

Resistance - A Thrust Towards Autonomy

A Case Study of Radix Body-Oriented Therapy seen from a Psychodrama Perspective

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Narelle is an internationally acclaimed Radix body-oriented therapist, based in Adelaide. After some early training in psychodrama she turned her focus to working with the body, training with the Radix Institute, USA. In 2005 she presented a workshop on Radix and psychodrama at the ANZPA Conference.

This case study describes my work with a client from both a Radix¹ and psychodrama perspective. The initial assessment of the client's functioning and the choice of interventions were based on Radix body centered concepts however there is considerable overlap with psychodrama concepts of role analysis and development, mirroring, warm up and spontaneity.

Initial Impressions

Joseph was 50 years old, 6 foot tall, slim and fit. He exercised regularly and his body was well proportioned. He had an open angular and friendly face. His eyes were soft but would not engage. He had a slightly furrowed brow with a fixed expression of bewilderment. His lips were full and his chin quite tense. His head was tilted back which brought his jaw forward. When engaged in conversation, he would often get a fixed grin on his face. It was difficult in the early sessions to work out if this was pleasure or tension. He appeared to have a firm wiry body but when touched his muscles were quite soft except for his shoulders and neck. When standing, he locked his knees and he found it difficult to trust that his legs could support him. His toes were curled very tightly

to try and hold him up. His neck and jaw were very tense. When speaking, he hardly moved his mouth. His arms hung by his side limply giving the impression that they were not attached to his chest.

Joseph's energy overall was very contained. I had the impression that his life force and spontaneity were very stuck. He blocked both the inhale and the exhale of his breath. He found it difficult to breathe into his chest and the concept of breathing into his belly was completely foreign to him. Later I saw that neither his inhale nor his exhale, deepened even with vigorous activity.

Clearly Joseph was not in his body, did not allow his energy to move easily and was robotic in his movements. In psychodramatic terms the congruence between his thoughts, feelings and body was low. He was over developed in his thoughts and appeared to use his body to protect himself from feelings that were unacceptable.

"A Hard Nut To Crack"

Joseph was referred to me by a fellow psychotherapist. He had sought counselling

with her for his lack of emotional experience and expression especially with his wife. After several months of verbal counselling with limited progress, his therapist had made the suggestion that some body psychotherapy might help.

In his initial interview, Joseph, a professional man in his late forties, reported that he had a reputation, professionally and personally of being very cool, calm and collected. He seldom lost his temper, he hadn't cried since early primary school, he couldn't recall feeling whole hearted joy about anything in his life for a long time. When asked about fear, he struggled to get a grip on what this might feel like. He said he could recall feeling anxious and having thoughts that centered around frightening things happening but no direct experience of fear that he could recall. One of his worrying fears was that if he didn't improve his relationships he would end up becoming a hopeless street bum.

Despite his reputation of calmness, he reported that he found it almost impossible to relax. He said that his wife would become very angry but he seldom expressed anger or felt it. He would just wait for her to calm down and then withdraw.

He had been married for thirty years. He felt that he was not emotionally close to his wife and hadn't been for a long time. She thought he was emotionally cold and most of their interactions focused on her telling him about his inadequacies. Their sexual relationship was virtually non-existent. He had three children. The two eldest had left home. The youngest was about to. He couldn't recall anything significant about his childhood. He had three siblings and was the youngest. His father worked to support the family and also wasn't very emotionally contactable or expressive. His mother was emotionally remote especially with him. At the same time she was "histrionic" in the expression

of her own emotions.

Joseph enjoyed his work and in fact spent long hours working to avoid being at home and at the demands of his wife. He was curious about the body oriented work and fairly convinced that it would not assist him in any way. He said "*I am a hard nut to crack*" and there was a sense of pleasure as well as pain in this statement.

Working With Resistance

Despite Joseph's presenting problem, the early sessions did not directly focus on his experience or expression of emotions. Joseph had reported spending a lot of time and energy resisting his wife who wanted just this form of expression. Dick Olney, a bioenergetic therapist, used to say that "*Resistance is the client's best thrust towards autonomy*", (Olney 1987). This seemed very true for Joseph. I chose as a first step to work directly with this resistance as it was expressed in his body.

In Morenian role theory we would say that Joseph's role in resisting his wife is a form of coping. Clearly it had once served him in some fundamental way to preserve his autonomy in the face of unreasonable demands. At that time it would have been progressive and expressed his spontaneity rather than what was now appearing as a stuck habit. If he got to know the nature of his resistance there would be the possibility of reclaiming the spontaneity that was originally there.

Early Sessions - Mirroring

Joseph had so little sense of self and such resistance that doubling was not effective. He had no idea if what I was saying and doing connected to him or not. To be obliging he would accept it but did not relate it to any internal experience. Joseph's behaviour had often been subject to interpretation. Firstly by his mother and later by his wife. Often he experienced this

interpretation as negative - they provided a negative mirror for him. The only way he knew how to oppose this interpretation and assert his autonomy was to go stupid, not know what he felt, become over accommodating. This reinforced his disengagement from his body.

So in early sessions, I began working with his resistance by mirroring what he was doing with different parts of his body, non judgmentally bringing it to his awareness. I drew his attention to lots of physical aspects about his body. How his jaw didn't move much when he talked, that his toes curled up when he tried to hold himself upright, that his chest didn't move when he breathed, that his head felt heavy when he relaxed, that his hands felt warm, that he ran out of steam when he ran and later that he spoke of emotional things with little affect.

Being largely unaware of his body sensations, posture and experience made Joseph acutely anxious. He thought if he relaxed some disaster would happen so he had to keep it restricted and tight. His body armoring was restricting his potential for spontaneity. In Morenian terms spontaneity and anxiety are inversely related - the more of one means the less of the other. In Radix terms limited self awareness often begins with limited body awareness. This left him open to others imposing their interpretation of him, as he had no information to counteract this.

No Sense It Should Be Different

There was no sense that the extent of his body awareness should be different. Rather it was an observation of 'what is'. This therapeutic stance is important in my practice. Radix is closely aligned with the fundamental Morenian principle that the protagonist writes the script for the work. It is process oriented.

From observing 'what is' the client can then get to know the nature of his or her own warm up.

In Joseph's case he had never had permission to do this.

Focusing on the body in this way gave Joseph simple insights into his own functioning and gave him some easy and concrete ways of changing his experience of himself when alone and in interaction with others. He found focusing on his body in this way intrinsically fascinating and non threatening and yet it enabled moments of spontaneity. For example, he discovered that if he dropped his chin a little, he felt emotionally more present and he noted that others responded back with more warmth. The simplicity of this delighted him. He felt in charge. He was getting to know his own warm up and bypassing old habitual patterns that kept him stuck and alone.

Getting To Know His Own Warm Up - Eye Contact

As sessions progressed, it became obvious that Joseph found making eye contact very difficult at any distance. He would look at me but he reported that he wasn't in the present. Rather he would be ruminating over events of the day or the last week or anticipating what he might say or do next. Sometimes he would simply focus on the mechanics of his breathing.

I would encourage him to keep his eyes closed and only open them when he really wanted to make eye contact. At first he struggled with this notion. He didn't know how to judge when he wanted contact or not. He was used to having others dictate when and how to do this. Gradually over sessions, he began to sense what it felt like to have this impulse come from an internal rather than external source. Mostly he indicated this by reporting events at work where he had felt he really wanted to look and engage with someone. When he did this he found that nothing bad happened to him.

A Moment of Spontaneity

In the middle of a session, eight months after he started seeing me, he spontaneously said, “*I want to make eye contact with you.*” His whole face, including his eyes, were soft and present. He shared that there had been several moments in an increasing number of sessions where he had wanted to make this contact but had stopped himself. His eyes teared a little. He shared that he wanted to have contact and cry when he wanted to, not when I wanted him too. I agreed that it was important that the impulse came from him and encouraged him not so much to focus on crying but to get to know how he resists doing so and to enjoy the resistance. Again he would get to know his own warm up before focusing on his goal.

He then said that his relationship with me mattered to him and that he realised that I was not his wife or mother and that I really didn't seem invested in how he responded. That all his life he felt he could only be loved if he achieved or did what others wanted from him. That he was getting a glimpse that this may not be so. He was in the role of *insightful self revealer*. Bringing this role into relationship with a trusted other meant that Joseph was beginning to repair his social atom.

Working with the body also strengthened his trust in his body to support him and therefore his autonomy. This was a significant element of our work.

Trusting His Legs

As I continued to actively focus on his entrenched stance of resistance, it seemed important to build his capacity to support himself better with his legs and feet. This would enable him to let go of the tension in his neck and in turn would bring more life to his eyes and possible engagement with the world. Joseph has a surplus amount of energy in his head. He

would often try and spend sessions asking somewhat interesting questions which would on the surface appear to be building our relationship but which in practice would shift the focus from his ongoing process and ‘real’ relating. He had an overdeveloped coping role of the *quizzical enquirer*. Later in sessions when he was disclosing more, he would joke about how frustrated he felt that I wouldn't be seduced by this role.

Redistributing the energy in his body from his head to his feet seemed a good way to get him ‘out of his head’. Initially he did lots of curls and uncurls. Basically this meant having him stand with his knees bent and his weight distributed evenly on his feet. Then as he breathed out he would slowly drop forward letting the weight of his head stretch and curl his back till his wrists were level with his knees. He would hang there for a few breaths and then uncurl letting his inbreath slowly uncurl his back up to an upright position.

When he first started doing this exercise he would fall over. His toes would tense as if clutching the floor, his ankles tighten and he would lock his knees to try and feel support. Instead of his head hanging loose like an apple on a string, his neck would be parallel to the floor. To assist him to let his neck relax, I began to hold his head and encouraged him to give me the its weight whilst still holding himself up with his legs and feet. He took this exercise home and would practice it at work and home. Gradually he was able to trust his legs to hold him up and at the same time let go of his neck.

Whenever he did the exercise at home his wife would say that he looked younger. He also noticed that if he did this exercise his anxiety reduced. He began to do it before work meetings where he was required to speak publicly. In the past when speaking publicly, his hands used to

shake and he would almost pass out. If he did the curl, he found that he could be more present and not shake so much. He was relearning how to be in his body and be supported by it. He was becoming a *confident embodied presenter*.

Vigorous Movements

Later, we did more vigorous activity with his legs and feet. Lots of lying on his back and pushing into mats with his feet. Kicking hard into mats. He found that when he did these things his head stopped spinning with thoughts and the intensity of his thinking reduced. He began to enjoy the movement and the developing strength of his legs.

Original Social Atom

As we worked through his resistant, coping stances, his progressive roles emerged more often. At this point he also brought forward his experience of his fragmenting roles, albeit in a manageable way. Joseph began to talk of the terrifying dreams which he had nightly. Some of these centered around his fears that he had mentioned briefly in passing, quite early on in sessions. Being alone and abandoned and not knowing how to look after himself. He now talked about these with more affect and with more emphasis. More often he shared about his terror of being destroyed, especially by his mother who he recalled as displaying an incomprehensible wrath towards him from a very early age. In psychodramatic terms, he brought out the central role relationship in his original social atom where he was the *bewildered terrified child* at the mercy of a *furiously mother*. Initially it was enough that he was able to stay in his body while he reconnected with his past. Later this dynamic was explored verbally.

Different Rhythmic Paces

Working in the ways described above, Joseph shifted his habitual patterns of warm up to himself and to others in his life, except probably

his wife. As this work progressed and his trust in me and his own process developed, we began working more directly to shift his emotional stuckness so as to deepen his growing aliveness and spontaneity. This was the most challenging aspect of our work together.

One of the ways he maintained his emotional stuckness was to keep his energy rhythm at a fixed, monotonous pace so he did not experience much intensity in his body. We worked to interrupt his ability to keep his energy monotic by having him do activities at different rhythmic paces. This approach is familiar in psychodrama groups to bring group members into their bodies and awaken their flow of energy and access to spontaneity.

I began by having him roll his head from side to side on the mat. Once he was accustomed to doing this, I instructed him to quicken or slow down the pace of the rolling. He initially found this very confusing and disorienting. Eventually he accomplished it. Later he added moving his arms and legs. He would run out of steam fairly quickly. Watching his breathing indicated that he was holding onto his exhale. That meant he couldn't breathe in fully as his lungs never emptied enough. So we started to play with sound as a way of assisting him to breathe out. This process then highlighted his tight jaw and throat. After working with biting and moving his jaw he was able to make good loud sounds.

After one of these sessions he reported that for the first time in his life he was able to shout. He had shouted across an oval at some kids who were into mischief and they had stopped their activity and ran away. He couldn't believe he had had the power to accomplish this. As his jaw loosened he was also able to breathe into his chest more and this resulted in him feeling much more energised at the end of sessions.

Embodying His Voice

Then he had a session where I suggested he shout out 'no' as he hit and kicked and rolled his head. A tantrum-like action. I wanted him to have the experience of his whole body being congruent and engaged in the activity. Not just his head. He was able to do this and stay very present and assertive in his eyes. His eyes had the look of 'don't mess with me'. He could feel the power of this and also the energy in his arms and legs. This was the first time that I had a strong experience that someone was 'home' - embodied and engaged. Joseph was thrilled. Then, five minutes later, his head started to spin. I grounded it by placing my hands on his forehead and the back of his neck and holding both firmly. He then started sharing how much he had wanted his father to be there for him and to stand up to his mother. His father had been so unavailable and absent. He had tears in his eyes. Again the work of reclaiming his body and allowing him to get to know his own warm up brought Joseph back into some congruence. While he is experiencing the feelings of a *hungry vulnerable child* he is able to stay in relationship and allow himself to experience what it means.

Connecting To Anger

A couple of sessions later, he arrived and looked at me directly and said he had been so looking forward to seeing me. He had been beside himself all week. It was the first time that he had really wanted to come to the session. He then talked of his wife attempting to kill herself that week with a kitchen knife. He shared how terrified he had been and he reported that she had done this off and on all their married life. She had sworn him to secrecy and he had worked very hard to protect their children from ever witnessing these scenes. He shared what a burden it had been bearing this all his life and how he was exhausted. That week he had decided that he had to tell someone and unburden himself. Gradually he began to

connect to his anger about this secrecy.

This led to some sessions where we discussed how he keeps himself isolated and others at a distance. During one of these, I had him sit with his back against a mattress and to hit out with his arms and say "I won't let you get close to me". As he did this he was again congruent right through his body. He felt strong and alive. He was really excited that he had been able to achieve this. Then he shared that this dynamic was the crux of the matter. It felt like a battle for survival. He had to keep others at bay or he would be crushed. In the next session I continued this theme. Encouraging him to hit out with his arms at a mattress placed behind him and shout, "Back off." "Give me space" "No way will I give in and be affectionate". In this way we concretized his feelings of anger and he experienced what it felt like to express it in a safe environment. He talked of resistance as the only way he knew how to be strong and the pain and loneliness of being like this. His eyes teared and he almost sobbed again. The next week he came and said that in his session with his verbal therapist he had cried deeply.

A month or so later, he reported that he could now feel his body from the inside. I had him kick and hit till he had to gasp in air. He had never breathed that deeply before. He said this felt challenging but good. The next month he left his wife.

Reflection

When my work with Joseph commenced I was most struck by the predominance of coping roles. In the Radix system, Joseph would be seen as blocking a lot of pain so on reflection the degree of coping roles was not that unusual. The blocking of emotional pain fits with the initial impression of stuckness in his physical body, his emotional expressiveness and his cognitive functioning. Life for Joseph was about getting

by without being too disruptive in any shape or form. In the early stages of therapy, it was not so easy to see his progressive roles as he was too fixed on 'being who he thinks he should be'. It took quite a bit of time before these began to emerge. By the end of a year's work, the *curious self explorer*, the *naive boy scout*, and the *delighted discoverer* were probably most well developed. The others were definitely developing but at the best of times their presence was fleeting.

What particularly struck me was how long it took for his fragmenting roles to really be revealed. He mentioned one or two very quickly at the beginning and then did not disclose them again until we had built a much more trusting relationship. Only when the deeper level of trust was established did he feel safe enough to share these roles especially when sworn to secrecy about his wife's suicide attempts. By the end of the year, particularly with his decision to separate from his wife, his sense of hopelessness was diminished. With more sense of self, there was also a diminishing of the *sarcastic destroyer*.

Psychologically and emotionally, Joseph was developmentally quite young. With very young infants, the sense of self, the development of emotional and psychological boundaries and the subsequent ability to centre and relax occurs by the caretaker actually providing physical support and touch. For example when he began to spin out after being angry, Joseph responded very well to me holding his neck and his head very firmly whilst reassuring him that all was ok. He needed more than cognitive reassurance at this point. As time progressed and he became conscious that connecting to his body gave him a sense of knowing himself, of greater control over how he presented to others and the quality of this presentation, he felt more of his inner strength and was able to relax and so his spontaneity increased. Connecting to his body reawakened the congruence between his

thought, feeling and action.

Conclusion

In writing this paper I have brought some of my Radix practice together with aspects of psychodramatic thinking. While each gives a different starting point and focus there is considerable overlap in the process of healing. The body is central to how we live and is great source of therapeutic data and insight. It is a key element of how a person orients to life. Noticing a person's physical posture, energy flow and tone enhances the ability to reverse roles with them and understand their warm up. For psychodramatists interested in paying more attention to the body the following questions are a starting point for training their perception about a client's orientation to life.

- *Are they embodied? Do you have a sense that they are really 'inhabiting' their physical body?*
- *Are there some parts of their body that has a sense of not quite fitting?*
- *Where is the life energy visible? In their eyes, their chest, their legs?*
- *Is it pulsating/flowing or stuck?*
- *How do they keep it stuck? By not taking in touch, support offered, by holding back expression, by keeping everything moderated?*

References

Olney D (1987), *The Bioenergetic Tapes*, Green People Productions Inc. Catati, California USA.

Footnote

1. Radix means root or source and here refers to the energy flow underlying body, mind and spirit. Radix practitioners work with clients to restore the rhythmic flow of the radix throughout the body - both on its inward movement, enhancing self contact and its outward movement, enhancing contact with others. In doing so clients discover experientially how the body unconsciously participates in how they think, feel and act'.

