

Three Ceremonies: Sociodrama In Situ

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Introduction: Integration of sociodrama into my being

I respond somatically to completing my written and practice tasks for my final accreditation. Experiencing myself cellularly as enlivened and buoyed, I am able to sink down into the ocean of my life and work fearlessly, then bob up again, corklike, lightly and joyfully. My confidence, strangely, also feels unsinkable: another completely new experience. I remember Max Clayton looking at me in one memorable moment and saying, "You're alright you know." I heard him and believed him, but I didn't feel it. Now I do. I begin to present myself as a sociodramatist, one who works with the whole group and different subgroups. I know I offer them, and they actively receive, something of real value. I feel the reverberations as I work.

Truth to tell, I am anointed!

Like other sociodramatists, I work in a society where I am called something else, in my case, a celebrant. As I write my thesis (Heriot, 2019), I realise that I hold my identity as a sociodramatist which is not mirrored back from the larger society.

What follows are three ceremonies conducted this year, 2020, and my commentary on the reverberations in my professional practice as a sociodramatist including the formulation of sociodrama principles. I present three pieces of work and elaborate on my reflections below.

My renewed and expanded identity is enhanced and validated in my work this year

Firstly, a *green* family burial for Margaret in a new allotment next to a conventional cemetery, an endangered, protected Melaleuca Forest where an arborist has set out the plots so the burials don't disturb the tree roots. I work with Margaret's son Richard, his wife Joanne and daughter Cristy, and later with Margaret's sister Beryl. The funeral is for the family. The numbers are within the Covid limit.

Secondly, a wedding: Jill and Max are marrying in middle age. Her

mother Jane who lives in a nursing home dementia ward is to be a witness.

Thirdly, a living wake where Bill is dying of cancer, at home with his wife. He wants his grandchildren to know his story. His wife Gillian and daughters Barbara, Susan and Felicity plan to host a luncheon for this purpose, including his siblings and their families. The work unfolds as Covid arrives.

1. The green burial: warmup to spontaneity, again and again

In this first scene I meet with Richard, his wife Joanne and middle daughter Cristy in their sitting room. We each sit slightly lopsided and forward in our chairs and I present myself, saying that I am there to compose and conduct the ceremony in tune with them and how they want to honour Margaret, whatever they require. I invite them to tell me about Margaret. "Ah!" they say, "She was amazing!" And the stories tumble out, of her love of children and family, nature and animals, and her great sense of playfulness and fun. I notice we are each settling back in our chairs and that they haven't mentioned Margaret's parents, her siblings or indeed her childhood. I ask about them and they say her childhood was difficult, that she and her sister were taken into care and badly abused by their foster carer, and there's a lot they don't know. Joanne reads a long Children's Services Report from her phone in full referring to them as illegitimate, starving and uncared for by their single, unmarried mother. The language is telling. She reads softly and steadily for some time, without haste, right through to the end.

Sociometry is inherently systemic, I conclude. I find it hard to hear and my spontaneity drops. I come back to myself and realise I am mirroring them, also with my head bowed. I wonder where the health in the system is and ask who was there for her — a grandparent perhaps. They say no. Again, we are silent. I think to myself that this is important for the ceremony and wonder how it can be included. After a pause I say that for all the pain of her childhood, as an adult she was loving and much loved and they nod emphatically, telling further fragments of what they know. I realise intuitively that this is enough for now, reassured by these words, written twelve years before I was born:

There is such a uniqueness about each actual momentary position of an individual in the community that a knowledge of the structure surrounding and pressing upon him at that moment is necessary before drawing conclusions. (Moreno, 2012, p. 25)

In the second scene I meet with Richard at my house to assist him with his eulogy, doubling and mirroring him. I invite him, with his three adult children and Margaret's sister Beryl, to shine the light on Margaret in their mind's eye and focus on the heart of their relationship with her and the

gifts of her life, to imagine themselves speaking to her and their family directly and to write down what they want to say. I have the confidence to conduct this leader-led warmup.

At the ceremony I curve the chairs including Margaret in her coffin next to me. Children run around with parents and others picking them up from time to time; there is no sense of disruption. I say that Margaret had a difficult childhood. That she was taken from her mother and fostered at the age of four, that *foster* means to *feed and nourish* and Mrs Crofter did neither of those things.

Richard, with his hand on her coffin, addresses his Mum and thanks her for her love and care, for the joys and security of his childhood regardless of their gypsy life and for not becoming an alcoholic or drug addict as she could have so easily, given her childhood. Beryl takes his place and brings everything out, including Mrs Crofter's brutality. She speaks of Margaret's love and forgiveness for her, Beryl, and care for her children when Margaret was yet to have her own. Beryl describes how she wronged Margaret and how grateful she is that they reconciled towards the end of Margaret's life. She says how much she loved her and felt herself loved in return and she will miss her forever. She drops her head and is silent for a long moment, then folds the pages of her script, nods quickly again, smiles slightly and returns to her seat.

There is a sense of a sigh and a settling in the group as we continue. Processing with Margaret along the path through the Melaleuca Forest, I imagine the little girl Margaret, somewhere safe from the abusive house, alive in nature, making a decision that she will never treat children as she is being treated. Rather that she will love all the children and those who have no voice: animals and nature, the poor and homeless. And now she will be at rest in this beautiful place, so in tune with her.

At the wake Beryl takes a seat next to me, full of stories. Richard's five year old granddaughter plonks herself on the other side of me to ask direct questions of life and death and I feel myself between two burbling, joyfully spontaneous little girls. We are warmed up to being life giving.

2. A wedding: Sociometric shifts in rites of passage are social atom repair

Jill and Max are marrying in middle age. When we first meet they say they want all their family and friends to rejoice with them at their wedding. Max is the only partner of Jill's approved by her mother Jane. He is a sustaining presence when Jill returns home wounded by her mother's vindictiveness. Jill is also appreciative of the changes in their relationship and her mother's softening in this last phase of her life; they have had several long periods of estrangement. Maria is delighted to be a witness and signatory for the wedding. Jill's twin Joan will walk her down the aisle. They are dissimilar,

fraternal twins who also have had periods of estrangement. Now Joan will stand in for their much-loved father, in this renewal of tradition.

As our work on the ceremony proceeds, Joan calls to say that their mother can't come to the wedding: she is too anxious. Jill and Max are distressed and helpless. I appreciate the centrality of this core subgroup and of Jill's mother. I propose that we have the wedding in two parts, the first to be the legal ceremony with Jane at her nursing home, and Joan *giving her away*. Jane can choose a hymn and her close friend Brigid can say a prayer they choose together. It turns out there is a small park next door and we make the ceremony ready to go for when the lockdown ceases.

Whilst the second part of the ceremony with their larger group of guests will contain the same essential elements, there is a range of subgroups and it will require different elements in tune with the larger group and the social context. It may be partially or wholly on Zoom. We three, Jill, Max and I, agree we are confident as a flexible core working group, at ease with whatever unfolds.

3. A living wake where Bill is dying of cancer; spontaneity ebbs and flows as I adapt this methodology to this unique situation moment by moment

In the first scene Barbara calls to ask if I know someone who can do a *living wake*. I say, "Yes, I can: I can work with you and your family to create what you want."

The next scene is an in-person meeting with Barbara and her middle sister Susan, with their husbands, at Barbara's home. It takes several hours. They are beginning to warm up to the reality of Bill's impending death, though it is hard for them to speak of it, and they don't know what to do. I ask a few questions and listen as they share their thoughts and feelings for the first time.

We are warming up together. They say Bill wants his grandchildren to know his story and their mother Gillian suggested they have a living wake. Susan, a practical woman, wants to have a lunch for their extended family at her house and we spend some time considering how to arrange the space, with the display of photos they have in mind. It becomes obvious the space is awkward and catering would be problematic. The decision rests for now, as does the date. Barbara will arrange a meeting with Bill and Gillian and their youngest sister Felicity who is arriving from Cairns. At this point there are many unknowns: not the least is when Bill will die, and how long he will be present and conscious and able to achieve his purpose. Our warmup progresses.

The third scene is at Bill and Gillian's home with Barbara and Felicity. Bill is alert, funny and welcoming. They prefer a lunch at a restaurant they all know, centrally located for those coming from different country

locations. At this point there are no restrictions and we plan the logistics, the flow of the story and the purpose of the gathering. It emerges that it is a ceremony of gratitude and appreciation and will include Bill's siblings and their families and a few very close friends. It remains difficult to make the date.

Subsequent scenes are held using Facetime, phone and email, still with the hope of an in-person lunch with special cake and we plan the ceremony accordingly. I send them the first draft, which they amend a little. They collectively express surprise and satisfaction in our following scene on Facetime and there are tears as we decide on the final details and make the date.

Eventually it is clear that the whole ceremony will need to be on Zoom if it is to occur at all. Bill is despairing and ready to give up. Felicity gently coaches her Dad in the process of Zoom. A grand daughter takes him on a Zoom inspection of her new home in Toowoomba. He has been an adventurer and *learner by doing* all his life. His spontaneity arises once more and we proceed.

Felicity moderates a rehearsal to warm up those relatives unfamiliar with the process and two days later we have the ceremony. The young ones dress up. Some old folk are comfortable in their lounges, peering at the screen in amazement. Following the introduction and warmup, Bill's closest brother and Bill share their stories, some old and some new and then, with little prompting, speak from their hearts and the intimacy deepens. Bill's oldest brother James, a quiet intellectual and very different, is moved to tears. The grandchildren are riveted. The internet drops out from time to time. Felicity patiently attends to it and supports her Dad as the stories and gratitude continue to flow, directly to each one. After the formal conclusion the whole family is divided into breakout groups to continue their conversations, which they do with great energy and verve. The ceremony has taken two hours altogether. I reflect; I am orientated to the whole system here and now as it shifts and evolves.

By the end I am exhausted and rudderless. Lacking the choreography and sociometry in the physicality of the staging and the warmup of a rehearsal in situ, I am adrift, unable to make any assessment at all and ending up in a pit. I'm most concerned about Bill, fearing he had found it disjointed and fragmented, then about James, and on and on it went. However, Felicity texted me shortly afterwards to say Bill was resting with a beatific smile on his face, listening to the music and to say that they felt very satisfied and really well held throughout. I haul myself out of the sewer realising that I am a poet even when at the bottom of the pit.

The whole was recorded for those who were unable to be present and their responses are congruent with Felicity's. Gillian says she realised after the ceremony that she needs to tell her daughters how much she

appreciates them, and now especially as she also is approaching the last phase of her life.

I have had to adjust my self assessment, and my relationship with Zoom, and to appreciate that there are valuable elements of Zoom ceremony which are not present in in-person ceremony. More people can attend, older people and those far away can be comfortably present at home with their local and heart community, everyone can adjust their own volume, and intimacy actually can be evoked. I realise that I adapt this method to each unique context.

I have a friend who is a dedicated and much valued Uniting Church Minister who is doing her sermons using the word version of Zoom. She hates it, preferring to make rough notes and refer to them as she flows with the here-and-now of presence with the congregation. She also experiences the loss of intimacy. However, the members of her congregation have a different experience, enjoying not having to go out and present themselves in the world, feeling her presence in a personal way and having it recorded so they can listen again. Colleagues in ritual, we both adjust ruefully to our changing times.

In the two situations above, I was able to call the groups to order in a companionable manner, by doubling and mirroring progressive roles and warming up to my own and others' spontaneity, in spite of my own discomfort and drops in spontaneity at times. As I write now, I appreciate how the work resonated with each community, the drama in situ unfolded and the work flowed. Farnsworth (2013) wrote of Max illustrating flow as "a spring of living waters." I conclude that in these two instances as a sociodramatist I have tapped the spring of living waters.

Like Moreno I am ambitious with my work: "a truly therapeutic procedure cannot have less an objective than the whole of mankind." (Moreno, 1993, p. 90). I expect that my clients may be freed from limiting conserved notions or refreshed with a new experience: their spontaneity heightened and relationships strengthened through the process and intimacy of our preparatory work, and the subsequent enactment of their ceremony with their community.

I realise my work is often therapeutic. What I offer my clients could be called a contemplative opportunity, to step away from the imperatives of busy modern life and simply be present with themselves, each other and their experiences, and be open. To listen, express, and enquire, taking the time to attend to the present moment, and to gather in community to share the wonders of this intimate presence, in joy and sorrow. Often, in evaluations, my clients write that, although the ceremony was satisfying for them, even more so were our free-flowing meetings in preparation. Oh yes, I think to myself, "It's all in the warmup" as Max used to say.

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