

Embodying a Creative Revolution: A Sociodramatist at Work

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KEY WORDS

as if, creativity, community development, encounter, God, health, mirroring, Moreno, playback theatre, relationship, role, sociodrama, sociometry, spontaneity, systems theory, warm up

This article explores Moreno's notion of sociatry and the required creative revolution that involves everyone in the healing of society (Moreno, 1947). It will appeal to anyone wanting to work sociodramatically or wanting to get to know about Moreno's concepts of sociatry and creative revolution. It is also relevant for anyone working with principles of social justice, equity, dignity, diversity and inclusion.

I work in the community with groups of people, most of whom want to change the world, people who have a desire for social justice whether openly expressed or not. I want that sense of freedom or relief of being able to face life head on and be ready for everything for everyone. I see myself in the people on the margins: those that haven't got the look, or the qualification, where the system has squashed their sense of self, those on benefits or single mums feeling 'othered' by not fitting in with the social norms.

Right now, the world literally needs to be healed as COVID-19 has shaken global systems. The global pandemic highlights the relevance of Moreno's question: "who shall survive?" (Moreno, 1953) and his challenge/call for others to embrace his philosophy to bring about healing in society. My interpretation of Moreno's works is that he writes of a revolution that results from everyone coming together and experiencing what is possible when each and every person takes each other in and warms up as spontaneous creative beings.

My reading of Moreno's concept of a creative revolution refers to a society centred on creativity and spontaneity and the idea of creating health, rather than focusing on disease. Often a revolution is one segment of society revolting against another. Moreno understood that all players in the system need to be part of a group process to expand what is possible. To achieve this requires the creative genius¹ in each and every one of us to be appreciated.

As a sociodramatist I have found Moreno's concept of a creative revolution very stimulating and have considered what this might look like in practice. I see groups of people being accepting of each other and being ready for what comes at them; people being prepared to be in relationship and address human needs, such as belonging and inclusion. I see a culture where there is value placed on everyone's unique contribution in society; where there isn't perpetuation of divisions created on the well or unwell, or the deserving and undeserving; and where there is an understanding that it is a function of the systems themselves rather than individuals that create such binaries. A creative revolution works with entirety and encapsulates encounter, role reversal and appreciation of each person as a creative genius.

A creative revolution in a small rural community

In the 1970s a small rural town in the north of NZ was thriving as a stronghold for the timber industry, housed the district hospital, had a shopping centre and provided a regular bus and ferry service to surrounding locations.

Today, in that same town, issues of poverty, under employment, inadequate housing and mental health all intersect. The town is on the road to nowhere; there is no more industrial activity, no hospital, no public transport, no café or community meeting spot and no library. The footpaths are broken and uneven and the public toilets are vandalised and no longer in working order. However, there is a school, a young kids' playground and a shop where you might get milk or bread but not much else. Many of the houses are run down, with car shells and inorganic rubbish in piles.

The local Council felt that residents needed to take more responsibility for the area and had established a community group to respond to the lack of community facilities. I was contracted by the Council to work with this community group to help them take their ideas and turn them into action.

My analysis, based on an initial consultation with the Council, was that it would take more than an economic revolution to revitalise this community. This was a town where residents had lost hope and they had become reliant on the Council, who held the resources. Council made the rules and approved the solutions. There was also a long history of negativity between Council and community members as promises made by Council hadn't seen the light of day. A lot of advocacy had been undertaken by a community group established 20 years ago, yet on my arrival the group seemed to be written off by both townsfolk and Council. This particular community group was unwilling to work with other people and flatly refused to meet with Council as they were sick of Council not delivering on their promises. Committee members felt hopeless and unable to find the energy to make anything happen and people in the community felt left out and unable to contribute. The Council also had given up on this existing committee and just under a year ago they had established a new committee (that I was

charged to work with) to respond to the lack of community facilities. My view was that the Council's solution of setting up a new committee to tackle an old issue and disregarding the existing committee added competition into the mix.

I attribute the collapse of this thriving township and it becoming a drive-through-don't-stop town as a systemic failure. The very things that made the town flourish also caused its decline. The success of industry and services necessitated their relocation to larger and more central venues, taking wealth, resources and employment prospects away from the town. Currently there are 400 people living in the town, a good number of whom rely on benefits as their source of income; either as super annuitants, supported living beneficiaries or unemployed job seeker beneficiaries. Most of the people who are in paid work leave each morning to travel to larger towns as there is little chance for employment locally.

The pātaka kai (community pantry) is well used. Facebook pages announce when food parcels are up for grabs from the Salvation Army and they quickly run out.

The population is a mix of Pākehā settler families, Māori and others who have come for cheap housing. Many people are related; the majority have been at school with each other and know each other's families well. Their struggles include not having enough petrol to go to the closest town for supplies and some suffer from anxiety and/or depression. To quote one resident: *"People wake to leave for work or wake with no work and try to fill in time."*

And yet here in such an impoverished town I see evidence that there is a real sense of community e.g., there are high numbers of volunteers and people sharing their resources; the community hall committee puts on shared meals; someone picks up a person who lives alone in temporary accommodation and takes them to the supermarket; and someone else lets them use their house for showering and washing clothes.

I reach the conclusion that something new is required — a creative revolution that involves the whole town and includes everyone's aspirations. A creative revolution requires hope, relationships and connections with opportunities for shared experiences and an appreciation of each other. Fundamental to this is the idea that everyone belongs and is accepted for who they are. This requires everyone to be willing to experience feeling a bit uncomfortable, including myself, and to take time to get to know each other. Working this way in communities you can't helicopter in and out and expect to build relationships, it takes time.

I had a sense that if people could recapture some of the feeling of a time when they experienced energy and hope in the town, they could warm up again and re-ignite their enthusiasm for new possibilities. Thinking systemically, I decided that it would be possible to work with a small group

of 12 people and that this could have quite an impact in a town of 400. I was working with the notion that “*spontaneity begets spontaneity*” (Clayton & Carter, 2004, p.69) and that everyone is connected. I knew that a well-placed intervention would have an impact throughout the community.

I spent months of work building my relationships with a wide range of people in the community and thinking sociometrically. I met up with individuals and groups in the town and joined them up with each other, in particular I linked up the two different community groups. I distributed paper maps and stickers for people to identify where they wanted activities or focus.

Though there were many ideas coming through this process, it was when I was listening to various people that I heard many stories and I saw that when people told stories about the old days, their faces lit up, their eyes glimmered and their voices softened. There were stories about catching the ferry to Helensville and about how the town had the best pie shop ever.

I was aware there needed to be an intervention that added life, one that created feelings of warmth. It seemed it was easy for people to warm up to what was wrong in the town or with individuals e.g. The loss of the ferry service that stopped many years ago or that there was now no place that sells food, etc., rather than what felt good. As I heard the stories, I noticed these experiences were being re-told largely in isolation; the town wasn't joined up. I read the following quote from Clayton's eulogy in the AANZPA publication *Socio* that reminded me to notice what is present and progressive, to value it and encourage it to grow (AANZPA *Socio*, 2013). I wanted to take that small spark of hope from the stories and help it grow.

“There is always a bit of light. Stay with the light, just with that little bit. Don't look for a bigger one. Stay with what you've got — it'll grow. Stay with the small light. Very important, stay with it. Don't stay with what you haven't got. Light is light.” (AANZPA *Socio*, 2013)

I decided that Playback Theatre would be a suitable form for an intervention as it involves story, is novel, active and could involve a range of members in the community. I decided that it would also be a way of staying with that glimmer of light I saw in people's eyes.

I arranged for an experienced Playback Theatre conductor to lead a weekend event where on the first day some townfolk were trained, if somewhat basically, as Playback actors. On the second day the community was invited to a Playback performance where members of the community told stories from their lives and the briefly trained townfolk played back these stories for the audience.

This form allowed townfolk to be part of the intervention; it provided a space for each other's stories to be experienced in a group and therefore

become shared stories in which people could locate themselves and their connections. I envisaged that the forces at play in the system of this town would be displayed for all to experience and also that this process would warm the townsfolk up to spontaneity and creativity and inspire and revitalise them with a flow on effect for the town.

On the day of the performance the hall was full of people: the Playcentre, parents of the actors, people from the Mārae, people from both community groups, elders from the town. The stories flowed. One man in his 90s relating to young people causing trouble told how when he was 15, he shot at an outside toilet while a girl was in it. As he said this, out of the audience we heard, "I am that girl!!" and a 90-year-old woman came forward to tell her story. And so it went on, each story stimulating the next — riding horses, the time the tornado tore through the town, sisters catching the ferry and being left behind, a young girl tripping up and feeling embarrassed in her school play. There were more stories than there was time to hear them.

Afterwards, almost everyone stayed for the afternoon tea and further telling of stories following from the performance. Connections, belonging, cohesion and hope were demonstrated. The room was full of people hugging and making plans for catch ups: *"Why did I wait so long before seeing you?"*, *"We must do something about the state of the hall."* The room was full of real experiences and spontaneity. It was as if this group of people had had an injection of vitamin B12. The town was enlivened as a community. They were more connected and, as a result, more able to draw upon their relationships to sustain them.

After the theatre performance a number of things were set up: a Facebook group grapevine; a church-based pop-in morning; the community plan was written up; a food truck was invited to town. Together, these seemingly small things began to make improvements to the community and community spirit.

I have been working with these people for over a year now, modeling ways of being, mirroring back to them their strengths, not being the expert or the saviour on a white horse but working with them to warm them up to their spontaneity.

The results of this process are not perfect. Several months after the Playback event, a ruction between two community groups presented itself, with public yelling and accusations being hurled. Part of knowing a creative revolution is in process is that while such disturbance can happen, people are not writing others off, but are willing to find ways to stay connected and to continue to involve all.

In my ongoing work with this community, I see how the people in the community are now maintaining relationships and having conversations that are difficult. My involvement with this particular community continues to occupy many hours of largely voluntary work.

The idea that a creative revolution would engage every human being has implications for people working in communities and for people who want to work with systems and social issues. People who work in communities, social workers, politicians, activists, teachers can all be part of the liberation of humankind. By embodying Moreno's notion of a creative revolution practitioners can spark change in the status quo.

A creative revolution is a long-term investment. Taking time to develop relationships, getting participants engaged and setting up work so the impact is sustained, requires going for more than temporary measures. If someone is interested in being involved in a creative revolution, they need to be prepared for months, even years of working with people and their warm up, modelling ways of being, mirroring strengths, not being the expert or being a saviour, but joining a group in the process as a committed participant.

A creative revolution requires hope, relationships and connections where there is an opportunity for shared experiences and appreciation of each other. Fundamental to this is the idea that everyone belongs and is accepted for who they are. A group leader needs to be in relationship with themselves and to be willing to disclose information about themselves as a group member. This requires personal development work alongside a lot of reflective practice, as well as an ability to reverse roles, double people and assess when it is appropriate to make interventions.

Sociatry necessitates working actively to balance participation in groups, communities and societies. It is important to address social norms and power dynamics that typically play out in groups that have an impact on 'social wealth'; that is the value of the resources a person has to meet their social and emotional needs. Social connection is the currency of social wealth. A well-placed intervention will have a significant impact throughout a group, so it is useful to consider choices about what interventions are likely to address the healing of society and bring about a creative revolution. Working in this way a group leader bases their choices on the principles that spontaneity begets spontaneity and that everyone is connected.

Moreno created methods to support his vision (Moreno, 1947, 1951, 1964, 1983). It is important to know the meaning of Moreno's concepts and his call to action. The method itself isn't piecemeal. Without understanding how it all fits together, a practitioner could reduce the psychodramatic method to a set of techniques. Keeping Moreno's bigger vision in mind at all times demands that practitioners relate the meaning of the concepts to their use of the psychodramatic method.

As a sociodramatist I see people as spontaneous, creative beings. This approach can lead practitioners to look for the health in the system and not to lower expectations or write people off because of their inadequacies or differences. It also implies that practitioners look for opportunities to build

self-acceptance, to include everyone, to accept that all people are involved in the process of a creative revolution together and to work from a belief that there is good in everyone. In practice, this challenges practitioners to get curious about why people are the way they are, to work with generosity and say in ways that can be taken in, "Yes I see the good in you."

Articulating my beliefs and values has reinforced my commitment to Moreno's challenge to be intentional about linking interventions, no matter how small, to a greater vision of creating a dynamic world where each person is valued in terms of their expression of the I-Self-God (Moreno, 1947). This spontaneous-creative expression is contagious. Valuing and including everyone can collectively result in what Moreno described as a creative revolution.

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