

Dale Herron: Opportunity, courage, freedom

Dr Dale Herron expresses many roles in the AANZPA community. She is an initiator, explorer, experimenter, close companion, friend, mentor, supervisor, psychodramatist, educator and trainer. She is also a Distinguished Member of AANZPA and continues to be actively involved in the work of the Auckland Training Centre for Psychodrama.



While many members of AANZPA have met and worked with Dale, many others have not. In this article, Dale describes in her own words the early influences of her family and communities in the USA, her subsequent immigration to NZ and the many friendships and contributions she has made in AANZPA. Scattered throughout are her reflections on the process of 'becoming' through psychodrama and the freedoms inherent in the method.

The text below is drawn from recent conversations between Dale and Selina Reid.

Learning to sink or swim in a rough and tumble world

I was born in Chicago, Illinois, on the 31st January 1942, right in the middle of World War II. All my mothers' brothers, bar one who was ill, were on active service. My father had a heart murmur, thank God, so he didn't go. It was a terrifying time to be born. Hard to explain if you've not lived through war.

The war moulded the first years of my life. My first memory is that everyone around me had concerns, not that I knew what they were about. For me, the world was my mother, father and a very small place to live.

We lived in one of two huge buildings that housed hundreds of people, including lots and lots of children. There wasn't a sense of being

watched over or overlooked, as all of us children were on our own and caring for one another from the time we were little; none of us had much of our parents during the war. I learnt to get on with some and not others. I learnt not to complain and to hold my own. These are probably all the things that I'm famous for!

When I was four, my father took my mother and me out to California to live with her oldest sister for over a year. It was a completely different environment. We had gardens and the gardener used to teach me the names of things. I remember following him around and chatting most of the time! It's probably where I got my love of gardens and gardening.

I started school in California, which I didn't like at all, until I learnt the ways of these children. They were very different from me. Their parents had more money and they had scooters and all sorts of toys that we didn't have in Chicago. There were a lot of boys living on my block and they taught me how to ride their scooters, which I really liked.

We went back to Chicago to live in the same building as before, but in a nicer flat. We didn't have much space, but we played hard. We had a huge community and people either got along or they didn't. You learnt to sink or swim. Because the boys were very tough, my father taught me how to box. He said, "No, I'm not going to sort this for you. I'm going to teach you how to do it."

The other kids were the most significant influence in my up-bringing because we children spent all of our time outdoors with each other, not with our families. Manners were non-existent and it was very rough and tumble. I think it made me very flexible, but is also what made me so difficult for some people later in NZ. They thought I was rough or tough.

Early foundations for groupwork

My mother was from an Orthodox Jewish family, but my father didn't discover he was Jewish until he was an adult. On the weekend my parents sent me to a Semi-Orthodox Jewish children's class, which I hated. Many of the other children went to a church around the corner, which I loved because of the singing, so I used to try to sneak out to get there. After a few times doing this, my Dad took me to an unorthodox non-denominational Jewish 'Sunday School', where they taught about real things; offering suggestions and leaving us be. It was a very large place with lots of music at the service in the Synagogue after the

children's class. There were hundreds of us there, including children of all ages. There was no up-tightness about it. It was truly wonderful.

The Rabbi was very determined to create as many community connections as he could. He cared that people would experience life. I came to this community young and grew up in it. As 14, 15 or 16-year-olds, he got us up the front singing, whether we could sing or not. That place gave me the background for understanding about the metaphysical in later life, and maybe this was a foundation experience of effective groupwork.

Learning about subgroups

In my last three years of high-school, we moved to the far North of Chicago, right on the lake. The girls at the school there were very welcoming and I felt for the first time ever the bond of women as tight, if not tighter, than any family. I was part of a self-identified female Jewish club; a close-knit subgroup. We met regularly as a group and I warmed to the relational work that took place among us. We enjoyed ourselves and got into lots of trouble.

That grouping was for a particular time and purpose. We didn't keep up afterwards; it was just for that time. And that's something about psychodrama too, that a group forms and it has its particular connection, which is so strong, and when it's over the warm-up can go.

New worlds open up

After high-school, I went away on a scholarship to a university for a year and in my second year I came back to Chicago to attend North Western University. It was a really old university, which I loved. It had a very beautiful campus right on the lake. It gave me a love for working in tradition that I had never had in my life. Nothing had been traditional so far, only transient. I think that is the thing that allowed me to take to psychodrama and to stay with it once I got involved. I could perceive something that was traditional, significant and could grow. I could stay and let it build.

The transfer to NW University was the making of me. Suddenly a whole other world opened up that I'd never seen before. Well-known poets and writers were attracted there, and we would meet famous scholars in seminars that we'd never thought we could meet in life. It was just the right place, the right people; lots of us on the lake developing close friendships, and the teaching was stunning.

After my undergraduate degree, I worked for a year before I took the final postgraduate entrance exam. I came first in my year and that shocked me. It was the first time that I realised that if I really applied myself I could do it. I worked like hell and was determined. And that is the determination that helped me stick with psychodrama when it was all new, or in turmoil.

NW University offered me a full scholarship to finish my PhD in English literature, which also explains why I love setting scenes and making a story. I was offered a teaching fellowship and spent the following four years there. The teaching staff were all male, besides me, and we were very well supported in trying out new creative things.

Then there was the big financial crash, which affected the universities. I was lucky to get a job at the University of Illinois' Chicago Circle campus; a new experimental university in the middle of the city. I was there for seven years and I loved it. It was huge, with fifty-fifty men and women. I had a ball working in a very respectful environment in my own classrooms. I could be very experimental. Nobody was telling us what to do, but we could talk to someone if we wanted to. We talked a lot with each other. It was the most wonderful way to learn. Magical.

Reflecting back, it was the places I landed in, as much as having parents or a genealogy, that allowed me to grow.

To New Zealand and Psychodrama

Near the end of my tenure, my husband, Reuben, got a job as Head of the Maths Department at Victoria University in New Zealand. On the way there we spent six months in Israel because Reuben's family and children were there. We then travelled to many different places for a further six months before landing in a cold Wellington.

After we were in Wellington for about three years, our friend, Peter Biggs, brought a flyer and left it on our kitchen table. It was for a three-week residential workshop at the University of Auckland with Max and Lynette Clayton. Reuben and I talked it over with our friends, Valerie and Rex Hunton, and we decided to try it.

There would have been perhaps thirty-five of us meeting psychodrama for the first time at that workshop. It was a time of things emerging and it was very, very rich. A lot of work was done outside the venue. For example, we would get given a task and go down into the city, always with someone else. We'd look at this and that, or write it up;

all kinds of observations and learning about systems. Max wanted us to be observant. He really pushed us to do that. He wanted us not to make judgements. I really respect that Max had us do this. I had lived in Chicago all my life so there were things in Auckland I'd never seen. I was fascinated by the whole lot.

A time of exploration

It was a big time. A time when people were really keen to grow. Rex, Valerie, Reuben, and Peter Biggs, were already involved in various forms of personal growth and I had begun running groups. So we carried on, with a psychodrama twist. It was a time of exploration.

We didn't only use psychodrama, of course, because we weren't that skilled. It was a very exciting time of developing what we already knew and adding psychodrama to that. We were all just beginners so we probably didn't even know that there was more we could do or that what we did wasn't very good, but people loved it. I travelled around Australia and had a huge amount of work, so it was easy for me on the second or third day of a workshop to introduce something psychodramatic, thereby having life-long learning experiences.

One of the main things for me was being with Valerie. We worked together, often doubling each other in the groups. She and I became very close friends and colleagues, and all these years later we're just the same.

At the time I wasn't aware of 'developing'; I was aware of 'doing'. I was completely involved in 'becoming'. It was wonderful for me. There was a sense of freedom in the whole thing. We were all cooperating with each other. We had all begun to sow seeds and that was why Max came. Max would turn up and by and large we would enrol for perhaps two workshops a year.

Max and Lynette Clayton

Max and Lynette each had their own sense of how to carry psychodrama into the world. They were looking for people who held the strings of things and who fitted with them sociometrically. Max would meet with Evan Sherrard, Don Reekie and me, usually just the three of us, and he started teaching a little bit in each session. We would meet for a couple of days for quite a long time, and it kept the three of us meeting beyond those sessions.

As we three were working at Presbyterian Support Services, this became a seminal place for psychodrama. Evan, Joan Dalloway and I

were also involved with setting up the Psychotherapy Department at the Auckland University of Technology, where we introduced psychodrama into the curriculum.

It was at that point that Lynnette became more interested in my work. Every time she came to NZ she would stay with me and we would look at my work, if I wanted to. We would also work together in NZ and Australia when we could. We clicked in our ability to work together and we loved travelling together. We loved walking and we had wonderful times. Her way of working was really different to mine, but she had no problem with me doing what I do and trying out things.

Meeting Zerka

In the early years Max invited Zerka Moreno to Australia several times. I would get work in Australia and then go to be with her. She really liked me and I really liked her. I had lunch with her the first time I met her, at a big long table at one of the universities. I had the whole lunch time with her before I realised that she didn't have a second working hand. That's the best way I can describe her. I couldn't believe how she did it because I am pretty observant. Then she said, "Can you come back with me. I'm going to have a sleep and I need someone to unzip my dress." I said, "Of course" and after that we just bonded.

Relationships among us are important

The thing that has always carried me onward is that I have never cared if I tried something and it did not work. Something else is always emerging. Your attitude, which is probably born when you are in the cradle, about how you get on with the other stuff that's going on around you - do you participate? do you keep your eyes open? are you scared? are you interested? - these things are important to me. That is what my life was like during the war; I had no choice.

I'm curious right down to the last bit of my toes. I always want to know what is happening. And also, I love it when other people do it. I don't get upset whatever people do. I haven't got this vision of 'this is the right way'.

I would like to say to the people who are trying new things, value your own continuity and creativity to bring forward what is in you. The whole thing stops if people are concerned about how things 'should' be done, like worrying about whether you're going against, toward, or whether

the committee does this, or I do that. All of that is trivial compared to the warm-up that people are bringing and that has to continue. That assumes that you're not afraid of each other because who else are you creating with?

The relationships amongst us all have always been important. In psychodrama, I have never been alone. There has always been someone to do things with or who might say, "What do you think of this?" or, "Come on let's go do that," or, "Let's have a walk and talk about what's happening."

I remember when it was just the three of us, Evan, Don and me, and we used to just pour out stuff. Even when Max was there, we would pour out stuff. We didn't follow through with most of it, but in there was the seed of whatever happened next. Then the things that needed to be, or could be, emerged and we could help each other with that.

A keystone is to have the opportunity and the courage to try out new things. Everywhere, when two or more of us are together, we can be fresh and we can be free. We can have a purpose and we can be safe doing it. With psychodrama we have the freedom to do it in our own way, not anyone else's.



About the interviewer

Selina Reid will be certificated as a psychodramatist in January 2017. Selina first met Dale in 1996 through the Human Development & Training Institute counselling training. She lives in Kihikihi, New Zealand and utilizes the psychodrama method in her counselling and groupwork.

