

Hopeless, Choiceless and Other Experiential Openings for Psychodramatic Theory and Practice

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A warm-up

One Tibetan breathing practice is to imagine a thick mass of toxicity below, breathe that into the belly and breathe out purified air. I assume the body is being used in the service of the universe. I give it a go. After a while, and totally unexpectantly, something else happens that I have never heard described. At the same time there is a cycling of muck coming in and clean going out, there's another cycling of clean coming in and muck going out. It feels like two bellows being worked simultaneously but in opposite positions, interpenetrating each other in a yinyang way.

Choice and tele

In a training workshop, Max Clayton said to the trainees: "Things come by you. And when they're right there in your face, you respond, in some way, immediately, and choice doesn't come into it. So I've questioned that on the grounds that choice may, perhaps, be illusory." (Clayton & Carter, 2004, p. 321).

That got my interest. Really? Yes, many well respected thinkers concur. Yet, many disagree. I hunt out the neuroscience. Measurements of the brain show that a person's awareness of the decision to act occurs 0.4 seconds after the act has already been initiated (Libet, 2004). Using similar research, Wegner (2002) reckons that that which people call choice is more like a moral indicator with power to veto an action already begun.

Several years of paying attention to this, mainly through careful introspection, reveals there is a prior movement of attraction either to something or someone external or to an internal posture, attitude or value before there is any kind of assessment or evaluation. Even with the 'moral indicator' or 'vetoer', there appears an initial movement towards or away

from something. I've also looked carefully at this in psychodramatic action, particularly when a person says they are making a choice, and there appears already an initial movement in the relational tele *field*, either away or towards.

However, people often summarise this experience into being primarily a movement of will and personal agency. They can be motivated by not wanting to be passive or a victim. This can put the will and cognitive processes in command and isolated from the vitality of the life available in the field of tele and the force of love. The person can end up bullying themselves into shape and become fatigued. Appreciating how intertwined the individual and social worlds are is one useful way forwards here.

Identity of the self

Research in interpersonal neurobiology reveals that an infant's experience of their social field shapes an initial structuring of the brain called the *social self* and this is prior to structures for reasoning and identity (Schermer, 2010; Siegal, 2010). Furthermore, the *social self*, is the core 'instrument' involved in functioning and that the separate individual consciousness is deeply and intimately entangled with the 'field' of the group¹. The social self is a good fit with, and addition to, the social and cultural atoms of psychodramatic theory and practice.

Once as a psychodrama group we agreed to be finely attentive in ourselves to where the loci of identity was moment by moment. To assist in this end, we did productions that were silent and had no role reversals. One protagonist was astonished to find themselves experiencing themselves as both a separate individual and distributed at the same time. Perhaps this is a more common occurrence in psychodramatic enactments than we have noticed.

Experience with psychodrama shows that individuation is well set up and practiced when the individual is relating to others. Interestingly, David Bohm's work in studying the operation of electrons in metals revealed that the more an electron participated with others, the more it had individuated existence. He also came to a theory of holonomy in which things are distributed, each part containing the whole, each thing constantly infolding and unfolding into the other in such a continuous process that one would never be able to definitively identify an elementary particle other than the process.

Musings for psychodrama

Appreciation of the deeply entwined nature of the individual and their social self offers other openings for psychodrama theory and practice.

¹ I have described (Carter, 2014) how the psychodramatic method has special properties to free up and expand the social self, using similar mechanisms that occur when a mirror is used to heal phantom limb pain.

I find I don't need one definitive approach to describing a 'role'. Stereotypical, generalised descriptions such as 'spontaneous actor' and 'loyal son' are highly useful as a specific type of behaviour is identified and can be enacted as a separate 'role' in a psychodramatic production. Call it a characteristic of a role if you want. A role description that is a unique to the individual and could be termed a personality is also highly useful, if it fits. Astute observation and careful inquiry with a protagonist in the field of action is a great place for this inquiry. Not only can I get at specifics, I'm also less likely to have my prejudices and pet theories twist or dominate the facts.

Careful and detailed observations of instances of what is called mirroring and doubling led to what seemed like clear things to becoming not so clear. In my PhD, I collected trainers' descriptions of psychodrama fundamentals based on their observations of videos of psychodramatic enactments. Careful examination of the functioning described as mirroring or doubling revealed there were no common external phenomena to distinguish them from each other, including time (same time — after), distance (beside — across), and closeness of the auxiliaries behaviour to the behaviour of the protagonist. Surprisingly, purposes and effects such as self-esteem and self-perception did not work either. The remaining thing was the protagonist's identification with the auxiliary. A differentiating description based on this could go something like: *Mirroring is self perceiving itself external. Doubling is the other perceived as self, internal.* However, when looking at specific instances, this also slips from being inclusive and definitive.

Observation of a protagonist when they are being 'doubled', shows that at times they have the auxiliary as themselves, a merged identity, and other times as separate. At times, this can be an inadequacy of the doubling. However, also consider that the protagonist may be moving quickly between internal and external loci of identity and that in one moment they are experiencing the auxiliary as a double and then in another moment more as a mirror.

Is it also possible that mirroring requires a base of doubling to be operating somewhere in the person? A person cannot be self-reflective unless there is an adequate base of self-esteem? In addition, perhaps the identity in a moment is spread or distributed in the whole system and so could be inclusive of both. How to accurately and precisely observe and inquire into these things during enactment is something we can swap notes on. Reflecting on the experiences of being an auxiliary could be relevant here, too.

It was such a relief to me when Max Clayton once said to an auxiliary playing a role something like, *'Look, you have to do exactly what the protagonist did in this role and at the same time take in what the protagonist is doing now because very shortly there will be a role reversal. Don't worry, it is almost impossible.'* The astonishing thing is how magnificently most people can be an auxiliary, even when they almost never do it in 'real' life.

There are many possible factors at play. The attention and thinking taken up in the living action of a crisp psychodramatic production might occupy the thinking and attention that are used to focus on self-interests and preservation. The willingness to be of service to others might also deactivate the ego mechanisms of survival. Some might call that love. Erich Fromm's work (1956) described in *The Art of Loving* continues to offer up treasures in the art and power of love. Noticing the dynamics between love and responsibility is relevant.

Responsibility and heart

If there is no choice, does that also mean there is no responsibility? When looking for responsibility, love or heart has emerged as a principle factor at work. In the twenty years I've worked with men who have committed various crimes, including murder and paedophilia, demands from others, or self, for remorse, accountability and responsibility have not generated much useful action. Instead, when conditions are set up for a person to enter their heart, and they do, there can appear a capacity to really know and see, to be available to what has really happened. Occasionally there is not even a whiff of responsibility, yet the experience of the suffering that has occurred to self and others is particularly visceral and sobering. The behaviour of the person looks very much like what 'responsibility' is held to be but they are in a place that appears beyond or independent of responsibility. Perhaps the 'heart' includes responsibility but is not defined by it.

Sometimes when all the factors in operation in a particular event can be laid out in a psychodramatic enactment, there can be a clarity on responsibility. There can be an initial event in the person's childhood where they were not responsible but it is imprinted and they go on to set up people and conditions in which this thing happens again and again. Seeing this accurately laid out can result in a very useful discrimination of responsibility. Without it, full responsibility can be resisted; and so too, full forgiveness. Here's love again.

Hopeless

Like choice, a careful examination of the treasured institution of *hope* offers gifts. Chogyum Trungpa (1991), a practitioner of the Crazy Wisdom School of Tibetan Buddhism, identifies hope as the main hindrance to freedom.

The process is one of going further in and in and in without any reference point of spirituality, without any reference point of a saviour, without any reference point of goodness or badness — without any reference points whatsoever! Finally we might reach the basic level of hopelessness, of transcending hope. This does not mean we end up as zombies. We still have all the energies; we have all the fascination of discovery, of seeing this process unfolding and unfolding and unfolding, going on and on. This

process of discovery automatically recharges itself so that we keep going deeper and deeper and deeper. (p. 10)

Hope can be used to protect against all kinds of dangers. As a response to the myriad of pressures, unforeseen and unwelcome events, false accusations, accidents and other things coming at them, people can attempt to cheer themselves up and exhort themselves to be positive and not weighed down by negativity. Being gung-ho and putting on a posture of toughness is advocated. Mantras of positiveness abound: *'everything is for a reason', 'you will be better off because of it'*. All manner of saviors appear: gods, heaven, ascension and reincarnation. Given that they are typically bred up in the imagination, they end up attracting and nurturing the very thing they are trying to avoid: anxiety.

Sometimes, fear is identified as the culprit. There are calls to overcome fear or even remove it but fear can be a response to something very real that must be dealt with. Could we distinguish fear from anxiety by saying fear is an instinctual response to something that is real. It is not something to remove, ignore or minimise. Trungpa offered the worthy and interesting challenge to live with fear without hope.

Jeanne de Salzmann (2010) offers various approaches or postures not only to the threats, surprises and other unknowns coming at you, but also to the personal deficiencies and conflicted internal warm-ups. Her phrases *'willing surrender'* and *'conscious suffering'* carry daring and dignity for me and I have been trying them out. Now I might call them convictions, something Max called a belief based on prior experience. In such a *'conviction,'* my will and determination are engaged and activated. I may not have chosen anything but those things which people would normally bundle up with choice or self-agency are there.

This quote from Jeanne's book *The Reality of Being* is one illustration of the process of willing surrender. Note, the *'it'* in the first sentence refers to attention. "I cannot make it appear, just as I cannot force love to appear. Attention comes when it is needed, when it is called by a feeling of necessity. If I really see that I do not understand, that I have lost the direction and the meaning of my life, then at that very moment my attention is called to be here." (p. 217).

A psychodramatist might call Jeanne's *attention*, warm-up, which appears a good fit given how I have found this attention is not just a point of awareness but can thicken and spread, is spontaneous yet can be worked. Others could well call it life force or presence or essence. This sits well with Jeanne's encouragement: "I let go out of humility because I begin to see that myself I am nothing, and at the heart of this humility a trust, a kind of faith, appears. In this moment I am tranquil. I am at peace." (pp. 261-262).

Breath

The operation of breath offers another integrative structure that can be usefully applied to many processes. Breath is immediately available, intimate and personal. The breath comes in, there is a pause, a place of fullness and capacity, a breath out, a pause, a place of nothing, and then a breath in. Interestingly, the breath in does a mini-activation of the sympathetic system and the breath out, the parasympathetic.

Usually I am operating in a partial way. The breath out is not full. I'm holding on to something, not confident about the future, unwilling to surrender. The breath in is partial. Perhaps I want to say something to somebody. I can't do that breathing in.

The psychological appears to also 'breathe'. When person makes a full expression, there is a pause, a changeover place, and then the new comes. As the receiver of the expression, we breath it in and we tend to relate to the content of the expression and not the pause or the new thing coming to the person making the expression. For example, Fred has a whinge about how crippling the day's events have been and Mary wants to fix it, analyse or argue against it but Fred's already in a new place. It's history. Watching Max Clayton work was inspiring and illustrative of how to be alive in the changeover period, attentive and available to the fresh, keeping production in the emerging and not five seconds behind the action. This involved being willing to drop fixations on ideas and theories.

Psychodramatic enactment invites attention to the social field and its dynamics. The occupation with the action neatly sidetracks the usual mechanisms of checking things out and other inhibiting habits, releasing the person from domination by choice, hope, keeping it safe and other cognitively-bound movements of ego survival that use the field of the imagination to exist. The protagonist is drawn into relating to what is.

What does your experience tell you?

Experience

Max's (Clayton & Carter, 2004) encouragement and guidance was to make experience and experiential learning the base:

I do profoundly live by the idea that everything that I do and everything that other people do is best related to experience. Experience is the foundation. The whole of life is an outgrowth of that. Life is not lived on the basis of external ideas or external pressures. It is based solely on generating experiences within ourselves and respecting that experience. Realising that really and truly there is life in that experience and it will always give us the best guidance. (pp. 122-123).

There is a resonance with Ramana Maharshi (1972): "People would not

understand the simple and bare truth — the truth of their everyday, ever-present, and eternal experience... They love mystery and not the bare truth, religions pamper them... why not abide in the self, right here and now?" (p. 99).

Inquiry based on personal experience comes with challenges. Daniel Goleman's (1986) summary of various scientific investigations are that the unconscious mind filters out most sensations as too threatening.

Crucial decisions as to what should and should not enter awareness are made in the unconscious mind. Thus that essential human ability, self-awareness, brings with it the capacity for self-deception. It is a simple step for the unconscious mind to act as a trickster, submitting to awareness a biased array of facts intended to persuade the aware part of the mind to go along with a given course of action. (p. 249).

Perhaps, only a genuine willingness to suffer, some kind of posture of being present with pain and fear, or an absence of self-interest and concern for preservation, might actually release the binds of these instincts. Many spiritual traditions emphasis the path as being one of total abdication of the self in service to the other or to an ideal. This 'experiment' only appears possible if I really want to completely offer myself. Again, I can't make this happen. I notice that the integrity of my desire is not full or sustained. I am wishy washy, conflicted. This has gone on for so long and so consistently that I am pretty convinced that I will not make it. However, even there I am a failure. My convictions have proven to not be reliable. I did actually move the cell phone charger from its usual place. Ah yes, see Philip, you do like the truth. I do like what experience shows. I am willing to question anything. I notice a tight trembling inside. It's normal. It appears to be frightened. I have been frightened my whole life...? It appears so. And I've survived. No wonder the ego is so wired. I'll go for a walk. Did my legs initiate that, or the knowing of past experiences, or was it a whiff of fresh air? Difficult, if not impossible to know now, seconds later, as it is already memory. What a great challenge for psychodrama to see if there can be a production in which these fine grained things can be laid out in accurate ways, with all the contextual factors. What new insights might that reveal?

Walking the dog on the beach

I'm out walking the dog on the beach and there is so much light in everything: the air, the sea, the land. There is a vitality, a life, an extraordinary freshness and it is bursting from within every cell of me and everything else. It is the living beingness of me and it is everywhere. *I am the essence of the universe getting to know itself.* This comes fresh, as a realisation: I am the essence of life getting to know itself through this body and everything else

is also the essence getting to know itself through their bodies. No plan, no ending, an on-going feast.

Some days later, I'm out walking the forest road just in from the beach. *I am mortal*. This comes as a certainty. I will die. This body and everything that I associate as me will end. I feel very sober. Settled. I feel honoured to be limited to this body. What an extraordinary experience. This mystery. As I am walking, I sense a force of life is living me and that this force isn't me. I look around — the trees, the light, the birds — it is living everything. It gets to live everything. I feel no rush, no deprivation. Life will get to know and experience everything. What a relief.

So what am I? The very essence of the universe getting to know itself or a totally mortal entity with a use by date? I'll take either. Both experiences had an extraordinary aliveness, freedom and presence. My normal functioning is a kind of middle ground of conflicted warm-ups, focusing on surviving all the different threats, full of self-referencing and various patch-ups of hope, positive thinking and other petty bullies, with not even enough motivation to give anything full sustained attention. I see this deficiency. I can't bully myself into being motivated. My tummy rises. It's a breath. The breath out is noticed. The breath in comes fuller. I feel moved. I don't know by what. I don't care. I don't need to know. I willingly surrender to a force I don't even know. Attention comes as a force, fresh and fuller. I am available or that availability has embraced me. It appears that the whole universe is here to support me. That sounds silly and a set up. I am in my head, rushing around collating a kind of summary, alert to some trick, watchful for a setup. Ah, my old friend is doing his work. An outbreath rushes out. On and on it goes, forever in the now.

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