

# Encounter

## Catch a Falling Star and Put it in Your Pocket — Never Let it Fade Away

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### *ABSTRACT*

This paper illustrates and discusses encounter, regarding it as a vital aspect of the therapeutic relationship. In my view an encounter, as described in this paper, can provide a corrective emotional experience that assists in social atom repair and contributes to role development. The article also gives an historical background of 'encounter' and its place in psychodrama theory and in the canon of psychotherapy. This is followed by an illustration derived from my work with several people, and my reflections on that work.

### *KEY WORDS*

attachment, attachment theory, corrective emotional experience, counter-transference, crisis intervention, critical incident debriefing, empathy, encounter, encounter group, equals, I and thou, role development, role reversal, social atom repair, spontaneity and creativity, tele, transference,

The history and meaning of encounter are fascinating and enlightening. The following extracts give a grounding and depth to Moreno's notion of encounter.

It has been recorded that in 1914 Moreno introduced the word "encounter" in a series of poetic writings, 'Invitation to an Encounter.' (Waldl, 2005a, pp. 169-173).

Thomas Treadwell acknowledges that Moreno is the founder of the Encounter Group Movement, a pioneer in the grounding and principles of group psychotherapy and recognises 'Moreno's contribution as a fore runner of web based social network media in virtual communities'. (Treadwell, 2014, pp. 95-105)

"Unfortunately, the genius of Moreno's poems will get lost in translation, but I will try: Word by word it says: There are no means between me and others/I am actually in the encounter.

It could mean: There is nothing between me and you/I am real in the encounter." (Waldl, 2005b, pp. 69-93)

There has been much contention about who first used the word 'encounter', Martin Buber or Jacob Moreno. However, Zerka Moreno says it is clear Moreno was the first. (Moreno, Z., 2006). Supporting Zerka's claim is a box that had been left in Europe, containing Moreno's papers. It was opened in 2006 after both Moreno and Buber had died. It has been found that Buber used 'almost word for word' Moreno's excerpts about encounter in his book, "I and Thou" (Waldl, 2005a). Moreno and Buber were colleagues and were both involved in exploring the concept of encounter. They were revolutionaries in the development of modern day thinking and practice in the area of interpersonal relationships. They were forerunners of our practice as psychodramatists today: meeting others mutually with compassion.

Jacob Levy Moreno, in an "Autobiography of a Genius" (Moreno, J.L., 2011, p. 163), said that the religion of encounter came to life between 1908 and 1914. Along with his friend Chaim and several others they were "...all committed to anonymity, of loving and giving, living a direct and concrete life in the community with all we met. We left our homes and families and took to the streets." "All gifts received went into funds for the House of Encounter."

Before World War 1 the world was in turmoil, like today. There was instability in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Refugees in Vienna were looking for new homes. Moreno and his friends found a house and written on a wall was "Come to us from all nations. We will give you shelter."

In this overcrowded house, during evening sessions "problems were bought forth and grievances were settled." These early "encounter groups" were the model for the encounter groups now spreading throughout the world. But nightly meetings were not just discussion sessions. "After sharing our feelings, we sang and danced and played games. Participating in the

encounters was a religious experience, a joyful one.” (Moreno, J. L., 2011)

In 1954, Jacob Moreno gave a series of lectures. These included discussions with colleagues regarding his theories about tele and encounter, transference and countertransference. His colleagues acknowledged Moreno’s ideas regarding the importance of tele in the therapeutic relationship and Moreno did not dismiss transference and countertransference. However, he saw tele and encounter as of primary importance in individual and group psychotherapy. (Moreno, J. L., 1959, p. 99). Throughout his life he continued to regard encounter and tele as fundamental to the method.

Dr Moreno defines tele as “insight into”, “appreciation of”, and “feeling for” the “... actual makeup of the other person.” “Thus defined it is indeed the foundation of all therapy.” (Moreno, J. L., 1959, p. 26)

In his lectures Moreno states that, “encounter encompasses not only loving, but also hostile and threatening relationships. It is not only an emotional rapport, like the professional meeting of a physician or therapist and patient, or an intellectual rapport, like teacher and student, or a scientific rapport, like a participant observer and his subject. It is a meeting on the most intensive level of communication.” (Moreno, J.L., 1969).

Moreno takes the position that empathy and transference are one-way, tele is two-way and mutual and this leads to encounter which is always mutual. “A meeting of two: eye to eye face to face. And when you are near I will tear your eyes out and place them inside mine and you will tear my eyes out and place them inside of yours, then I will look at you with your eyes and you will look at me with mine.” (Moreno J. L., 1959, p. 15)

“Encounter means that two people not only meet but also comprehend one another, each with his whole being. The participant is not pushed into the situation by an external force. They are there because they want to be there. There is in every encounter an element of surprise.” (Moreno, Z.T., 2006)

“A living encounter involves being bold, requiring one to direct, to challenge, to explore, to be truthful and for the dramatic producer to warm-up to respecting the full potential in themselves and the others.” (Clayton, M. & Carter, 2004 p. 207)

Lynette Clayton shared from her experience, “Encounter occurs when the creative genius of the protagonist and of the psychodramatist meet”. (Clayton, L., personal communication AANZPA Online Event 2021). At this point the protagonist and the psychodramatist meet as equals.

“Encountering, is therefore, at the core of the psychodramatic experience. The encounter comes first. Perception or interpretive analysis comes second.” (Moreno, Z.T., 2006)

“Catch a Falling Star and Put it in Your Pocket — Never let it Fade Away” (Vance & Pockriss, 1957) is a metaphor to illustrate the notion that a psychodramatist can assist a person to develop inspiration, spontaneity and

creativity in the face of adverse life situations. Catching a falling star seems impossible, however, an outcome in a therapeutic encounter can lead to a starburst of hope and inspiration for the protagonist, the psychodramatist and, during a group session, for group members.

### Paul's story

Paul has been living in his car, 'couch surfing' and using refuges for the homeless for two years. His addictions included alcohol, drugs for pain and Valium. There had been numerous nights in a cell at a police station and several times the riot squad had been called when he became threatening and aggressive. These confrontations caused the situation to heighten his aggression and once again he would be charged; a court case would follow and would be given either a jail sentence or a good behaviour bond.

Paul was the second appointment for the day, and he arrived clutching a roll of paper. "Read this" he said. I unrolled the paper and began to read. A therapist had once suggested he write his story in the third person. His narrative was a tragedy, appalling violence and neglect. He was smart, he did not want to go over his story again and he wanted me to have a sketched outline of his life.

His current life had taken a down-turn when he had been evicted from his public housing and his neighbours had stripped the flat of all its contents. Due to prescribed medication for a back injury, he had become addicted and found that withdrawing from the drugs caused unbearable anxiety and panic attacks.

After reading his story I shared my response and told him that I was horrified that he had been treated in such an appalling way. I then invited him to share with me what had brought him along to this session.

Paul launched into a tirade of anger and rage. He had worked hard all his life for his wife and children and then she had an affair. This ended in a divorce; he lost the house and ended up with a large debt. His father had recently died, and his mother was chronically ill. He wept about his father and despaired about his mother.

Much to my alarm he then began saying that he would like to kill his ex-wife. After about ten minutes of expletives and rage he looked at me and said, "I would never do that as I love my kids". I did not want to maximise his rage at this point. The office manager phoned to check that I was all right as the noise was travelling throughout the building. He then began to cry and sob. He expressed the pain and grief of not being with his children and shared his frustration about the barriers that his ex-wife put in the way, stopping him from having adequate time with them.

I looked at Paul and said, "You are a good man Paul, I can see that you are a loving father and you want the best for your kids. You want your children to have a better life than you had." He softened and said, "I am

pleased that you can see that in me, I haven't been thinking much of myself for a long time". I then said, "You are also caring for your elderly parent, this shows me how loving you are with your family". He continued sobbing and weeping.

During this meeting a true encounter occurred, and Paul and I benefited greatly, allowing us to move towards a mutually positive relationship and together face the current crisis and plan the required action.

Psychodrama is called the theatre of the soul and the truth and as I was experiencing a sense of gratitude, Paul said, "Thank you for listening to me." He attended further sessions. I then assisted him to communicate with his doctor as he was desperate for medication for his back pain.

This intervention prevented the usual chaos caused by his cravings for drugs, and it stopped the history of police intervention that usually occurred when he required medication and was suffering from drug withdrawals. He continued to share his grief and pain and, with the assistance of a kind GP, received adequate pain medication. He continued to gain insight into his behaviour and once said to me, "When I say these things out loud I realise some of my actions, ideas and thoughts aren't so good."

Paul was given public housing and began to rebuild his life. Finally, his children were able to stay with him for extended lengths of time and he began to re-establish family life.

Paul contacted me a year after our last session. He was distressed and asked for an urgent appointment. A misfortune that was not his fault had led to him letting down a friend, financially and psychologically. At our meeting the next day he informed me that his shame and humiliation was overwhelming, he had spent the night wrestling with his suicidal thoughts and his murderous feelings towards his ex-wife. He was able to experience his fantasies and not act. During our time together he made an action plan and began to see a way out of the problems. He reported to me some weeks later that he was back on track.

## Reflections

It is with gratitude that through my psychodrama training and my psychodrama practice, I am dedicated to my own development through peer and hierarchical supervision. Applying psychodramatic principles to my own life assists me to be a more tolerant and sensitive human being. These disciplines have led to role development and life skills enabling me to work with people who have complex life situations.

Having continued to refine my abilities to role reverse with a wide range of people, my capacity to have mutual, respectful relationships has improved. The therapist is a 'tuning fork' who is finely pitched to resonate, then to draw on their learning and life experiences, and then respond adequately to situations that emerge during a therapeutic encounter. In my

work with Paul, and with countless others, I have observed and experienced that the strength of tele and encounters facilitates role development.

As I consider my meetings with Paul, my first memory is of the pleasure, humility and joy I gained from this work. The second is how easy it is to forget the importance of the encounter that is created by two people involved in human relationships and that, "through direct expression, we are able to achieve living encounters that leave lasting impressions." (Clayton, & Carter, 2004. pp203-205).

Following his explosive abreaction Paul seemed to integrate my mirroring when I said, "You are a good man Paul, I can see that you are a loving father and you want the best for your kids. You want your children to have a better life than you had."

My response came from the depth of my being and I felt warmth and love for him. At that point he began sobbing and I continued to sit with him, and our gaze met. I could see the transformation taking place as he softened, as he felt his own and my humanity.

Paul's crisis unleashed past trauma and grief and, as a psychodramatist, I was able to make therapeutic interventions to assist him to resolve past concerns and to develop new responses to life situations.

Paul experienced a "corrective emotional experience" (Hartman and Zimberoff, 2004 pp3-8) that enabled him to become unified in himself — "thinking, feeling and acting in the 'here and now'."

The encounter created a fluidity of Paul's psyche: "The reworking of old situations aided social atom repair." (Broom, 2010, p. 18). New and fresh responses to life situations began to emerge. (Clayton & Carter, 2004)

During meetings with Paul we continued with mutual respect for each other. Despite his panic and pain I kept a kind, patient and generous spirit that assisted us to find enabling solutions. Encounter and role reversal enabled this result and I think the previous cathartic encounter established positive tele that led to our compatible working relationship.

In further sessions Paul and I discussed his hopes and plans. He began to put his life in order. We met as equals and the sessions were uplifting. Together we met as creative geniuses: wise, creative and spontaneous as Paul grappled with his life. A doctor who recommended further sessions for his patient commented, "I am requesting further sessions for Paul this year. This is the first time Paul has responded so quickly to treatment, it appears that he has a very successful therapeutic relationship. I strongly recommend further treatment sessions."

The difficulties with relationships due to the lack of attachment (Bretherton, 1992, pp. 759-775) and the absence of a primary carer throughout Paul's life began to diminish. His adequate roles developed and were strengthened through our mutually positive, robust, companionable relationship.



During the meetings with Paul we formed an attachment of trust and mutual concern. This provided the beginning of social atom repair in relation to his lack of attachment and limited parental guidance, nurturance, love and affection. The result of this lack of attachment had been a chaotic life that had plagued him.

The principles of crisis intervention (Pilar, 1990, pp. 121-40) were useful with Paul as he would arrive at the clinic in a predicament requiring urgent assistance. By working in the moment during a crisis, interventions were successful as Paul was less guarded and defensive, his psyche fluid and flexible.

What I discovered, when working with men at the Drug and Alcohol Centre, is that the truth was revealed when we had meetings that included encounter. Despite their addictions, criminal records and traumatised childhoods, these men contacted the truth of their human spirit; they became, in the moment, beautiful, sweet, kind, compassionate human beings.

The bond and the positive tele that had developed during our therapeutic encounters had assisted Paul to reach out and seek assistance and find new responses to old situations. He reported that he had formed relationships in his neighbourhood and was involved in shared childcare and assisting with repairs and renovations in his community.

It has been a memorable experience to enter the world of Paul as he caught his falling stars. My hope is that he will not let them fade away. Or when they fade, he will retain an ability to bring vitality, dreams and imagination back into his life.

The combination of clinical experience and research during the writing of this paper has led me to understanding further the fundamental concept of encounter, which is a foundation of the psychodramatic method, and how strongly it is required in the therapeutic relationship.

Following the history of the word 'Encounter' adds to an understanding of Moreno's philosophy. His acute interest and passion regarding human beings was grounded in a vision of each of us learning to understand and to connect with each other.

The way I see it, encounter is a concept that contains a vision for the world, a vision of people connecting with each other mutually, with love, honestly, spontaneously and creatively.

You meet and you get each other.

This paper was written as a result of a peer group of psychodramatists, Kate Cook convener, Peggy Cook, Neil Hucker and myself. Our focus was to translate aspects of our work hoping that this would lead to other professions understanding our contribution to psychotherapy. We presented our work at an AANZPA Conference 2014 and at the International Group Psychotherapy Conference in Croatia in 2015.

Many thanks to all my colleagues who have been my guides and companions.

## Note

Thank you to all the 'Pauls' I have met during my work. This Paul is made up of men with similar life situations and with common interpersonal difficulties. They all progressed and developed in their ability to build a meaningful life. Names and identifying details have been changed throughout this article to protect the privacy of the people involved.

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