

How Psychodrama Helped Pop My Creativity Cork

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Almost anyone can write, but at what point can you call yourself a writer? I enjoy writing but I've always struggled to perceive myself as a writer, at least outside the safe confines of the academic arena. Academic writing is my safe space where the rules of specificity, clarity, formality and evidence dictate the tone and credibility of your work. I make my living supporting others to write effectively in this style, as an avenue for achieving their learning goals. Quietly though, I've harboured more expansive writing objectives.

My creative aspirations started as a 10-year-old, when a short story I entered in an Arbour week competition (featuring a dialogue between Mrs Douglas Fir and Mrs Radiata Pine, no less) was broadcast on Nelson radio. I still remember the warm glow of hearing my words come alive on air. It was a success sadly never repeated, despite numerous efforts to develop my creativity. Looking back, I was trying too hard: attempting to be literary, searching for subjects, when in truth I really didn't have a style or anything particularly significant to say. Life was also busy and self-confidence low. I spent too much time "waiting for inspiration's shove or society's kiss on (my) forehead" as Susan Sontag puts it (as cited in Militello, 2003). Caring too much about others' perceptions has been a lifelong theme. Over-developed role, anyone?

Over the past decade I've experienced several life-quakes that shifted my groundedness. One of these was my father's devastating stroke in 2017, an unforeseen calamity that left him in hospital-level care in a retirement village. The consequences have often felt overwhelming, as dad's health deteriorated and our family faced a compounding series of crises. Often, I wondered what to do with my extreme emotions. I didn't know how to carry the guilt, grief, anger and pain; how to contain them and the troubling questions they raised for me and my life. That's when I started to write again, to find words to express and hold the emotions and questions, to help me to live with them, rather than be consumed by them. I was also aware that we wouldn't be the only family facing such a traumatic experience. I wrote a version of dad's story from his perspective in creative non-fiction form, shared it with some friends who gave positive feedback, and that felt amazing. I thought that was it, all wrapped up. But no.

In 2020, I restarted psychodrama training after a 27-year gap, Covid-19 struck, and coincidentally (or not) I became a poet, of sorts. Yes, the role is

still emerging, and I struggle to claim it. Nevertheless, as lockdown progressed, I wrote and wrote and wrote. The condensed form of poetry seemed achievable, even with my fulltime work and parenting. And I haven't stopped, though the output varies according to my commitments and level of emotional agitation. It's not all good writing — I have a large trash can — but enough of it meets my standards to make me smile. When I get the writing urge, the process of finding the “right” words feels gnawingly obsessive, then wonderfully therapeutic when it works.

So why do I claim that psychodrama popped my creative cork? Because, on reflection, I consider my poems mini-psychodramas in which I create vignettes, direct scenes, engage in dialogue, soliloquys, role reversals and role training, as I attempt to make sense of my turbulent social universe.

Taking a director role

Through poetry, I explore significant moments by creating scenes with dialogue, depth and role reversal. Often, they explore my changing family atom, within a sociodramatic medical context. In *D-word* I explore my parents' current situation, we say things we sometimes haven't said, and maximise their expression to convey the emotional force of the experience.

D-word

My 90-year-old dad asks why
his parents haven't visited.
They passed away long ago, says mum.
His expression is puzzled, then outraged.
Why was I never told?

It's a stage of dementia, says the nurse
and mum's face scrunches.
That's the first time they've mentioned the d-word
she says later.
No mum, remember the doctor did briefly -
that day you cried?

It's the sneaky way this d-word arrived
that's perplexed her.
It's not the kind of word
that should just drop in.
Who made that diagnosis? When?
Wouldn't a wife be told?
Have things explained —

what to expect?
how to cope?

After all
it's not a word she's too frail to carry
having trudged the perilous path
of caring for four long years.
The day-to-day fray of it carves at her
as slow rivulets of decline strip away
conversation, empathy,
interest in people, activities,
and in her.

Yet he calls and calls her name, desperate
to keep her in view.
I'm in the toilet, she snaps.
Is this the day everyone leaves me? he whispers.

We speak of being prepared for the other d-word, death.
It's okay, she says, I've already grieved.
It's not death that scares me.

None of us ever expected to be in this situation, yet here we are, now year after year, facing the unthinkable and surviving. Is that not what psychodrama teaches us?

Auxiliary role and role reversal

By doing the work of writing, I believe I have become a more useful life auxiliary for family members, especially my parents. The act of role reversal is one of recognition and relationship: I role reverse with you in order to *see as you, feel as you, empathise with you*. In *Complaint*, when I role reverse with my father, who has so little autonomy, I'm mirroring his anger back to him, and doubling him by affirming his absolute right to say the unpalatable and refuse to accept the intolerable. Containing my emotional response to his despondency through poetry frees me to fully engage in our face-to-face interactions; to listen to him, respond fully, and hold him even as he sobs or rages... though I still sob with him.

Complaint

Death
you've come too late
I'm long past my best.

You could have had me by the feet
in a fast-flowing river
high on a mountain trail
that time I stumbled
caught my pack on a rock
struggled to be free.

That would have been an adventurous death.

Or the time I painted the roof aged 84:
a simple slip would have done it then.
Or you could have had me on the road
outside Wellington railway station
when a car's bolshie horn made me hit
the tarmac.

I could have coped with an accidental demise.

But no, you messed up
and I've paid the price.
Now you owe me
Death.

My stoic mother tends to understate and avoid situations and emotions that are too stressful and confronting. She used the phrase "perfect afternoon" and described the experience below in such a light way that it felt like a stomach punch. I started writing this poem the moment the phone hit the table.

Perfect afternoon

On the perfect afternoon
you returned to me
I looked into your face and your old eyes
looked right back
at me.
And for two unseasonable sunlit hours
we re-lifted our unfinished book
taking turns to select and read
from its most worn pages.
Your face was soft again with pleasure
and I bathed in waves of wonder
at the small familiar.

Breath flowed freely
in and out
of our chests and our shoulders
dropped
into soft companionability.

On the perfect afternoon
our locked eyes stretched to shatter-point
as they wheeled you away from
me, left gasping
rocking back, forward, back, forward
punishing my pillow for the knowledge of you
still in there somewhere
while darkening sky
enveloped me
and my shoulders ached to know -
will we ever meet again?

Nobody tells the full story of dementia and its many-faceted cruelties. By reversing roles with my mum, I pay full attention to her everyday pain. She is the one experiencing the cruel loss of a 60-year relationship and she needs my support. My compassion and pain are written into every line and for now that gives me strength.

Role training

My re-immersion in psychodrama is helping me to accept, even celebrate, the joy in writing and to care much less about outsiders' views or assessments. The act of writing is developing my role of confident (and shameless) self-expressor and helping me to find and trust my own voice.

Lost and found

Strange phrase —
finding your voice.
As if you were combing the shore for
beautiful shells
and came upon it
nestled in the knots of an old
piece of driftwood dribbled with
glints of sand and the broken claws
of a crab. And you thought
what's this rusty old thing
discarded and disowned?

Cleaned and polished would it have
any use?
And if it spoke its truth
would it have something
of worth
to say?

Yes, I answer now, regardless of what others (including you) think. That assertion is bewitchingly liberating. The lessons of psychodrama are helping me to inhabit the voice that I (and only I) own, and to reject prescriptive rules or standards that don't suit my creative and emotive purpose. While I admire those who perfect the art of literary poetry, sometimes I lose patience with their artistry, especially when it requires too much prior knowledge (or the use of an encyclopaedia). I don't need or desire to be a literary poet. My objectives in any genre of writing have always been communication and accessibility.

I would like others to share and enjoy my poems, but it's not essential. I write them *for* myself because I write *myself* and *my life* through them. A poem is finished when I recognise it, when the words create an emotional story that sings to me, that expresses me. My motivation to share is excitement — like a big kid: look what I've created, does it sing to you too? My audience is myself and anyone with emotional common ground.

Thank you psychodrama, I now call myself a writer.

REFERENCE:

Militello, C. (2003). Commencement 2003. *Vassar* 99(4). Sourced from <https://www.vassar.edu/vq/issues/2003/04/features/commencement.html>



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