

Towards a Definition for Spontaneity

by Phil Carter

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Recently, I've been keen to reach a satisfying definition of spontaneity that describes its essential qualities from a psychodrama point of view.

I started with my own sense of spontaneity which I can describe as: *a fresh, vital and unconflicted response that bursts forth from within without premeditation or restriction.* In the psychodrama world, I found spontaneity was most often used in this sense. So I was puzzled by the definition that is usually given: *a new response to an old situation or an adequate response to a new situation.* That's a bit dull, I thought, especially *adequate*. However, I was assured that this was Moreno's definition and that it was about having a sufficient repertoire of roles so that an individual's functioning would be full whatever the demands of the situation.

When I found the 'definition', the context showed Moreno was talking about what a state of spontaneity results in, not what it is; he said, spontaneity "propels the individual

towards an adequate response to ..." (Moreno, 1975, p.42). So, what does he say about spontaneity?

In *Spontaneity and Catharsis* (Moreno, 1975), Moreno points out that spontaneity derives from the Latin *sponte* "of free will". He stresses that spontaneity is not impulsive, emotional conduct that is out of control. He says it can be present in thinking just as much as in action and feeling and that it aims at "highly organised patterns of conduct" (p.42). He talks of having the right amount of spontaneity for the situation, but warns against thinking of spontaneity as a reservoir of energy. He explains how spontaneity stimulates and interacts with creativity, how cultural conserve results from this interaction, and how spontaneity can revitalise cultural conserve.

The essence of his writing about spontaneity is, "Spontaneity is a *readiness* to respond as *required*" (p.42). When I thought about *readiness*, I thought of how similar this is to the Eastern concept of *empty*

mind; the ability to experience the world brand new in each moment. They both seemed founded on the knowledge that the universe is in a constant state of change, with each new moment demanding a fresh response. I feel inspired too when Moreno goes a step further and encourages us to realise the creative potential of the moment, to be co-creators of the world. I think there is an acknowledgement here that we are not alone but are interconnected in a constantly evolving web where every part influences and is influenced by every other part.

For many years I was very attracted to *empty mind*. I thought the way to obtain this was to reduce conflicts, numb out needs and act empty. Well, deprivation didn't work, however, with the help of psychodrama I'm awakening to the freedom of abundance. Fully experiencing and entering into the present moment creates an openness and freshness for the emerging moment. Anyway, it's a lot more fun.

So, can these elements be combined to reach a satisfactory definition? Essentially, I think we need the key ideas of *readiness* and *adequate* while conveying the sense of freedom and vitality. If an *adequate response* is described as one where the person's functioning is not depressed but is alive and vital, then how about:

Spontaneity is a readiness for a free and vital response to the emerging moment.

Reference

Moreno, J. L. (1975). Mental Catharsis and the Psychodrama. *Journal of Group Psychotherapy, Psychodrama and Sociometry*, 28, 5-32, reprinted in J. Fox (ed.) (1987).