

The Transformation of an Autistic Pseudo-Martian using Psychodrama

by Marcel Saxone

Marcel counsels Autistic people individually or in groups, using psychodrama. He has found the psychodramatic method useful in enhancing Autistic individuals' self esteem and as a consequence they are better able to communicate and socialise in the outside world. Marcel is an advanced trainee with the Australian College of Psychodrama in Melbourne. Marcel also works as a community pharmacist and his aim is to spend more time in the counselling field where his passion lies.

As an adolescent I was always fascinated by the world of science fiction. On many an afternoon I would plunge into this eerie world of Isaac Asimov or Frank Herbert and stay there immersed for many hours. Fortunately I always returned and my exciting journeys served to garnish the more mundane experience associated with everyday living.

Even now as an adult my passion for the unknown sustains me, drives me along my pathway of life. Sometimes present on Earth, and sometimes on an amazing journey of exploration, lost in space and time. No wonder that I have a positive affinity towards individuals such as the Autistic who are somewhat alien in this world. Generally, Autistic people struggle with their perceptions. For some unknown reason sensory stimuli are misinterpreted, leading to poor communication, inadequate

socialisation, obsessive behaviours, and isolation, according to DSMIV (Diagnostic Statistical Manual IV).

In counselling 'high functioning' Autistic people, I have a strong sense of what it is like to live on Earth like a pseudo-Martian, to never *fully* understand another person's facial expressions, or to be unable to communicate with another beyond a certain level. A young male adult I was working with acknowledged he had no idea whether another person was positive, negative or neutral towards him, whilst communicating. Consequently, Bill would go blank in his thoughts when conversing with another person.

I also have a strong faith in the value of psychodramatic enactment, and of Moreno's major postulates; the spontaneity factor and the notion of the creative genius, both notions present in *all* people.

I have found that increased spontaneity levels slightly enhance

the ability to more accurately interpret stimuli from the environment. This results in more appropriate cognitive and affective functioning by Autistic individuals. Role reversal has also been effective in providing them with the opportunity to glimpse the world from a non-Autistic perspective. For example, Bill described a scene of himself on a school bus at the age of 12. Simultaneously Bill would see himself on the same school bus several weeks later. Both pictures were linked with a common affective component, ie loneliness. By role reversal with Bill as the objective observer, he was able to integrate the two scenes and gained a greater understanding of the awfulness of these situations he often encountered on the way to school. I have often marvelled at how a stiff, rigid Autistic individual can quickly become animated, both in speech and in bodily movements. For example, Peter normally walked in a robotic fashion but when involved in a scene at the bowling alley, he demonstrated extraordinary agility as he bowled strike after strike.

Further, doubling has been an invaluable technique to assist the Autistic person to unravel a range of internal dialogues, which by the nature of their impediment may often become garbled. Brad often struggles with the understanding and expression of his anger. Quite often he tends to associate his current anger with a situation that occurred four years ago. Using doubling, Brad has been able to see the futility of wasting his energy by the reliving of those old memories. He said recently, "I'm fascinated that I continue to hurt myself, over the two individuals that I have been angry with for the last four years."

The major benefit of my work

with Autistic people, as reported by them, is the emergence of a greater self-understanding and acceptance, ie: the development of the 'self lover' and 'self appreciator'. Brad often says, "All people have one kind of problem or another and Autism is just one of many." As a consequence these people appear to be better able to deal with themselves in relation to the outside world.

I have found that as a director I need to be directive with my language. It is useful to exhibit overt facial expressions, and I need to be demonstrative with my feelings. I consciously smile overtly, speak clearly, loudly and slowly, and often make prolonged eye contact. To further illustrate this, Bill was asked to assume the role of an auxiliary where he is dancing at a party. He immediately froze, but when I reminded him of his desires to understand other's facial and bodily expressions, he immediately got up and took the role of the dancer. He put up no resistance at all, so I concluded that I needed to be firm and directive with him so that he could mobilise his own internal resources.

I have also noticed that the majority of Autistic clients tend not to make future appointments to see me unless I make the suggestion first. I realise that this indifference is not a reflection of my ineptitude but is due to the lack of motivation in the Autistic individual. This limited self-drive is an area that I still struggle with. Autistic individuals are willing to experience psychodrama but left to their own devices, there is a reluctance to change. It is as if their inner spark just fades away when left unattended and unsupervised. Brad is one such person.

Brad (a 24 year old Caucasian

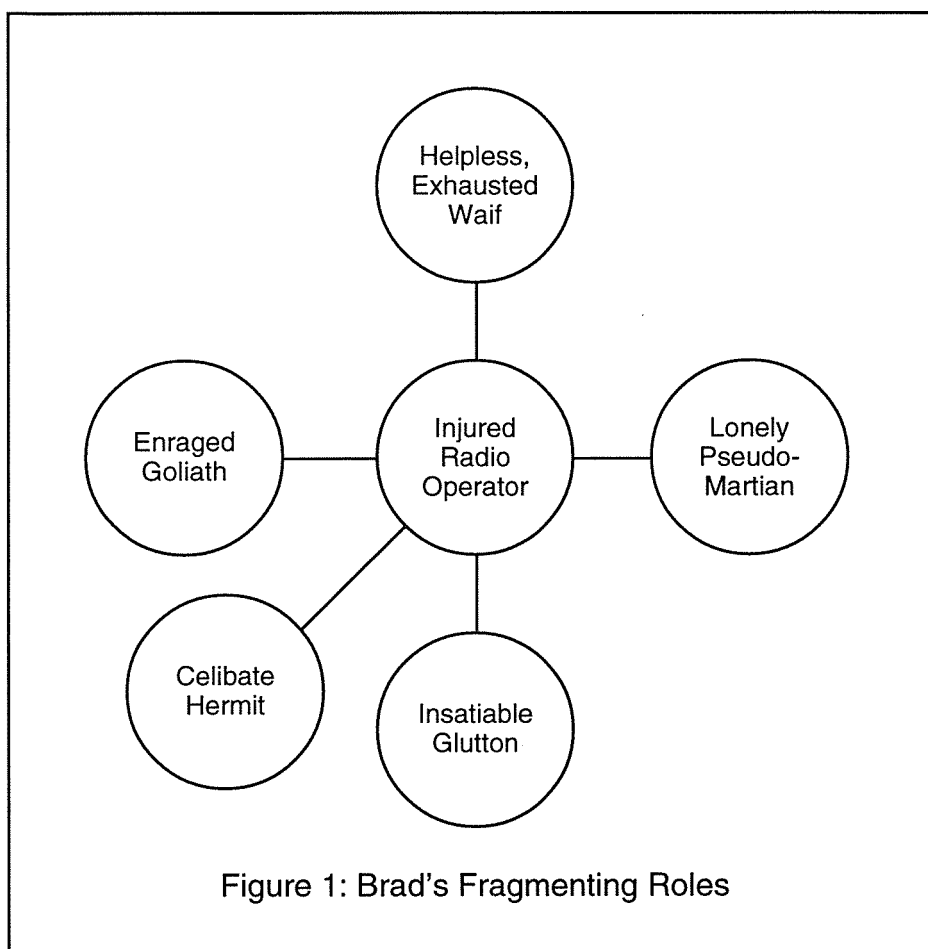


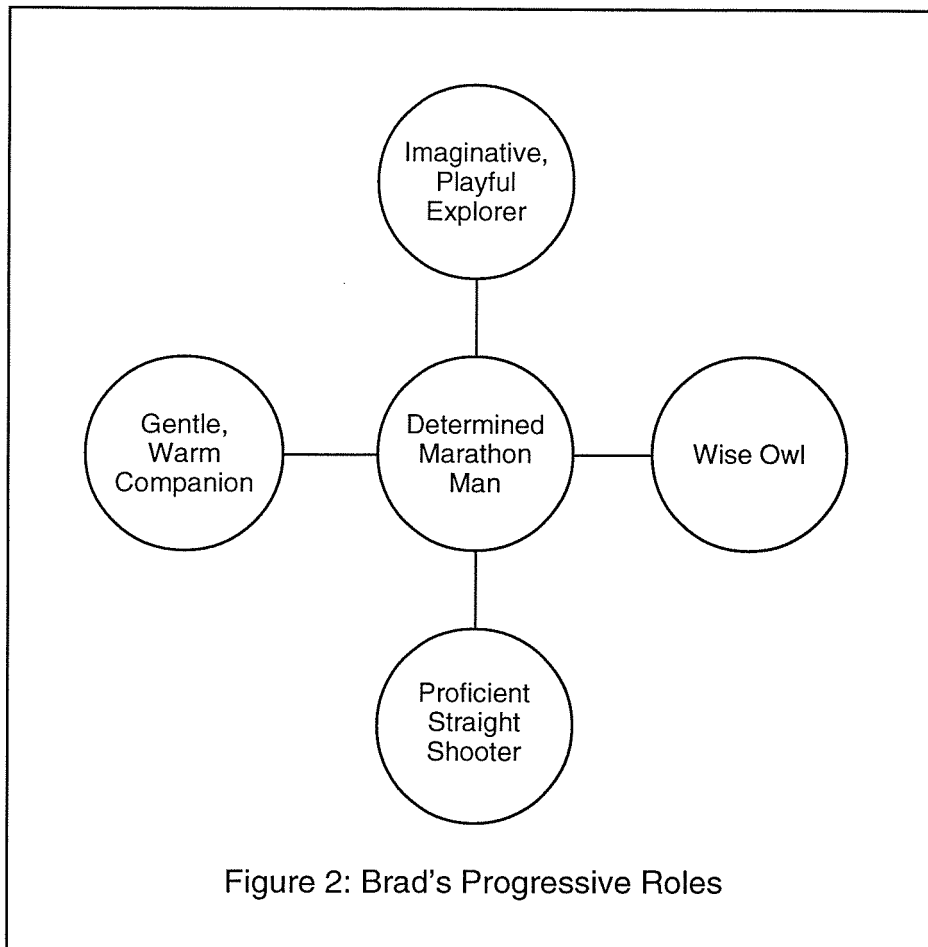
Figure 1: Brad's Fragmenting Roles

from a middle class family) once said to me "If Booba won't feed me, I will never see her again." Yet Brad loved his grandmother and did enjoy her company. I had also observed Brad cut off from a number of friends for no apparent reason other than their absence. He would then complain that he was bored because there was nothing to do. Brad's self-deprecating behaviour intrigued me and I wondered to what extent the Autism exacerbated his efforts to deal with intimacy.

Brad's functioning fitted some of the behaviours described in the DSMIV (Diagnostic Statistical Manual IV). He was oversensitive to a range of smells, his voice tended to be

monotonic, and he had poor socialisation skills, possibly due to an inability to appropriately integrate visual cues and verbal and non-verbal cues. He displayed some repetitive and obsessive behaviours, for example, washing his hands for ages. Brad complained that in the presence of lots of people (especially young females) he felt as if he were surrounded by "a swarm of rats". Brad was however drawn towards individuals whose positive facial expressions and voice tone were overt. Consequently he found artificial smiles endearing, and every used-car salesman was potentially Brad's best friend.

I posited that Brad's fears,



exacerbated by his Autism had resulted in the overdevelopment of a number of fragmenting roles, such as 'enraged Goliath' and 'the insatiable glutton', roles destined to lead to 'the lonely pseudo-Martian'. Could I assist Brad to reach out to others in the world and not remain so isolated? See Figure 1.

Brad quickly developed a trust with the psychodramatic method and with me as a director. This trust allowed him to explore ways to deal with a range of issues. The primary issue was to understand the world around him. Contrary to the DSMIV, Brad was capable of spontaneous make-believe play, social imitative play, and was quite often able to

take other people's perspectives. These attributes were extremely useful in a number of Psychodrama interventions. For example, in one of his early dramas Brad became angry after watching an episode of Roseanne (an American TV sitcom). His main objection was that Roseanne and her daughters were not polite to each other whilst chatting. As a matter of fact they were downright rude to each other. Brad further felt that they probably never hugged each other.

With role reversal, Brad quickly moved into the world of Roseanne. She explained to Brad that the family were actually very close, that she was surprised that Brad was so

judgemental, and that furthermore it was really none of his concern. At this point, with doubling as a dispassionate narrator, Brad began to realise that he was expending a considerable amount of useless energy, in an attempt to understand these people and he was saddened by this knowledge. He revealed that he tended to initially create a picture of safety and harmony in his head, thus wore himself out in an endeavour to make the outside world fit that picture, rather than vice versa.

In addition, Brad revealed that he used "thought barriers" to protect himself from people who were young (teens, early adulthood) or who were threatening. For example, "these people are grubs", "I might get Aids or genital herpes if I have sex". I was excited that through psychodramatic interventions Brad was able to develop a number of progressive roles, such as: warm companion, determined marathon man, imaginative playful explorer, proficient straightshooter. See Figure 2. Hopefully, the progressive roles would assist Brad in dealing with his Autism, and with 'the lonely pseudo-Martian'. Perhaps then Brad could choose whether to live on this planet, or whether to fly off to some distant galaxy in his head.

I have been working with Brad for four years and have observed that he now expresses himself clearly to others and that others find him somewhat shy, but otherwise proficient in his communication skills. His Autism does not appear an issue to other people, not finding his Autism a dominant characteristic as they interact with him.

Brad still struggles with his sexuality and is still fazed by young women. In addition, when anxious Brad overeats and consequently is

several stone overweight. For example, Brad over-indulged in food at his job because he became "nervous and anxious" at the sight of one of the young women staff. Brad acknowledged that he was not hungry for food.

Future work with Brad will focus on further development of his progressive roles. In particular, 'the proficient straightshooter', and 'the imaginative playful explorer' to help him cruise through muddy waters; 'the determined marathon man', helpful in assisting Brad to burn off fat, and to dissipate nervous energy;

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and 'the warm companion' and 'intimate lover' of value to Brad in dealing with intimacy and sexuality issues.

Postscript: At the time of writing this paper, Brad decided to leave his family home to live independently. This courageous move came from Brad, unsolicited and after many previous anxious outbursts about his inability to cope alone out in the world. Brad is equipped with a

yearning to make sense of his world,
with a strong desire towards
independence and inner peace. He
also shows a wisdom far beyond his
years and a readiness to take others'
perspectives which I credit to his
amazingly gentle nature. Perhaps
Brad's spaceship is finally landing on
Earth.