

Accessing Spontaneity in a Role Training Session

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Like many of life's significant events this one begins with a story.

We are in a senior psychodrama training group which has gathered for the weekend to focus on role training. This is a very cohesive group whose work during the previous nine months of the year has been focused on the integration of all aspects of the psychodramatic method. The cohesion of this group has been significantly enhanced by the morning announcement of a sudden death. It is now early afternoon and a role training session directed by a member of the group under my supervision is in progress. It is not easy in this session to identify a moment when a role analysis should be made. So far I have made only one or two small interventions with the director.

The protagonist is walking round the outside of the scene. Suddenly, spotting something in the protagonist's face, I asked her how old she is. She says she is about eight years old. I then asked what happened when she was eight. The result is a short but significant interaction between the protagonist and her eight year old self. The result is positive. New roles emerge and are clear in the original scene and the drama concludes in the usual way. One problematic area remaining is that many of the group members are still unclear about the difference between psychodrama and role training.

Now I am not going to pretend that my interventions as a supervisor were adequate. Given that the group was there specifically to learn about role training, I would say they were far from adequate. However, the point of focus for me in that session was the moment when I abandoned role analysis, or so it seemed, and supervised the enactment of a mini psychodrama as an intervention before returning to the original scene.

Earlier in the day I had informed the group that in my experience there was a real need to deepen the warm-up of the protagonist around the area of the role analysis. Further, that this was not just an intellectual exercise but a purposeful intervention aimed at understanding the role system. Through the process of making connections with earlier enactments of the same system, role training aims at reducing anxiety and fragmentation and providing greater opportunities for the emergence of creativity and new roles.

Role Training

Role training is a psychodramatic intervention which enables progress in many situations where classical psychodramatic enactment would be unthinkable. The structure of the sessions provides greater emotional safety for participants in that it is contained by

virtue of the fact that it focuses on one aspect of the personality structure. This seems to offer some control over the enactment, unlike classical psychodrama where all aspects of the personality may be addressed and multiple warm-ups at many different levels may occur.

Role training has clear steps and limits the possibilities for multiple warm-ups. In the early stages there is also a greater warm-up to intellectual aspects. However, it is also clear that the greater the warm-up of the protagonist to the role system under scrutiny, the greater the possibilities for the emergence of the feeling aspects and the catharsis of integration which releases the spontaneous impulse and enables the new to emerge. A catharsis of integration occurs when previous experiences are recognized, at all levels of being, as part of the present. There is a reduction of fragmentation or a new and more enduring integration toward a healthy whole. Such new development is often accompanied by strong feeling. In the example given at the beginning of this paper, such an integration occurs in the protagonist when she recognizes the significance of the experience of her 8 year old self. The feeling levels in her present situation are significantly heightened. Anxiety drops away and a more lively spontaneity is immediately recognizable.

The question then for the role trainer becomes how do we deepen the protagonist's warm-up to the role system so that greater spontaneity is released and creative new responses develop. The greater the warm-up, the more intense the critical moment, the greater the integration, the greater the spontaneity, the greater the creativity, the more integrated the emergent new roles. The key to good role training, I would say, is the accessing of significant levels of spontaneity. This means that we must come to grips with what spontaneity is and how we work with it.

Spontaneity

Spontaneity is something that we all know about through our experience from time to time, but which no one has as yet been able to define

in terms that have meaning for everybody. This is partly a problem with words but it is also with understanding the nature of spontaneity. David Kipper describes spontaneity as "a human quality whose exact origin is not known". (1986:12). Moreno himself did not define it. His operational definition as follows: "The protagonist is challenged to respond with some degree of adequacy to a new situation or with some degree of novelty to an old situation" (Moreno 1946:xii). Perhaps our understanding is too limited. My operational definition of spontaneity is "the force that impels creativity at every level of the cosmos." Perhaps better it might be described as "the force of attraction that leads to creation". Spontaneity exists everywhere in the cosmos. At a certain point or level of development it is irresistible. It is simply there. It turns up like an unexpected visitor. It is the driving force behind all creation in this world and at every level from sub-atomic to cosmic there is ongoing creation. That is the nature of existence. If there is no creation there is no life.

To understand this notion of spontaneity, we must begin to appreciate that everything that is, has come about through processes that are irresistible. From a scientific point of view we might say that particular atoms are in a certain relationship with themselves and each other as they rush around through space. At a certain point their collision and destruction is inevitable. Out of that destruction emerges something new. This is spontaneity at work. That newness will at a certain point collide with some other newness and more newness at a slightly higher level will occur, as the old is destroyed in order to create the new. In our measurement of time some of these processes occur in nanoseconds while others take billions of years. But the process is the same and this force of attraction which leads to creation is called spontaneity.

Once we appreciate that these forces of attraction and repulsion that exist at all levels of existence are finely balanced we can begin to appreciate how fragile and yet inevitable

life actually is; if not our life then some other life. All life from the least complex to the most extravagant exists in a circular process. It arises, interacts, stabilizes, decays and disintegrates in the process of forming the new. The inevitability of these processes is clearly manifest.

In humankind, as with all other life the spontaneous urges which emerge are subject to the interactive process. That is they are shaped by the other forces with which they come in contact. Internally and in the process of physical development, growth occurs spontaneously and in a recognizably orderly fashion. When certain levels of interaction occur in the development process, cells expand and eventually become an ear or interact in a different way and become a cleft palate. At this stage a certain stabilization of the process occurs. Eventually, however, the ear begins to decay and disintegrate. All of this occurs as a result of spontaneity - the self generating energy that makes certain processes irresistible.

On the psychological and social level the process of development is similar. We call it socialization. All development at every level occurs through interaction. In the socialization process there are blocks put in the way of certain spontaneities. Thus begins the difficulty. Spontaneous development is blocked as humankind thwarts spontaneity, often for what individuals perceive as a good reason, for example, the prevention of destruction. Human beings move constantly against the spontaneities of the cosmos in order to prevent violence and destruction. They also move against these spontaneities to please significant others, to avoid punishment, to obey the law of the land and also to live within a culture imposed by outside authorities. Often, however, their interventions are driven by fear or greed and not by understanding and appreciation. Socialization experiences are internalized and there are immediate blocks to spontaneity. Hence there is a need for a role training that releases us from these blocks that inhibit our free response to the world.

All Understanding is Subjective

There are some other factors that might help us in our search for greater appreciation of spontaneity and how to work with it.¹ Consider this: all knowledge or understanding is subjective. This does not mean that all truth is subjective. Truth itself is not limited or uncertain, but our view of it always is. Heisenberg (1901 - 1976), a physicist, developed an understanding that has come to be known as 'Heisenberg's uncertainty principle'. In this he challenges our ability ever to know anything absolutely. He says we can only know that aspect of reality we are looking for and that our answers will always be answers only to the questions we ask. Reality has an infinite number of possible expressions, all of them necessary and each of them in some way valid. Our perceptions of reality are more limited. An example: I may study a certain interaction and see certain things. You study and see different things, a third person different things again and so on. Nobody, sees or can see all expressions of that reality.

This principle has some critical implications for our understanding of how we learn. In any area we can only gain knowledge of different aspects of reality and acknowledge that reality as a whole that is greater than we can perceive. It suggests that learning is a function of our experience and of our internal responses. It is not something that is given to us from outside. The old way of learning involved an externally imposed set of truths. The new way suggests that in some fundamental sense learning comes from within. This thinking is not new. It simply reiterates what many philosophers, mystics, and religious movements both ancient and modern have always taught. That we are born with all the knowledge we can ever need or have. Teaching is about helping people to access it. My daughter in her wisdom has sent me a small card with the following quote:

"You cannot teach people anything. You can only help them to discover it within themselves". (Galileo)

All of this leads of course to the conclusion that we are born spontaneous, that spontaneity is readily accessible and indeed irresistible under certain conditions. As role trainers we need to discover what those conditions are and how we can best create them.

Who can wake us up?

There is another way that we can begin to appreciate what spontaneity is all about. As I have discovered with so many of life's experiences it is often the artists who have woken us up and showed us the way long before we have been able to understand the experiences of existence. They are able to capture something of what it is to be alive in ways that are not dependent just on the intellect but appeal more directly to the imagination. In many poems the subject itself is not directly addressed but one is left in no doubt as to what is at work. On the subject of spontaneity this is even more so since its conceptualization is fraught.

Rainer Maria Rilke, the great German poet describes the power of the force he feels as he approaches the moment of creation thus:

"The hour is striking so close above me,
so clear and sharp,
that all my senses ring with it.
I feel it now: there's a power in me
to grasp and give shape to my world.

I know that nothing has ever been real
without my beholding it.
All becoming has needed me.
My looking ripens things
and they come toward me to meet -
and be met." (Barrows and Macy 1996)

What a sense of power is in these words. Rilke knows his own importance. In these first lines of Rilke's great spiritual epic, usually translated as 'The Book of Hours', there is a conviction that our presence in the Universe is a reciprocal process. We are not a series of isolated singularities. Our very existence is dependent on interaction, on reciprocity.

Who does this sound like? Well listen!

"Help me!
I who gave birth to all,
Must be fulfilled by all".

And again:

"This is my prayer:
May all things be blessed
with a place in the universe
a place in the sun
or a place in the moon.
It does not matter where,
If it is only a place
Where they can create me."

The sense is strong that without interaction there is no existence. In "Words of the Father", Moreno's great spiritual poem, there is also a decisive link between freedom and creativity (1971).

"Remember
He who loses touch with me
Loses his freedom, also.

Away from me
He loses the desire to create.
He is seduced by false idols,
Ready-made values,
Ready-made ideas,
Ready-made pleasures
Which bind him
To an aimless, sterile life,
A world which invites its own end.

Only the creator is truly free.
Only the creative are free." (1992)

With a slightly different approach Mary Oliver, captures something of this urgency in her cry for life to be lived:

"When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into
my arms.

When its over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something
particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and
frightened,
or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited
this world."

This poem is a magnificent prayer in praise of
life.

What more is there to say? Life is utterly
dependent on spontaneity. Without that
irresistible urge to move forward, to create the
new moment, there is nothing except a slow
decay. That is the nature of life. It is utterly
dependent on its ability to move forward. Once
it stops there is only decay and disintegration.

Each of these poems has in its own way
captured something that indicates the nature
of spontaneity. It is an irresistible urge toward
the creativity that is the fundamental hallmark
of life itself. It cannot be conserved. It does not
exist. Yet in the presence of certain conditions it
is suddenly everywhere. Only conscious life has
managed to redirect its power and inhibit the
creativity that is life. Once we realize this then
we must work to create the conditions which
make the emergence of spontaneity inevitable.
This is especially true of role training, the most
structured of the Morenian methods.

Role Training as a Process

The role training session referred to at the
beginning of this paper has provided us with
an opportunity to consider further the notion
of spontaneity and its relationship with role
training. I first encountered role training in
1983 and saw at once that I could become a role
trainer. At this stage I was far from sure that I
would ever become a psychodramatist. Role
training seemed to provide a structure that was
definitive and provided clear boundaries. As
time went on I became clearer that role training
was not determined by the structure but by

the area of work to be addressed. What I was
not clear about then was the significance of the
process or its purpose.

In those early days I followed the structure
rather literally, hoping that the often rather rigid
process of role analysis would somehow free
up the protagonist so that greater spontaneity
became apparent in the functioning. And it does
work. On many occasions the protagonist was
clearly enlivened by the enactment, especially if
there was accurate auxiliary work with a good
level of spontaneity. They were enlivened by
the mirroring they received and the process
of making a comprehensive and accurate
role analysis. Modeling, re-enactment, more
mirroring, coaching, further concretization
also contributed substantially. What I had not
been clear about in my own mind was that
these interventions were all part of a process.
A process! An essential process! And the aim of
that process was the warm-up of the protagonist
to greater and greater levels of spontaneity.
Without this, no matter how perfectly the
structure is followed role training is indeed a
wooden affair. What is also much clearer is that
when we are truly present in the moment, in the
now, our warm-up deepens and the forces that
block spontaneity recede.

Now I have been a certified role trainer for
over 20 years and I have come to realize that
the tiny indicators of that cosmic force we call
spontaneity are the moments for intervention, if
at all possible. These are the moments to treasure.
These are the moments when the protagonist
indicates a readiness for action. Sometimes
it comes in the warm-up or the interview;
sometimes in the enactment, in the mirroring, or
during a reflective period, or the role analysis.
It can come as early as the opening interview or
as late as the final re-enactment of the new role,
even during the sharing. Sometimes it demands
a small psychodramatic enactment, sometimes
further role analysis. The real question is, are we
as role trainers spontaneous enough to respond
confidently with whatever we have in that
moment.

Role Analysis: Developing A Sense of Who You Are

Clearly in role training a contained small drama releases greater spontaneity as is demonstrated in the session mentioned above. I also know that a role analysis often requires more than a simple naming of the observed sociodramatic elements. Some years ago Bev Hosking, co-leading a workshop with myself, invited the group to write up every word or phrase that occurred to them as a possible description of the enactment and mirroring they had observed. Nothing that was brought forward by the group was rejected at this stage. Everything was written on the board, even words that the protagonist immediately rejected. Without any attempt to turn these words into role descriptions (one of the steps in a role training session) the protagonist was invited to reflect on what had been written; to add to, reject or change. Often the result of this process was a marked increase in spontaneity, as protagonists developed a greater sense of who they were and what was involved in this interaction. We could say perhaps that in this way they accessed elements of the psychodramatic or somatic components of their being.

Over recent years this has become my preferred method of conducting a role analysis. The real impact comes where the work is done in settings where any sort of psychodrama would be problematic. In particular this way of conducting a role analysis is valuable in groups that are only together for a short time such as a seminar or short workshop, or in work settings or community where there is no contract for any sort of psychotherapy.

Back to the Group

As I reflect on the session described at the beginning of this paper I have become aware that I had developed a much greater warm-up to the protagonist than to the director. Hence my own spontaneity was mobilized in response to the protagonist as if I was the director rather than to the director and the group as a

supervisor. The moment when the protagonist was in touch with forces greater than her own mind could manage was recognized and my intervention was immediate.

Further reflection would lead me to say that in the moment when I ask the protagonist how old she is, my warm-up to the whole group lacks spontaneity as a supervisor (in that I was warmed up more to the protagonist than to the director). My intervention was an old one brought about by anxiety as I did not easily see where the role analysis should be done. The lack of spontaneity comes in the old solution where I intervene directly with the protagonist bringing about a satisfactory development and integration for her but leaving the director out in the cold. The group are left with mixed feelings. On the one hand they are satisfied with the piece of work done by the protagonist, on the other they are still unclear about why this would be called role training rather than psychodrama.

Having said that, I might also have valued the moment when I see something in her face. I am aware that an immediate response arises in me. Could this have been the place to do a role analysis rather than the vignette? Retrospectively, I think so. Certainly, outside of a training setting this would be the intervention of choice. In either case, what is overwhelmingly clear from my own experience is that where greater spontaneity is accessed by the protagonist the role development that occurs is more lively and certain. The key finally may be, and almost certainly is, in the spontaneity of the leader of the session. •

Footnote:

1 For much of the thinking in this section and its formulation I am indebted to Dana Zohar and Ian Marshall, 2000, pp 199 - 212.

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