

Sacrifice and spontaneity: a doctoral journey inspired by psychodrama

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Guest Contributor

Sacrifice—the process of making sacred through meaningful surrender—is the core topic of my doctoral research in psychology and psychodrama is at the heart of my research methodology. It was during psychodrama foundation training at the Corban Estate in Auckland, New Zealand with Max Clayton in 2010, that creative sacrifice and its relationship with spontaneity began to take root in me as a Muse that would power seven years of doctoral research and practice. I remember this event in my training vividly:

Max was being a skilful rascal in helping two participants negotiate a conflict. It became clear to me as an observer that one participant had a significant block to spontaneity that was preventing the conflict from resolving. The other participant had a high level of spontaneity and seemed to have a compassionate knowing that there was something in the way of their colleague surrendering to the necessities and meanings of the moment. As the tension built, my attention became focused on the backdrop of the scene, the church altar raised up on a dais behind the two participants. In my imagination, I saw the defensive participant lay down reverently on the altar, surrendering to let the other participant eviscerate their defensive anatomy, housed in their abdomen, and then offer it up to Deity as a service to the entire group. The person on the altar rose and danced blissfully. Their defence was surrendered as a painful sacrificial offering.

I didn't mention this awesome and terrible vision to anybody in the group, but I knew that I had heard the Muse and the impact was deep. I moved back to the United States shortly after my foundation training and began my doctoral journey, delighting in the fact that my graduate studies afforded experiential group work and role training that deepened and diversified my understanding of spontaneity theatre. The seeds of my doctoral hypothesis were planted: that spontaneity had something to do with the capacity of a person to engage in conscious sacrifice. This article highlights the main learnings that support this hypothesis while championing the efficacy of psychodramatic inquiry.

The archetype of sacrifice: ritual, theatre and group

After hearing the Muse of conscious sacrifice, I began seeing sacrifice everywhere— in myself, in groups, in films and literature, and in my family. I wasn't surprised when I found a passage in C.G. Jung's (1969) work referring to sacrifice as an archetype (see p. 265). According to Jung, archetypes are quintessentially *numinous*, a concept that comes from Rudolf Otto (1958), who describes the numinous as a non-rational substrate of religion constituting what is "wholly other" to a person (p. 25). The numinous is characterized by Otto as being a multi-hued phenomenon, described by widely varying adjectives such as: mysterious, marvelous, horrifying, evil, sublime, fascinating, uncanny, weird, tremendous, potent, and divine (p. 40-42). This list of conflicting adjectives reminded me of the powerful sacrificial image on the altar at Corban Estate because 'seeing' the defensive anatomy of a person getting eviscerated was simultaneously grotesque and sublime, occurring as "wholly other" to my gentler sensibilities.

Being interested in the numinous functions of theatre, it was intriguing to find that theatre is the progeny of ritual and that ancient Greek theatres mobilized the archetype of sacrifice by slaughtering bulls to invoke the presence of Dionysus (Pizzato, 2005). It was astonishing indeed to find out that the rise of theatre, born on the slopes of the Acropolis, had everything to do with sacrifice. The location of the ancient Greek performance itself, writes Mark Pizzato, "is physically located between the god [the statue of Dionysus in the theatre auditorium] and the sacrifice in his honour" (pp. 312-313). Discovering information like this—about the mythical and ritual dimensions of sacrifice—began providing a mythical backdrop for the doctoral project. It inspired further questions about how individuals and groups might relate to the archetype of sacrifice as the image of Dionysus, and other deities, appeared resolutely on the balcony of the psychodrama research stage. Many questions about what sacrifice looks and feels like in a contemporary setting arose; for example: when a protagonist seeks relationship with a figure or force on the balcony, what kinds of sacrifices need to be made? Is courage a sacrifice? Is surrender? What is being sacrificed and to what end? What kinds of barriers to making these sacrifices might be encountered during the seeking? If unconscious sacrifice exists, how does it happen? Can time and money be considered a sacrifice? Is scapegoating an unconscious sacrifice?

Interest in how the numinous could reveal itself in group sacrificial processes inspired further research into the anthropology of communal sacrifices to the gods. Robert Moore's (1997) illustrations of how

sacrificial processes involve positive and negative idealizations emerged as the core to both the contemporary and primordial experience of the numinous. The ancient Hebrew scapegoat ritual, for instance, involved the community placing their hands on one of the two sacrificial goats and infusing it with their sins so that it became a sort of battery-receptacle for negative tele (negative idealization). The goat was then sent off—with its negative charge—into the wilderness to fend for itself while cleansing the community of its sins. Contemporary Scapegoating, on the other hand, is when a person gets unconsciously cast in the role of a battery-receptacle for negative tele, but with no figure on the balcony or guiding consciousness to make meaning of the sacrificial process.

In the ancient ritual, the other goat was put on the altar and offered up as an invocation for the Deity to bestow its huge positive tele (positive idealization). Positive idealization, in a contemporary setting, can show up as unconscious abdication of personal power through idealizing a teacher, director, religious figure, therapist, actor, belief, or idea. The idealized figure becomes a battery-receptacle for storing positive tele, but because there is no guiding consciousness to ritualize the sacrifice of both the one who idealizes (abdicator) and the idealized (charged receptacle), the tele disconnects from the balcony and runs amok on the stage of human life. Both goats have the potential, if utilized consciously and effectively, to serve as functional roles for the group, i.e. to expel the negative and invoke the positive. The Research Problem of the project—what are barriers to conscious sacrifice?—was shaped to include the possibility that barriers to conscious sacrifice may involve unconscious idealizations that truncate the experience of the numinous and undermine connection with the primordial spontaneity associated with it.

The literature reviewed in preparation for the psychodramatic exploration of archetypal sacrifice included the Neo-Jungian structural psychology of Robert Moore (2006) for illuminating the “private sacrificial system” of individuals and groups (2003). Insights from anthropology clarified the phenomenological roots of sacrifice, gradually leading me to Nancy Jay (1992) who linked the rise of sacrificial rituals to the establishment of the patriarchy. Jay laid a foundation for turning to the psychology of sacrifice and then deep research about male and female narcissism and how it shows up in relationship (Beers, 1992). Literature involving Systems Theory was reviewed to examine sacrificial tensions in biology, theatre, and in somatic psychology (Pizzato, 2005). Lastly, writings were explored about how spontaneity and imaginative ritual partner together as catalyzing forces driving human evolution (Omer,

2005). Collectively, the literature reviewed may offer the psychodramatist further insights into the workings of sacrifice and its relationship with spontaneity in individual and group psychology. A psychodrama producer interested in qualitative psychological research may also benefit from seeing how the participatory research methodology, called Imaginal Inquiry, was used in concert with psychodramatic inquiry to gather and interpret participant experiences.

Sacrifice, soma and spontaneity: a qualitative research project

The live research involved two full days of group work and sought to explore, using a diversified set of expressive arts inquiries including psychodrama, how the group experienced the conscious embodiment of sacrifice. The hypothesis was that spontaneity would flourish as a result of the conscious embodiment of sacrifice. Five men and five women with experience doing transformative rituals with the same gender (such as rites of passage events and men's and women's circles) were involved in the research so that gender dynamics regarding sacrifice could be included.

The main finding of the study—that conscious sacrifice catalyzes change while unconscious sacrifice creates barriers to spontaneity and growth—has five constituent learnings:

1. Conscious sacrifice is a force of generativity that constellates a felt sense of power and a meaningful experience of received grace.
2. Encountering significant barriers is often necessary in the transformative process of conscious sacrifice and that barriers seem intergenerational in character.
3. Gender dynamics may be woven thickly with sacrificial subtexts and that a difficult knot in this weaving could relate to explicating one's truth and having a voice. The somatic locus of this knot appears to be in the throat, a location that has been associated with speaking one's truth for millennia in Yoga philosophy.
4. Ignorance is a unique kind of barrier that may be quite powerful in affecting the ability of a person to make intrapsychic sacrifices.
5. Sacrifice is a process that catalyzes psychological transformation, spontaneity, and the manifestation of potential through a painful setting fire to loved attachments or familiar barriers.

The first and third learnings sprang directly from psychodramatic inquiry. One scene in the psychodrama was cited by almost all participants as the most important process in the entire research. Here is what happened:

On the morning of the second research day, two weeks after the first research day, participants arrived with a myth they had written to portray a powerful moment in their life when they felt they had given up something important for positive change. The room deepened when participants began sharing their myths evidenced by tears, thick silences, meaningful pauses, palpable reverence, and occasional bouts of spontaneous belly laughter. After everyone had shared their myths, a spectrogram was used to support the group in selecting someone to enact their myth for the group-as-a-whole. Participants were invited to place themselves close to the candle if they felt like being the protagonist and far from the candle if they did not.

After three group participants placed themselves equidistant to the candle, the seven remaining participants stood near the person whose myth resonated with them most. The group unanimously chose Gabrielle by standing near him almost immediately. Much reflection had occurred in-between the two research days and while the participants were sharing their myths about sacrificial moments in their life. It is hypothesized that the spectrogram allowed the other participants to role reverse (in their imagination) with the myth of the protagonist to assess whether his sacrificial story resonated with theirs and thus the spontaneous selection of the group constituted the selection of a sacrificial myth as a protagonist, rather than an individual person. This could be the bridge between psychodrama and mythodrama, as it exemplifies the shift from personal spontaneity to the spontaneous imperatives of a group expressing the mythical mind.

The myth the participants chose for enactment through their selection of Gabrielle was the story of Apollo and Daphne, the Greek myth Gabrielle had brought to express a sacrificial motif in his life. After having been selected to enact his myth, Gabrielle was asked to choose the scene in the myth that was most powerful to him. He chose a scene at the climax of a long chase where Apollo, sick with love, chased after Daphne and when Apollo finally caught up to her, she chose to be turned into a tree instead of engaging with him.

Gabrielle was invited to choose co-participants to embody Apollo and Daphne at the moment of her transformation into a tree. He chose Eric to embody Apollo and was invited to adorn Eric with a costume from props on the stage to more fully become the character of Apollo. Gabrielle chose Megan to play Daphne, and he populated her body with a costume, including a mask. After Daphne and Apollo were created in form, Gabrielle placed them on stage at the moment of climax, shaping Apollo so that he was reaching towards Daphne as she transformed.

Gabrielle was invited to give Apollo words to say as he reached towards Daphne. He said, "Can't you see all that I can be!" Daphne responded with a phrase that was also created by the protagonist, Gabrielle, "I am all that I need!" The women participants made physical contact with Daphne, adding their voices to hers as she responded to Apollo and the men did the same with Apollo—they physically contacted the god and added their voices to his as he propositioned Daphne. The result was that a group of men as Apollo and a group of women as Daphne were expressing loudly back and forth "Can't you see all that I can be!" and "I am all that I need!" A hypothesis explored in the dissertation project is that the sacrificial myth itself is the protagonist and that Gabrielle was serving the group by providing lines for the masculine and feminine voices to express themselves as mythical protagonist. There was ample time built into the research for the various individuals enacting the myth to share about their personal experience within their roles, which later yielded powerful data about the relationship between gender and sacrifice (learning #3). Asking the client to craft the moment of climax was not part of the research structure, in fact a full-length psychodrama needed to be sacrificed because time constraints began to press in and the result was a spontaneous production of the moment of climax: the moment where Daphne sacrificed her human body.

The moment of sacrifice

The group paused at the moment of sacrifice and then expressed themselves spontaneously in response to the event. Research ethics suggest that no definition of sacrifice should be given in such a circumstance and no definition of sacrifice was given to the group throughout the project. It was up to them to spontaneously express—based on their weeks of deep inquiry and expression about the mythical dimension of sacrifice and its personal significance—as free from researcher bias as possible. After the group expressed extemporaneously, a group member was invited to be concretized as the Moment of Sacrifice. The group adorned the volunteer, Geb, with a costume and other props and Geb, as the Moment of Sacrifice, expressed himself to the group. He paused for a long, thick moment and said: "I bestow my power and my grace to you." As the group repeated this phrase there was a feeling of power and grace in the atmosphere as reported by participants when they were asked later in the day to share what they experienced during the drama. It is suggested that the group had indeed entered the mythic geography of sacrifice and that the numinous qualities of experience reported by Geb and others (i.e. power and grace)

indicate the successful embodiment of an archetypal protagonist, an agent of the group's mythic mind.

The scene where Apollo reached towards Daphne as she turned into a tree and the Moment of Sacrifice created by the group in response to the enacted myth provided strong images for participants to muse about sacrifice and group dynamics. Geb, for example, said that "Being the Moment of Sacrifice was a really profound moment for me." When he said the words "I bestow on you my power and grace," he recalled that he "didn't know where those words came from." The comment recalls the principle of otherness undergirding the numinous. Upon hearing the utterance of Geb as the Moment of Sacrifice, another participant remembered thinking "oh, that is why sacrifice is a good thing, because I can bestow myself this blessing by consciously going into sacrifice." This group member reported that calculated and courageous risk taking is a conscious sacrifice that bestows blessings which give his life meaning.

Geb, who can be seen as having inhabited the archetype of sacrifice, sums up well the confirmation of my hypothesis that conscious deployment of the archetype of sacrifice is related to increased spontaneity: "I felt the psychological sacrifices that people made during the exercises of the research—and it seems to me that when a person is more in tune with Spirit there is a lack of self-consciousness, there is more spontaneity, and it seems like sacrifice then becomes easier because there is less of an attachment to self-identity." Self-identity, therefore, is positioned as one of the central answers to the Research Problem: what are barriers to conscious sacrifice?

Surplus reality: dismembering the identity complex

In psychodramatic terms the identity structure is a role, and like any role it can take up too much real estate in the totality of the psyche thereby undermining spontaneity and full access to the vast multidimensional topographies of surplus reality. Edward Whitmont (1991) calls the identity structure the *identity complex*, "which is assumed to function like all other complexes . . . in that it attempts to exert its own energetic influence, quite often regardless of the total psychic equilibrium, and which tends to behave at times as if it were the only central, or at least the most essential, psychic structure" (p. 235). Complexes like the identity complex tend to inflate and assert sovereignty over and above psychic totality, thus sacrificing the integrity of the whole. The alternative is to put identity on the altar and sacrifice it so that the two primary threads of tele (fantasy and reality) can be unknotted and rewoven in spontaneous ways while traversing the numinous geography of surplus reality. The gluey nature of identity is scrubbed clean in the process and can then

operate with more fidelity to totality until the time has come for another sacrifice.

Aftab Omer (2013) suggests that the formation of the identity role relates to resistance: "Identity is the structure that is formed out of our resistances to the now." Identity thus becomes an adaptive construct "adaptive to the degree that the soul's multiplicity is being repressed and suppressed" (Omer, 2012). This identity structure is sharply distinct from individuality in that individuality "supports the soul's longing for a fuller range of multiplicity." When the identity structure has been sacrificed, experiential possibility diversifies in a reality akin to surplus reality, what Omer (2012) calls *primary imagination*—an ecstatic form of imaginative experiencing "not oriented to 'arrival' like many traditions;" but rather to a participatory consciousness relating creatively with emerging marginal thresholds including affects, images, archetypes, and habits that require a "significant and painful encounter with barriers to learning." Therefore, Omer proposes that the willingness and courage to experience the pain of our barriers is an act of sacrifice that beckons the pleroma of surplus reality.

In Leif Blomkvist and Thomas Rützel's (1994) definition of surplus reality, we can easily see the motif of sacrificing identity:

An intersection between different realities, known and unknown, where the ego's ability to control and distinguish ceases. This state determines ecstasy which we understand from its etymological root as leaving the limits of one's individuality. This is a state in which one does not experience things as one used to do, but looks upon them from another unfamiliar perspective. This perspective can either belong to an unknown part of the self, to another person, known or unknown, or to an impersonal force. (p. 168)

Blomkvist and Rützel argue that surplus reality is a surreal reality distinct from the unconscious, they write: "It is very important not to confuse the world of surplus reality and the unknown with the world of the unconscious. The principle of opposites influences the world of the unconscious whereas surplus reality or the surreal world is truly Dionysian . . . a form of disintegration or falling to pieces" (p. 170). Surplus reality is therefore the locus where the catalyzing force of spontaneity disintegrates cultural conserves such as language and the ready-made roles that family and culture provide: "Spontaneity is the engine that drives the creative act. The process of psychodrama involves the movement from cultural conserves with stereo-typically prescribed roles to an increased role repertoire borne out of spontaneity" (Karp, 1994, p. 42). The sacrificial function of dismemberment is thus central to the Dionysian domain of surplus reality.

Identity situated in a system

Yvonne Agazarian (2010) helps us to situate the process of sacrificing identity in group processes such as psychodrama. She suggests that roles taken by individuals serve a containing function for the system and its conscious or unconscious goals: “the hero or the villain leader, the scapegoat or the identified patient are all ways that a system “stores” information in a sub-system until the system-as-a-whole can integrate it” (p. 10). The chief bulwark of the restraining, defensive, tensional force always operating within systems is the stereotypic, repetitive enactments of old role behaviors to manage differences, conflicts, and similarities. These restraining forces create an impermeability to the boundary between the individual and his or her subgroup/group-as-a-whole, thus preventing the goal of making “boundaries appropriately permeable between one system and another . . . by reducing the restraining forces to communication at the boundaries” (p. 42).

The identity role stores information for the system until the system is ready to sacrifice, dismember, and integrate it. Every group has conscious and unconscious goals. If sacrifice is an archetype it means that it is operating somewhere in the system as an archetype and is thus manifesting as either an unconscious or conscious goal. If sacrifice is manifesting unconsciously then, through the mechanism of scapegoating, a group member will become a battery-receptacle for negative tele and an engine for role boundary impermeability. If sacrifice is conscious then the system can dismember the identity complex (either the group identity, the identity of an individual, a subgroup, etc.) and therefore invoke surplus reality, boundary permeability, and role diversification of the group-as-a-whole. The attuned producer can notice the sacrificial imperative and use psychodramatic techniques such as concretization to externalize and give form to restraining forces so that they can be sacrificially dismembered.

Defensive anatomies

Defensive restraining forces often show up in the body, as was the case noted at the beginning where the sacrificed defensive anatomy was in the abdomen of the person with limited spontaneity. Reflections from participants on their expressions as Daphne or Apollo highlighted the throat area. One of the men as Apollo felt “energetic congestion . . . the feeling of not making an impact and lack of self-worth made me freeze, and it locked up my throat.” The protagonist as Apollo felt congestion in his throat too, “I felt like the women created a fortress and that I could not carry forward my spontaneity.”

Debriefing also revealed the image of the fortress as a restraining force of collective spontaneity. Further psychodramatic investigation of the relationship between the restraining forces in the throat and the fortress, as well as with the mythical figures and the Moment of Sacrifice would be interesting. How would sacrifice want to engage with the restraining forces? How might it want to dismember, eviscerate, or expiate the restraining forces and what figure or force on the psychodramatic “balcony” would be invoked or propitiated by the sacrifice? The fortress and its relationship with patriarchy, cultural conserves, and the gendered dimensions of sacrifice fascinated me. These considerations are detailed in my dissertation (Tierney, 2018). The core is evident in Learning Three: Gender dynamics are woven thickly with sacrificial subtexts and a difficult knot in this weaving relates to explicating one’s truth and having a voice (p. 158-180). The somatic locus of the knot appears to be in the throat, a location that has been associated with speaking one’s truth for millennia in Yoga philosophy.

Transgression, sacrifice and spontaneity

The power of principled and courageous transgression in the face of the fortress is an essential form of conscious sacrifice that loosens the knot in the throat-soul, clearing the way for spontaneous expression. Omer (2012), for example, states that the “soul is inherently transgressive” and Thomas Moore (1998) writes: “We become persons through our transgressions, by bringing them close to home, allowing them to etch the outlines of our character in gradual, painful realizations” (p.78).

Courageous and principled transgressions are thus crucial sacrificial aspects of what Tian Dayton (2005) calls true spontaneity in contradistinction to *pathological spontaneity* and *stereotyped spontaneity* (p.62). Starting with the definition of spontaneity as “a new response to an old situation or an adequate response to a new situation,” Dayton then proceeds to define pathological spontaneity as a novel response without adequacy and stereotyped spontaneity as an adequate response without novelty. In sacrificial terms, true spontaneity sacrifices old situations found in the present moment without unconsciously sacrificing novelty or adequacy. I therefore posit a multiplicity of ‘role’ categories within the archetypal domain of sacrifice: the transgressor, the sacrificer, the sacrificed, the balcony mythical figures propitiated or invoked through the sacrifice, the restraining force, and the life force.

True spontaneity, with its transgressions against—and sacrifices of—identity structures, has an affinity to what Omer (2013) calls reflexive participation: “surrendering through creative action to the emergent necessities, meanings, and possibilities inherent in the present moment”.

Such spontaneous and courageous participation with life requires the radical surrendering—the sacrifice—of structures in the psyche and in culture, which prevent the soul from inhabiting and acting from its ground of multiplicity in the numinous, ecstatic geography of surplus reality.

Implications

For psychodramatists, I hope this work has opened up the usefulness of having a sacrificial geography and provided some means to developing a discerning eye for the functioning of the different dynamics of sacrificer and transgressor, and practical means for working with this in an enactment. There is continual learning for me in using participatory research methods and in working psychodramatically to explore what is emerging, what is unknown, what is embryonic, what is ready to sacrifice, and what arises as barriers to these learnings in myself and in others. Additional orientations for a psychodramatic practice may perhaps be stimulated with the following questions:

- Is the identity structure a restraining force for the individual? For the group? How is it structured? How does it feel in your body, the body of the protagonist, and the body of the group members?
- Does the current group have a mythical canopy, a metaphoric balcony?
- How is the sacrificial imperative moving? Does the protagonist or group want to expel, invoke, or propitiate? To what mythical figure or deity or force?
- What is the window of tolerance in the protagonist and in the group for sacrificial imagery?
- How near is surplus reality and what needs to be sacrificed to get nearer?
- How can I make a sacrifice? What needs to be sacrificed now and how?

I am thankful to those in New Zealand who opened up psychodrama to me and how to embody the shaman or director of the play. It is inspiring to me that the psychodrama method works powerfully as a research method and I imagine that more insight and experience will come as I continue to play with the arts and methods of psychodrama, mythical theatre, archetypes, sacrifice and consciousness. If you are interested in reading my dissertation to deepen your understanding of sacrifice, or want to share sacrificial observations regarding spontaneity theatre please email me at somaticdoctor@gmail.com.

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