

What Price a Smile?

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Buck was an 18 year old schizoid boy, a patient at the Moreno Sanitarium. In those days in the USA mentally ill people without financial means were sent to very large state mental hospitals. After five years of hospitalisation in one such institution, Buck had been sent to us by his middle-aged mother. He was her only child, born in her forties. She was now frail with a heart condition. Her husband, Buck's father, had recently died and had left her a small insurance legacy. Instead of ensuring her own future, she chose to invest it in her son.

However, things are never simple. Buck was unable to forget the hospital where he had lived for so long, nor forgive his mother for bringing him to this new place that he did not know. Although he responded positively to one of his nurses, he withdrew from his mother and remained withdrawn.

Every Sunday Buck's mother would visit him at the Moreno institute, and on the following afternoon she would visit Dr. Moreno's New York City office to report. She related how she could see that Buck was well fed and looked better, but she was sad nevertheless. Moreno asked her why she was unhappy and she said in a despondent voice "Buck used to smile at me when we met, but now he never smiles at me".

Poor woman. She was denying herself everything for that boy, and he could not even smile at her. Nevertheless, Moreno told her not to give up smiling when she saw Buck again.

Moreno felt bad for her and devised a plan. It would be a challenge and he always enjoyed those.

Every subsequent afternoon of that week, Buck was the protagonist in the psychodrama theatre at the hospital. His director produced some warm mother and son exchanges with the help of Buck's favourite nurse. To make up for his poor childhood experiences, Moreno warmed him up to being a 4 year old having a birthday party. There was a real cake which our cook baked especially for him. We were his friends at the party. The next day in the psychodrama Buck was an eight year old and his psychodramatic mother took him to the beach. We accompanied them as his friends and all played ball with him. His 'mother' praised him for catching the ball, a real one.

For a total of six sessions, Moreno raised Buck up in developmental stages with age-

appropriate activities. This type of behaviour training, adjusted to each individual protagonist, was one of Moreno's greatest achievements but was seldom recorded.

Buck blossomed under this regimen. He was simultaneously being helped to socialise and he made some connections with staff members and patients even though they were older than him. In the last session he went off to summer camp. His 'mother' hugged him goodbye, telling him that she was looking forward to his return home. By this time Buck was in much better shape than when he had arrived, and was able to let go of her in the drama.

Came Sunday's visit from his real mother. We held our collective breath. How would it go?

We had been asked to leave Buck and his mother alone so no one saw what happened. But the next afternoon his mother triumphantly reported to Dr. Moreno that Buck had smiled in response to her smile. He had not initiated that smile but he had responded in kind.

When his mother's funds ran out a little later, Buck was discharged in sufficient social recovery to be able to go home with his mother.

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