

Remembering J. L. Moreno

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ALTHOUGH I HAD MET Dr. J. L. Moreno and Zerka a year and a half before, my initial visit to Beacon for 2 weeks of training in 1962 was really the beginning of a 12-year acquaintanceship, friendship, and studentship with Dr. Moreno, and the beginning of what has become a dedication and commitment to philosophy, theories, and methods that he originated. I have not been the same since that first visit—and for that, I am grateful.

Although I remember a great number of things about that first experience at the Moreno Institute, I think that the most impressive was the impact that his respect for his patients made on me.

The institute was a licensed sanitarium in those days, and a middle-aged woman was admitted for treatment on the same day that I arrived for training. The initial steps in her treatment were part of the 2 weeks of training that I was enlisted in. The trainees were the group for her first psychodramas. Her problem was that her former husband, from whom she had been divorced, would not let her go to live with the new husband to whom she had then been married. The fly in the ointment was that both the divorce and the marriage, to a young doctor whom she had not seen for several years, had been carried out by “radio waves.” She was not very happy about being at the Moreno Institute. As a matter of fact, she was vociferously angry and upset, rather unpleasant to be around.

Now I had been educated and trained by very civilized people who would never intentionally be disrespectful to a patient or client, people who certainly taught me that it was important to have respect for one’s patients. However, I had never seen the best of these listen to the delusional productions of a patient with the respect and concern with which Moreno listened to this woman. He made no attempt to challenge her reality as she presented it. He was not in the least skeptical about her story. He was interested in every detail, and when she discovered that he was not going to try to convince her that she was wrong, she warmed and blossomed and produced many details.

Then he promised to help her in every way he could to straighten out the unfortunate state of affairs into which her life had fallen.

In minutes, she was ready to do anything that he asked.

At this point, he introduced her to psychodrama and directed her in some scenes in which she simply enacted events in her daily life.

I had been taught to be polite. Moreno showed me what it meant to respect.

In the early years of my training, Moreno was still active in the training program, even though Zerka pretty well carried the brunt of the training responsibilities. He still came to the theater for some sessions. He directed psychodramas. He conducted didactic sessions. More often than not, the evening session was held in his living room, where he would talk with students about what they were learning and experiencing and use these interactions as a springboard for discussions that included theoretical and methodological issues as well as personal anecdotes.

I thoroughly enjoyed these sessions. I was quite in awe of Moreno and liked listening to the stories he told, even though I did not think that Moreno was above embellishing the facts from time to time. I did not always believe everything that he said about himself. So I have found it fascinating that Rene Marineau (1989) has authenticated so many of his stories and claims and discovered new ones. Of course, I fully believed the one about his having been born aboard a ship on the Black Sea, a "poetic truth," which both Gheorghe Bratescu (1975) and Marineau have identified as such.

Of many weeks that I spent in Beacon, one of the more memorable began on a Friday afternoon, November 22, 1963. As I got off the bus from Cooperstown, New York, news of the Kennedy assassination was just hitting the streets. This event, which altered the daily routine of everyone in the country, had the same effect upon our training group, possibly even more, considering the emotional climate of a training group at the Moreno Institute.

The training schedule did not hold up very well. We spent time watching TV, talking, and abreacting. But shortly after Lee Harvey Oswald, who seemed an unlikely assassin, was apprehended, Dr. Moreno decided that he could be of help, that if he could conduct a psychodrama with Oswald, he might be able to get at the truth. So he proposed that we move the whole workshop to Dallas for that purpose.

He immediately started contacting people he knew who might be able to arrange an invitation to Dallas. Before his efforts bore fruit, Oswald was himself assassinated, and this brought an end to the whole endeavor. To this day, I wonder what kind of experience I may have missed out on.

There is no scientific definition of genius, but there is no question in my mind that Moreno fits the description. I think that what makes one a

genius is an act of perception. A genius is someone who looks and sees where others have looked and not seen. Newton reported that the concept of gravitation had come to him when he had seen apples fall from trees to the ground. What Newton saw was that the ground (the earth) fell up to the apple—a little bit. That is what no one else had seen; seeing that is what made Newton a genius.

I think that Moreno saw things that nobody else had seen. I think that at Mittendorf, Moreno *saw* black and red lines connecting people, just as Newton *saw* the earth move toward the apple falling from a tree. And as he watched these people trying to create a village from scratch, he began to understand the part that the forces of attraction and rejection played in the developing structure of the community.

He also *saw* spontaneity in the children in the gardens of Vienna and in his *Stegreif* players. It had a tangible, almost visible quality for him. And maybe he saw some other things, too, that he never quite articulated. A common experience for the genius is to regard his discovery as being “given” to him from outside himself. And I think that was true for Moreno.

Although a number of leading figures in psychiatry, sociology, psychology, and education recognized the importance of his discoveries, and William Alanson White, Adolf Meyer, Margaret Mead, Theodore Newcomb, Gordon Allport, Gardner Murphy, and Henry Murray, to mention a small sampling, promoted him and his work, he was not greatly appreciated by most of the rank-and-file of his psychiatric colleagues. He was considered a maverick and a troublemaker, probably beginning with his first attendance at an annual conference of the American Psychiatric Association in 1932, during which he demolished A. A. Brill’s psychoanalytic critique of Abraham Lincoln. He was accused of calling attention to himself in ways that were not considered becoming or appropriate. I suspect that this perception was not altogether gratuitously bestowed upon him. Over the years since I met Dr. Moreno, I have met psychiatrists who tell me tales of Moreno’s disrupting meetings at APA conventions with his outspoken criticisms of speakers or papers.

How accurate these stories are, I do not know. I can, however, easily believe that Moreno may have sometimes indulged himself in attempts to infuse a little spontaneity into the proceedings of a society that tends to function in an unbearably dull and boring manner and that his traditionally minded colleagues did not appreciate his efforts. Instead, they tended to see him as offensively egotistical, grandiose, self-promoting, even megalomaniac.

A recently published book, *Models of Group Therapy* (Shaefer & Galinski, 1989), includes a chapter on psychodrama and Moreno. The authors,

who are generally quite positive about psychodrama, note that Moreno has had an impact on the whole field that has not been fully acknowledged, and they try to account for the fact that psychodrama and Moreno are not better known. They suggest:

Perhaps some explanation for this fact lies in three characteristics of Moreno and his approach. First is a self-acknowledged immodesty; undoubtedly his manner, his rather overbearing style, and his concern about being properly credited for his productions tended to put people off. (p. 101)

The other two reasons listed are (1) his writing style and (2) the fact that his thinking was too far ahead of the times.

In my opinion, a great deal more than egotism and immodesty was involved in Moreno's "self-promotion" and his insistence on recognition for his contributions. I believe that there were two factors that motivated some of the behaviors that may well have been self-defeating.

The first has to do with the fact that his thinking truly was novel. He did see things in unprecedented ways. It is a difficult matter to be that creative. Rollo May (1975) devoted a whole book to the topic of the "courage to create." It does take courage to tell the world that you know things about it that nobody else has known before—and that the world badly needs to know. Moreno had tremendous confidence in himself. But I am convinced that, despite this great belief in his work, he still wanted (and desperately needed) confirmation from others that his ideas were indeed valid and that they made sense.

The other factor has to do with his conviction that he had seen some truths that were of extreme importance to humankind, and that they provided a key to the most pressing problem confronting humankind; namely, how do we avoid the pitfall of self-destruction? He had an answer—a spontaneous-creative social order—but he had trouble getting anybody to listen to him. He was a veritable Cassandra.

I think that he felt a tremendous responsibility. He had been permitted a glance deep into the nature of human society. He had seen a solution to the threat of self-destruction that we seem to find repeatedly confronting us. And he experienced a tremendous frustration in the difficulty that confronted him of generating enough interest to make that solution work. It is no easy thing to bring about a social revolution, a change in the social order, especially when the change Moreno had in mind required the collaboration of everybody!

His first attempts, of course, involved the Stegreiftheater in Vienna, and the Impromptu Theater in this country. It was only when neither seemed likely to achieve its purpose that he "retreated from the Theater of Spontaneity to the Therapeutic Theater" (J. L. Moreno, 1947) and to the devel-

opment of psychodrama, combining the principles of spontaneity drama with his more traditional profession of psychiatry. Of course, it was here that he finally made an impact and achieved some measure of attention.

Despite the fact that he credits his retreat to psychodrama with keeping his work alive, it was not accomplished without some cost. If you wanted to start a worldwide revolution, the traditional mental health professions were not the most likely comrades. Historically, members of these professions can more frequently be accused of establishment bias than of revolutionary radicalism.

What happened, of course, has been documented by Zerka Moreno (1969) in her paper, "Moreneans: Heretics of Yesterday Are the Orthodoxy of Today." As Moreno created methods, concepts, and techniques, all based on a philosophy of a world system and designed to move society toward a spontaneous-creative social order, colleagues appropriated them and put them to use in ways that only perpetuate the status quo of a technological, legalistic, conserve-conscious social order. As Zerka puts it, the ideas and concepts have been separated from the parent philosophy and from the long-term goal—a world order that can bring peace.

Perhaps, looking at things from this perspective, it makes more sense that he was sensitive about issues of priority and attribution and that he lamented that his instruments for social change had been borrowed, often without acknowledgment, and used for other purposes, whereas his theoretical ideas, the mother lode from which the instruments came, "gathered dust on library shelves" (J. L. Moreno, 1953).

There is still danger, it seems to me, that the success of psychodrama as a therapeutic modality can stand in the way of the development of some of its broader uses, in education, for example, and that this dynamic can delay the establishment of a spontaneous-creative social order. We reduce psychodrama when we think of it simply as a method of psychotherapy. It is of a much broader scope than that, and if we include role training, sociodrama, and spontaneity theater, we expand the applications even further.

Perhaps Moreno was overbearing, even immodest. I guess that a man who spends 10 years of his young adulthood taking upon himself the role of God—and then talks about it—either has an overabundance of ego or a pathological lack of it. Moreno certainly did not suffer from the latter, despite the claims of some of his detractors.

It is easy for people to misunderstand Moreno's God-playing, to take it as evidence of overbearing ego. It is not always understood as the very serious endeavor that he embarked upon, one in which he assigned himself what he would later refer to as a "delusion." He said to himself something like: "What if I really am God? What if I have created this world, and I have created myself as a man in this world? This world is obviously not

like I want it and it is incomplete. Now what do I do next? How do I go about making it better?" Thinking of this ilk does not engender in one a feeling of egotism. It gives one, rather, a feeling of overwhelming responsibility and a very serious need to get busy making things better. I think Moreno felt that responsibility for the rest of his life. He encouraged other people to experience it also. And it was from this experience that his ideas of spontaneity-creativity and God arose.

If he was egotistical, he could also be quite humble. From Zerka, I have heard the story of a patient who became psychotic after giving birth to a child. She recovered under his care, but he told her when she left his sanitarium, "I don't think you should have any more children. I am afraid that you could have another psychotic episode if you do." Some time later, she was admitted to his sanitarium. She had had a psychotic break following childbirth. "Well, Doctor," she said to him, "I guess you can say 'I told you so.'" Tears filled his eyes. "My friend," he replied, "I'd give anything to have been wrong."

Another story from Zerka: The Moreno family is doing some last-minute Christmas shopping on the 24th of December. They are in Macy's, Dr. Moreno in his usual black suit and bow tie. A very frantic lady rushes up to him and says, "It's just terrible. It's going to ruin our whole Christmas, and you've got to do something about it. The sofa came and it has a terrible rip in the fabric." It was pretty obvious what had happened and that she had mistaken Moreno for an employee of the store.

"Do you have your sales receipt?" he asked her. She did. He took it. "Wait right here," he told her. "Don't move and I'll be right back."

A few minutes later, he returned with a floorwalker, introduced him to the customer with a flourish, and said, "Here, Madam. This gentleman will take care of everything for you." She may have thought that she had been taken care of by Mr. Macy, himself!

And this story comes from Ann Quinn, nurse and residence manager at the Moreno Institute. During his final illness, Quinnie took care of him. Every day, about noon, she would go down to the house, give him a bath, and do whatever she could to make him comfortable. Just a week or so before his death, she walked in one day and he seemed rather depressed. "Is this any way for the great Dr. Moreno to be acting?" she said in an effort to cheer him up.

"Miss Quinn," he replied in a sad little voice, "I wouldn't recommend myself to anybody today."

Moreno's priorities with respect to psychodrama and sociometry, group psychotherapy, marriage and family therapy, and the influence that he has had upon the present-day practice of psychotherapy, both individual and group, are already well documented and probably challenged by nobody

today. At the same time, there are really only a handful of us who make use of his most potent methods, psychodrama and sociometry.

The questions that almost everybody who experiences the excitement and power of psychodrama asks are: Why haven't psychodrama and the other contributions of J. L. Moreno caught on? Why haven't they received a wider hearing and greater application?

We can point to his personality (Moreno himself did), to the fact that he published his own works, depriving them of the potential for distribution that an established publisher might have been able to give them, his writing style that was admittedly difficult, and to the fact that his work was so far ahead of his time. It was not only ahead of his time; in many ways, it is still ahead of *our* time!

And yet, I think that the real answer to why there are only about 300 certified psychodramatists/sociometrists in the world is that these methods are scary and, in some respects, even potentially dangerous. This notion was brought home to me rather pointedly at this conference by the presentation of Dr. Robert Blake (1989), who discussed the use of sociometric methods by law enforcement agencies in attempts to combat drug distribution networks (see p. 148). Dr. Blake pointed to the ethical question of using sociometric methods to destroy an organization. Although few would quibble about the attack on drug-dealing rings, the situation implies that someone with a significant amount of sociometric information about an organization, a business, for example, could use it for destructive as well as for productive, creative purposes.

Psychodrama, too, scares people—sometimes the participants and sometimes the administrative people of the agency in which it is being used. Obviously, a majority of the therapists in this country are quite willing to do without its unique potency in the field of psychotherapy, and I reluctantly propose that fear is one of the reasons.

Nor has Morenean theory advanced significantly beyond the point at which Moreno left it. As a matter of fact, applications of Morenean methods have been so sparse that there has not been the kind of interplay between theory and technology that is probably necessary for the development and advancement of both.

With a few notable exceptions, most applications of Morenean methods and theory are in one field, mental health, and almost nobody identifies actively with Moreno's original goal of bringing about a spontaneous-creative social order.

Why is that so? Was his idea of a spontaneous-creative social order just one man's crotchet? Do we no longer need it? Or have we already got it?

I think that if J. L. Moreno could be here in more than spirit, he would be extremely excited about the current major outbreak of spontaneity in

the world. I refer to *glasnost* and *perestroika*, of course. And I think he would say something like, "If only Gorbachev had a sociometrist!" I don't have any doubt that he would have long ago been on the phone, trying to call the Kremlin to offer both his advice and help.

I think that he would agree, however, that the spontaneous-creative social order is still a long way off.

In closing, I want to share with you another week that I spent at the Moreno Institute. It was in May 1974, exactly 15 years ago. I was between quarters at the university where I was a faculty member. Moreno was on his deathbed.

When Miss Quinn saw me coming into the student quarters, she said, "I'm so glad you are here. I need help with Doctor when I bathe him." She explained that he always shifted way down in his bed, and she had to have help to get him moved up where he belonged. She would ask one of the students in residence to help her, but, she said, she knew that Dr. Moreno did not like to be seen in his current condition by someone whom he didn't know. It would be better now that I could help.

And so, every day, just after lunch, Quinnie would call, and I would go down to the house to help her. The first time I went into his bedroom, Quinnie said, "Look who's here, Doctor." Moreno opened his eyes and when he saw me made an old familiar gesture. Lying flat on his back, his arms reached straight out to me. And he smiled.

And then, on Wednesday of that week, Quinnie called me as usual. Zerka was taking some sun on the patio. She had been with him all morning. We spoke briefly. The end was near, she told me. I went in. Moreno was not very responsive, and, as we were moving him up in his bed, Quinnie stopped and said, "Get Zerka." I did. Moments later, he was dead.

"Psychodrama is modeled after life," Moreno liked to say. He also said, "There is no death in psychodrama."

And that is one way in which life and psychodrama are different. Life comes to an end, at least for us as individuals, and that end is death.

Maybe Moreno was not recommending himself to anybody that day toward the end, when Quinnie talked with him.

But I recommend him.

I recommend him to everybody.

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