J. L. Moreno's Autobiography: More Than Meets the Eye

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READING MORENO'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY has been a poignant, enlightening, intellectually stimulating, and sometimes a sad experience for me. What has been sad is that this creative, at times brilliant, pioneering, risk-taking man, who actually made significant contributions to the development of modern psychotherapeutic methods and theories, did not quite "make it" with his colleagues in the psychiatric profession.

Although his son Jonathan states in his introduction to the condensed version of his father's memoirs that what set Jacob Moreno apart from the scientific mainstream was his interest in ancient religious traditions, Greek philosophy, and classical drama, I believe it was for other reasons that he became set apart and isolated from most of his colleagues in psychiatry and medicine. Many physicians through the ages have been interested in these subjects, as well as modern religious and philosophical ideas, the implications and existence of body, soul, and mind as separate organizations that are also inextricably linked together as the essence of "I," yet they remained in the mainstream of medicine. Physicians have always been concerned with life, death, mortality, immortality, and God.

Moreno's autobiography is so laden with interesting and enlightening ideas, historical information, and anecdotal data about cultural, professional, artistic, philosophical, political, and otherwise significant movements and people of Moreno's time that I can only attempt to do justice to a review of these memories by commenting on them chapter by chapter. This decision is also based on my gut reactions to the fact that, for me, the presentation is sometimes disjointed and contradictory.

To me, it is an interesting contradiction that Moreno's own acknowledgment of his megalomania in some strange way reflects humility at a deeper intrapsychic level. Throughout his life-story, there are repetitions of both his denial of and striving to fulfill his omnipotent, grandiose image of himself. Although in his introduction Jonathan talks of Jake's reluctance to make presentations at professional societies, it was my personal experience that he devoted much time, energy, and money to self-promotional efforts.

I refer to Dr. J. L. Moreno as Jake because he asked me to when I, as president of the American Group Psychotherapy Association (AGPA) and its board of directors, had been requested by AGPA to arrange to meet with him in an unofficial capacity to discuss issues associated with AGPA's joining with him and his organization in sponsoring world promotion of AGPA members in the Third International Congress on Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama. When I met him in 1962, he opened his arms widely, smiled broadly as he stood at the top level of his psychodrama stage, and said, "Hello, Milton! Call me Jake, and I'll call you Milton!"

This occurred in the West 78th Street world headquarters of his psychodrama organization in New York City. I was being shepherded by his wife, Zerka, to meet him. He had changed our meeting to this site by sending me a telephone message 1 hour previously that he was unexpectedly tied up and therefore could not meet me at the neutral restaurant site we had agreed upon earlier. I had been taken in in a way that affirmed what I'd heard in advance, namely, that he was wiley and not to be trusted wholeheartedly.

Many of Moreno's disciples expressed surprise when I informed them in later years that he had in this encounter asked me to call him Jake.

It is difficult to fault Jonathan Moreno for attempting to smooth over Jake's interpersonal difficulties in the field of psychiatry by attempting to make a virtue of his father's arrogance with his colleagues. In fact, how could the American Psychiatric Association (APA), with its many brilliant members, cater to a man who paraded himself as superior to them?

When the animosity between Moreno and Slavson is briefly mentioned by Jonathan in his introductory chapter, he minimizes the potency of the venom that was distilled in their interaction. Their personal rivalry for recognition as the originator and pioneer in the development of group psychotherapy permeated the field of group psychotherapy and retarded collaboration between group psychotherapists and group psychodramatists in this country and abroad.

I recall only too well the bad-mouthing Moreno and Slavson did of each other and particularly the viciousness of remarks made about Moreno by Slavson. It should be noted that many responsible colleagues in psychiatry, psychology, and social work were also concerned about the free-wheeling acceptance of nonprofessionals for membership in the psychodrama organization. Another major concern, which I personally experienced and many of my colleagues had also reported to me from their personal experiences with Moreno, was the summons to the stage and the pressure, to the point of humiliation, to share openly private histories, experiences, and feelings before a large group of strangers who were the audience at Moreno's public psychodramas.

I must differ with and correct Jonathan's statement that "as president of the International Association of Group Psychotherapy, he [Moreno] was also able to effect something of a *rapprochement* with the AGPA at home." Initially, the First International Committee of Group Psychotherapy was founded in 1951 in Paris by J. L. Moreno, M.D., and others, such as S. H. Foulkes, M.D., first vice-president, Serge Lebovici, M.D., second vice-president, and Joshua Bierer, M.D., J. Favez Boutomier, M.D., and Zerka Moreno. This committee organized the First International Congress of Group Psychotherapy in Toronto in August 1954. Then came the formation of the International Council of Group Psychotherapy in 1962, which organized the Third International Congress of Group Psychotherapy to be held in Milan in 1963. During 1962, a number of spirited meetings of the board of directors of the American Group Psychotherapy Association were devoted to the issue of whether the AGPA, which was the largest and most highly respected professional group devoted to group psychotherapy, would officially endorse and participate in the Third International Congress in view of our conflicts with Moreno and his disciples, who at that time held the most power in the International Council.

Samuel Slavson, Wilford Hulse, Samuel Hadden, and David Mendell of the AGPA were also members of that council. After I had met with J. L. Moreno in my capacity as president of the AGPA and its board of directors, I reported the pros and cons of my visit with him. Although we had major differences with Moreno and his practices, we decided that for the benefit of the continued growth of the group psychotherapy movement we should sponsor the congress and recommend active participation in the Milan meeting to our members. The decision was based on the concept that the growth of the group psychotherapy movement as a whole was more important than the positions of Moreno or Slavson.

Because historical reports, once in print, become perpetuated as truth, I'd like to comment on Jonathan's implication that Moreno's ideas penetrated the southern hemisphere, especially South America, because of their power. They penetrated South America and much of Europe not only because of Moreno's zeal to travel and spread his ideas but also because of his dedication, revealed over and over again, to demonstrate to the world that it was he, and not Samuel Slavson, who developed modern group psychotherapy.

Reading Moreno's memoirs is a continuous experience of interest in the multiple aspects of this creative human being. We have a sense of significance in the circumstances of his birth on a ship crossing the Black Sea on a stormy night while his mother was traveling from Bosporous to Constanza in Rumania. When we read about Jake's mother, we can feel her aliveness and identify with this little son being raised by a mother who had ac-

cepted the old gypsy woman's prophecy that this rickets-deformed infant would one day "be a very great man. People from all over the world will come to see him. He will be a wise and kind man." We can be sure that this story, probably with embellishments, was told to Jake by a doting mother because he relates the story of the incident clearly. He probably heard it many times, for his mother was a teller of tales, a superstitious person, and a strong believer in fortune-telling. Today we are very cognizant of the power of role-suggestion on growing children. Such feedback had to play a role in the development of J. L. Moreno's own image of who he was and who he was to be.

As he describes his experiences with the family's Hungarian maid, we see the powerful impact on this bright, imaginative, eldest child of this third significant woman in his life. He states, "She gave me a profound respect, not only for her but for the primitive cosmic events *and for my place in the universe*" (italics mine). The power of the positive feedback from significant others was so great that we see it translated into action at age 4 in 1894.

Moreno relates that the game he devised to play with some of the neighbors' children when his parents were visiting with friends was "Let's play God and His angels." Asked by another child, "But who will play God?" he replied, "I am God and you are my angels." He then proceeded to create a stage setting to act out this role until, carried away with the belief that he really was the role he was playing, he fell and broke his arm. His autobiography reveals many other times in his life when he took as reality his omnipotent fantasy of himself only, like Humpty-Dumpty, to come tumbling down!

In his autobiography, J. L. Moreno presents his own father not only as a traveling merchant but also as a somewhat elusive traveling parent whom he missed terribly and yet did not miss because he, "the firstborn," was propelled into "a special position of authority very early in life." He talks of his father's absence leading to his own taking over and developing the need to be a strong leader. It is not insignificant that he relates how, on Sunday afternoon walks with his family, he "had the job, at the head of the column, of looking out for traffic when crossing streets." Moreno's position as the eldest son in a family with a frequently absent father and a strong mother who accepted the gypsy's prophecy of the child's grand destiny and the family's perception of itself "being outside the mainstream of Austrian life" all combined to further Jake's compulsive drives toward omnipotence and feeling himself outside the mainstream. These influences conditioned Moreno's relationships with peers throughout his life, and we saw this so dramatically in the course of his relationship with members of the American Psychiatric Association. I can attest to this separating and

extrusion process, having been aware of it since my membership in the APA in 1945.

I cannot make too much of an interpretation of it, but I do believe it is quite significant that Jake, whose early memories for so many events were profound, states:

> Although my family life did not emphasize the development of an unshakable Jewish identity, I did have a bar mitzvah in the Sephardic temple in Vienna. I have only a hazy recollection of the event and of the inevitable religious instruction, which must have preceded it. The bar mitzvah took place in a relatively calm period of my youth, in an interregnum before the final separation of my parents. They were both at the ceremony.

Is his hazy recollection of this very significant event in the life of every Jewish boy secondary to the fact that his parents' marriage and, therefore, his family life were threatened with dissolution during these months and that his long-term fantasies of omnipotence could do nothing to stem the tide even if he really wanted to? There is more here than meets the eye. And much more to Jake's feelings for his father than are stated in his remark that he took sides with his father against his mother and uncles. It is significant that when his father's brother, a doctor in Istanbul, died in the cholera epidemic, Jake relates that his father said, " 'Maybe you should follow his example and become a doctor.' And that is what I did. . . ."

Again at 13, Jake received powerful suggestive feedback to bolster his self-esteem and idealized image of himself when his Uncle Jancu, who was devoted to Jake's mother and to Jake, offered to take him on a trip around the world. "He was proud to travel with me, to be seen with me, his brilliant nephew. He was sure that one day I would surprise the world with my cunning." For Jake, his Uncle Jancu was an important father-surrogate whose positive feedback continued to feed the inner image of the great person he was to become.

I found Jake's review of his relationship to his name intriguing. He was not only toying with his need to be distant from others, "free of all chains, whether spiritual, moral, psychological, or nominal," which was related to his attempt to assume the prerogatives of the Godhead, but also was discovering in the process how nonverbalized attitudes such as arrogance, righteousness, and being forbidding could alter and regulate human interpersonal relationships. There are some specious qualities to his reasoning, e.g., "by using" a person's "name we are actually possessing him." It also seems to me there was evidence of much alienation from self and reality in the driven quality of extensive and feverish reading and behaviors in his early teens. His extremism, as manifested by his drive toward celibacy, his moodiness, and disrespect "of everything," while he asked the questions frequently asked by sensitive, intelligent, inquisitive adolescents searching

for answers to "who am I?", seems to me to reflect a profound neurotic disorder.

It is easy to identify with the adolescent and early adult days of J. L. Moreno as he struggles with the eternal quest for answers to "who I am? Is the body which I possess me? Is it all of me? Is it all matter? Or is there any part of my body, or some other manifestations of me, that would be called *soul*?" J. L. Moreno asked questions that curious, vital young people who are sensitive, intelligent, and responsible ask when they are not satisfied with the answers to life given to them by their parents and other authorities as they move from adolescence or preadolescence into adulthood. What was remarkable about J. L. Moreno, however, was the intense passion and thoroughness with which he pursued answers to these formidable questions and the extremes he went to in trying to find out what it is like to be God by playing or acting-out his conception of God. His keen imaginative mind, his lust and enthusiasm to satisfy his curiosity, when added to his tremendous energy, drove him to act rather than to be simply living-in-imagination and concocting theories. His belief in spontaneity and acting on his thoughts and beliefs led him to live an exciting life and fostered his belief in the power of small groups to bring about significant personal and interpersonal change of marked proportions. He clung to this belief throughout his life, and he stated that "one result of all my reading in theology and philosophy was violent opposition not so much to the remedies the writers offered, which were excellent and beautifully expressed, but against this behavior as individuals and as representatives of the values they preached."

He took pride in seeing himself on a level with Jesus, Guatama Buddha, and St. Francis of Assisi. Like them, he estranged himself from his family at an early age. He, too, tried to find followers with whom he could have a surrogate family and experience a genuine feeling of belonging, with such common goals as helping children, treating the sick, and providing homes for the homeless while rejecting the lawgivers and the rich of his time. These and other prophets left their rich parents to live like beggars, shunning worldly goods. Moreno believed that he was like them, a chosen one. This fed his feelings of pride and righteousness and gave him motivating strength to go his own way despite his mother's attempts to control him through guilt-provocation and tears.

I find writing this review of J. L. Moreno's autobiography a difficult but fascinating task. The autobiography is so laden with fascinating data, presented in a disjointed manner, that I tend to forget so much of what was presented in previous chapters as I become immersed anew in each subsequent one.

In my reaction to the man J. L. Moreno, I am constantly torn by his al-

truistic acts and motivations at one moment and then by my questioning of his integrity a little while later. For example, in his chapter on "Vöslau," he describes his taking a job as health officer for the town of Kottingbrunn after World War I, when he decided to "practice among plain people." A short time later, he was offered the job of health officer in the next town, Vöslau, where he was to practice exclusively. He accepted the invitation. He quotes himself, " 'Oh God,' I said, 'that is almost like a miracle. Let us drink a glass of wine to celebrate the occasion.' " He doesn't say one word about his lack of commitment to his contract with the people of the first town, Kottingbrunn. What does he indicate here about his sense of responsibility? How does this act of expediency reflect other events and actions in his life? I refer to his behavior as tutor to the two little girls and also to his behavior in the theater.

His strong inconsistencies and contradictions are also evident in his sex life. We hear over and over again about periods of celibacy that coincided with periods of Godplaying. He states in chapter 7, when he discusses his close relationship with Marian, the school teacher, that the "stronger my desire for Godplaying was, the weaker was my desire for sex." Again, he ties himself in identification with Jesus and talks of the "negative correlation between sex and God," which he describes "as a universal phenomenon." He continues, "the Godplayers in the Bible, for instance, Jesus, who certainly was a great lover in the spiritual sense, was hardly interested in sex: the story of Mary Magdalene speaks for itself. When one begins to play God, one loses the desire for natural copulation. One becomes quasi-impotent; the mystery of celibacy is closely related to it. God (or those who aspire to become God) does not permit the flesh to dominate Him. . . ."

He offers details of his practice of medicine with various patients in the town of Vöslau as additional experiences to foster his illusion of omnipotency, saying, "There were many such episodes that helped me hold to my dream that I was, indeed, God. . . ."

At this point, I'd like to remind readers of the fairly well-known fact that many doctors enter medicine because of their need to control life and death or to come as close to that control as possible. Some doctors may develop an omnipotent sense of self, which is demonstrated in their behaviors and relationships as a consequence of the worship and idolatry that they experience with patients and their families over a period of years. Jake had the early need to play or be God, and this was indeed fostered by many of his later experiences. In general, in psychiatry and medicine, we warn young physicians against this occupational pitfall of their calling because it can lead to serious human and legal consequences.

I am moved to speculate about the degree of alienation from self and others in J. L. Moreno. It is astonishing to read of the depth of spiritual

(and later sexual) relationship with Marian and learn that he terminated the relationship by not answering her letters after his emigration to the United States in 1925. He writes that "somehow my feelings for her just died down as I became involved in an exciting new life." What happened to his capacity for confrontation and facing life and its vicissitudes that we'd been hearing about previously? We could wonder what his incapacity for a sustained relationship had to do with his relationship with his father, who was continuously in and out of his life.

Moreno's emigration to America and his promotion of himself and his ideas in this country are examples of how having a perception of what you want is a major source of motivation for accomplishing it. Although some of what is presented sounds like serendipity, I am sure most of the directions opened to Jake came about because his own energetic capacity to present himself and his ideas for improving the world socially offered hope for change and were intriguing to others. So we see how sociometry, early group therapy, and the impromptu theater continued to evolve in the twenties and thirties as the more traditional group psychotherapy of today was evolving on a parallel track.

Jake's capacity to react and develop relationships with those who were not only "sympatico" but could help him in evolving his concepts was phenomenal. It is no simple accident that what he was involved with came to the attention of and was written about in the *New York Times* and other publications. His ideas held hope for reaching toward the prison population, the welfare population, and the mentally ill. There was a need for new ideas, such as his, that could improve man's relationship with man.

Bela Schick, Ira S. Wile, Beatrice Beecher, E. Stagg Whitin, Lewis E. Lawes, Walter M. English, A. A. Brill, William Alanson White, Winfred Overholser, Paul Schilder, Fannie French Morse, Gardner Murphy, Kurt Lewin, Gorden Allport, Hadley Cantril, Nolan D. C. Lewis, and many others with whom he became involved in one way or another, represent a modified *Who's Who* of helping professionals.

Jake's story about the muscular, aggressive Armenian girl who came to his apartment and seduced him is typical of one of his patterns, namely that of presenting events in his life as if he were the passive victim or target of the actions and interests of others. He wrote that later he understood her method of collecting famous and about-to-be-famous men when he saw her with Sir Julian Huxley. I believe he saw in her, without being aware of it, a resemblance to himself.

Reading the autobiography prompted me to review many jarring moments. In chapter 9, he talks of meeting a beautiful, sensitive, and delicate girl, Florence Bridge, who after 6 months came to live with him. They married just after he started his life in Beacon, New York, where he had opened

a sanitarium. As Moreno shared this information, he wrote, "Florence lived in the small gatehouse, where I live now, and the patients lived in the big white house where the institute students live and work. . . ." What are the implications of "Florence lived in the small gatehouse, where I live now"? Did she live there alone, separately, after their marriage? Where was he living? What is behind his not stating "we" lived in the small gatehouse? Over and over again, difficult-to-interpret but sensed data emerge that attest to his difficulties in relationships and difficulties in being in a "we" relationship.

Chapter 10, simply entitled "Zerka," is a very moving experience in terms of their meeting, their sensing of each other, the establishment of their relatedness, and their movements toward marriage, becoming parents, and surviving her serious illness, which culminated in an amputation of her right arm and Jake's development of humility.

I am currently teaching a course on communication and relationships to psychiatric residents at the New York University School of Medicine. The other day I asked them if they recognized the name, Dr. Jacob L. Moreno, and was disappointed at seeing their blank faces. I gave them a brief review of his contributions and an explanation of why he was unknown to them. I suggested that they become familiar with psychodrama and how it could be integrated into their work as psychiatrists in varied settings.

I have been privileged to review Jake's autobiography in galley form before its publication, and I feel enriched and stimulated by the experience. I believe it will be worthwhile and stimulating reading for new people entering the helping profession and for seasoned professionals.