Book Reviews

Family Reconstruction: Long Day's Journey Into Light. William F. Nerin. 1986. New York: W. W. Norton. 225 pp.

William F. Nerin is a psychotherapist with over 20 years experience, and in this book he describes his use of Virginia Satir's approach to family reconstruction. It is largely a quasi-psychodramatic approach, and I am reviewing this book for a reading audience that is primarily psychodramatic in nature.

Apparently, in her later years, Satir, an internationally recognized leader in the field of family therapy, developed this more systematic approach that integrates psychodramatic methods with her concepts of individual and family psychodynamics. I am saddened to have to note that Ms. Satir, who wrote the foreword to this book not long before her death, made no mention of her debt to psychodrama literature. Indeed, I found only four references in this entire book (aside from Satir's foreword).

In the first chapter, Nerin presents his approach, which seems to me to be pretty close to what occurs in many psychodrama training workshops. Mr. Nerin notes that this approach is a blend of "gestalt [therapy], communications, psychodrama, body work (sculpting), hypnosis, accessing the unconscious, and fantasy" (p. xvi, p. 4)—but the description of most of what follows is in fact a derivative of psychodrama. Family sculpting, for example, is hardly "body work" but rather Satir's term for applying the psychodramatic technique called "action sociometry," described in Barbara Seabourne's article in *Group Psychotherapy* in 1963.

Terminology has been changed. What in psychodrama are called "auxiliary egos" become "role players" in family reconstruction. The director is renamed "the guide"; and the designations "star" (Satir's term) or "explorer" (Nerin's term) are used for what in psychodrama is called the "protagonist." Moreno's social atom diagram is called "the circle of influence." (Nerin also uses the geogram without crediting its origins with the earlier work of Murray Bowen and the family chronology without noting its roots in the classical work of Adolf Meyer, the dean of American psychiatry.)

Some rules again, harken back to Morenean principles: Family members do not play themselves in the reconstructions (p. 65). Indeed, it seems that the

real family members do not ever have an opportunity to explore their perceptions of the relationship with the protagonist in an actual encounter with a therapeutic facilitator, using the process of a "full role reversal."

On page 68, Nerin describes the action portion of the workshop. After preparing participants by having them make various aforementioned diagrams, the guide introduces some action experiences that psychodramatists know to be "warm-ups." The rationale for this series of activities is presented over the next few pages, along with examples.

On page 72, Nerin begins to warm up the group, though that term is not used. He describes how he talks about roleplaying. I was a bit startled to read how the auxiliaries ("role players") are "enrolled,"—that is, warmed up to their parts: After being placed in a family sculpture, "by staying frozen for a minute or two, the role player begins to get feelings and thoughts." It was at this point that I sensed that those who use this approach would be able to enrich it significantly by learning about the principles of psychodrama.

As the process continues, it shifts away from the principles of authentic psychodrama and explores a variety of fantasized or "reconstructed" scenes as improvised by the guide and the role players, based on inferences but with minimal real evidence of actual truth. For example, on page 96, an enactment of the birth of a paternal aunt is described. The idea, of course, is to help people become more compassionate and understanding of their parents or other significant persons not just by imagining what the circumstances of their early lives had been.

As we might imagine, the dramatization of key events in the lives of one's ancestors becomes the course of affect-laden associations. For example, on page 97, on witnessing a family sculpture in which the role player of the grandfather found himself patting the "aunt" (as a child) on the head, "Ann blurted out with great exclamation that her dad treats her in a way that keeps her helpless so that he feels important about himself. 'He must have learned that from his dad. Grandpa McConnell also treated me the same way.'". Yet these are patently projections, and often rather far-fetched ones.

The problem is, of course, that these rich and moving quasi-sociodramas tend to have the force of reality. As such, they receive the collective projections of all concerned, and they function in a fashion similar to those of the "recovered memories" that are now such a controversial problem in the mental health field. The question of the accuracy of these reconstructions seems to be ignored.

What seems ironic to me is that a similar degree of rich imagery, experience, and insight can be elicited from more conventional psychodramatic enactments of the protagonist in relationship with people in his or her actual social atom, which would reflect to some degree a greater accuracy of the

events. yet even then we should be careful to have these "insights" designated as hypotheses that deserve to be checked out with the people concerned.

Also, it is clear that each protagonist is offered a number of enactments and that on a given weekend only one, or at the most two, protagonists ("explorers") will receive the full attention of the group. The desire to act felt by the others who are asked to play supporting roles goes unmet. Nevertheless, it might be of value to some psychodramatists to view another, related (though derivative) approach. Nerin spells out many of his principles (pp. 130–137), but I tend to find them a bit simplistic, although quite noble in intention.

Apparently, this approach has become part of the self-help network associated with such groups as Al-Anon and Adult Children of Alcoholics. There may be a growing network for this synthesis of marathon encounter weekend, psychodrama, Satir's type of humanistic family therapy, and "personal mythology" work. In the long run, I expect to see more of this in the community, the church, and the general self-help movement. But I am uneasy, in the same way I was uneasy with the explosive growth of the encounter group of the 1970s. Basic principles of therapy and group dynamics were ignored back then (such as failing to have people in conflict role reverse), and I suspect an equal number of principles are being ignored in this work.

Although *Family Reconstruction* is intriguing, I find myself confirmed in my belief that psychodrama is indeed a highly complex process requiring all the training the current certification process demands. However, I am reminded that (a) there are lots of people out there leading psychodramas, sometimes under that name, sometimes by a different name—not that this is anything new; and (b) it is not unlikely that the quality of these enactment processes are several cuts below the standards of practice in our field.

My strategy is to encourage such practitioners not to call their craft psychodrama (which, thankfully, this author does not do) but to go on to learn about psychodrama, especially its underlying principles. I would be interested in readers' ideas regarding the best way to cope with this inevitable dilution of our craft.

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Persona and Performance: The Meaning of Role in Drama, Therapy, and Everyday Life. (1993). Robert J. Landy. 278 pp. Hardcover, $23.95. Available from Guilford Publications, Inc., 72 Spring St., NY 10012.

This book is relevant for psychodramatists as well as drama therapists because it deepens and extends the theoretical foundations of role theory,