

Section 2: The Practitioner's Corner

Working with Life Scripts:

Spontaneity, Surplus Reality, and Personal Change

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This article addresses features of spontaneity, the power of life scripts, and surplus reality. A psychodrama unfolds wherein Jean, a 22-year-old woman, confronts the issue of being pulled across the generational boundary by her mother, who has used Jean to solve her struggles in her marriage as well as stresses in her life. Jean resolves the issue by disengaging from her mother in a dramatic scene in which the entire group assists by empowering Jean.

KEYWORDS: Concertize; differentiation; metaphor; role reversal; script; spontaneity; surplus reality.

SPONTANEITY

Ralph leaned back in his uncle's lap, looked up, and said, "You have hair in your nose, Uncle Max." That is an example of complete unscripted, natural, and unobstructed spontaneity. When we mature, we suppress that degree of spontaneity and settle for moments when our feeling, thinking, and doing are in harmony. A psychologically healthy young child feels safe and free to be who he is in the moment. Spontaneity is one with his existence. It may be the most primitive, uncensored, and genuine moment of spontaneity he will ever have. The very young do not model themselves to anyone's behavior, but rely on the spontaneity of their nature.

So what am I saying? An adult gets a glimpse of her spontaneous self when the person she truly is inside coincides with the person others see outside. She is congruent.

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Impulsivity and spontaneity are not the same. An impulsive person tends to act on a whim with little or no forethought, reflection, or consideration of the consequences. An impulsive person says and does whatever she feels, believing she is clever and the envy of all. A spontaneous person is content, self-assured, and comfortable in her own skin, and feels safe, open, honest, and at times vulnerable.

What prevents us from being spontaneous? Spontaneity cannot coexist with our collective fears, anxieties, anger, self-indulgence, and need to defend ourselves from our own inner vulnerabilities. We cannot be spontaneous when devoting excessive energy to controlling our childhood angst and sorrow. Nor can we be spontaneous when we manipulate and pressure others to change in order to avoid having to change ourselves.

SCRIPTS

The foundations of these psychological barriers are set at early stages of our lives. We define who we are quite early in life based on information at our disposal at the time. It is a blueprint for life that becomes a script. Scripts are often premature and lack access to all available data. Nevertheless, we form pictures of ourselves that become translated into scripts. If we are lucky, we form very positive scripts. Often, however, scripts contain lines that begin with “don’t”: Don’t be close. Don’t trust. Don’t succeed. Don’t be important. Don’t feel your feelings. Don’t be happy.

CASE STUDY

We adopt and follow our life scripts. Unfortunately, the script we adopted at age 10 becomes outdated and responsible for much discomfort. Many people work at changing their life scripts and frequently end up in our psychodrama groups. Jean is one of them. She became part of a group because the script she followed most of her young adult life was “Try to please everyone even if it means sacrificing yourself.” After she shared bits and pieces of her life, it became clear that Jean was tired of being in the role of rescuer. Jean is 22 years old and lives at home.

Jean told the group, “I need to find out what I can do. I feel used up.” When I direct a drama, the idea of spontaneity is not the first thing that comes to mind. And yet when I hear someone like Jean, it is clear she has neatly folded a large part of her person and packed it away. Even her closest friends and family have taken for granted that what they see of Jean is all there is. She has packed away a great deal of her spontaneity. If Jean were to unpack and wear all of her spontaneity, as it were, most of her friends and family would not recognize her. Roles in the family system would change or the family would try to live in an unbalanced system. My guess is that the family would want Jean to change back and conserve her role so the system would remain homeostatic.

We begin the drama. “We all know at least part of your story, Jean. Look at your life and show us what it is like to follow a script of ‘Please everyone.’”

Jean says, “I feel my parents expect me to solve everything, including their disagreements. To me it has always been a heavy obligation.” Jean has just given

the first metaphor: heavy. I keep it in mind as a possible way to concretize feeling later in the drama.

I ask, “Where do we need to begin dealing with this?”

Jean answers, “My home. That is, my parents’ home.”

“Take us to your home. Show us where we are: What is happening and with whom?” I say. Someone who has packed away a good portion of her spontaneity needs help getting it back. So a director accepts that there will be a subdued or reserved aspect to responses. However, the objective will be to move toward spontaneity, toward a place that embraces all of her gifts of awareness.

Jean has watched other psychodramas and has a good idea of the process, so I follow with, “Show us how this ‘Please everyone’ script often happens. Where does the action take place and with whom?”

She says, “In the kitchen with my mother.”

“Let’s go there. Show us the kitchen.”

“The kitchen is small. We eat there and when we talk it is often there.” Notice that Jean is telling us about the kitchen. As dialogue should be minimized in psychodrama. Jean needs to show us.

“Help us be there with you. What are the kitchen’s smells? What colors? How big? What are the counters and the sink like? Where are the appliances?”

I won’t go into detail, but Jean spends time warming up to the kitchen scene. I then ask her to pick a mother.

Jean looks at the people in the group and selects Alice to be the auxiliary ego for mother.

I say, “Jean, reverse roles with your mother. Alice needs to understand Mother’s frame of mind and attitudes of life.” The role reversal puts Alice in the role of Jean and Jean in the role of Mother. Jean seems warmed up to the role of Mother based on her body language and the ease with which she moves into Mother’s role.

Alice needs information about Mother, so I ask Mother (Jean), “Tell us about yourself.”

“I am married and have two children. Jean is 22, the oldest, and we have a son who is 18. They both live at home with my husband and me.”

“Tell us a little about Jean,” I say.

Jean, as Mother, says, “We can always count on Jean. She is always there when we need her. However, I’ve noticed lately she has been angry a lot. I don’t know what is going on. She has always been a quiet and helpful girl. We never had any difficulties with her. I just don’t know what is going on.”

Jean is within her comfort zone and is ready to risk getting into the psychodrama. We know that Mother may not have a clue as to Jean’s desire to assume control over her life. We also know that Jean is angry but controls that anger by being passive or perhaps depressed.

Surplus Reality

We now engage the most exciting and profound part of psychodrama—surplus reality. Moreno believed that we need a therapeutic situation in which reality

can be simulated, allowing us to develop new ways of living without risking serious consequences.

Psychodrama is one approach to therapy that is a three-dimensional method. The protagonist paints the scene that needs repair. The protagonist then effortlessly steps through the portal of surplus reality into a third dimension that transcends time and space and brings the past, present, and future into the here and now. As the protagonist paints the picture of her distress, she steps over the frame into a third dimension where she can roam and view significant others from every angle.

I say, "Reverse roles."

Jean assumes her role and Alice assumes the role of Mother. I say, "Mother, will you tell Jean what you are concerned about?"

"Jean, I don't understand, but lately you seem distant and angry."

Jean hesitates with her arms folded. "Mother, this is hard. Do you notice that whenever you and Dad fight, I get sucked into it? Both of you try to get me to take sides. You have done this as long as I can remember. That is not my job! I am not your parents."

Mother (Alice) says, "No one ever asked you to act like a parent. Why are you angry? What am I supposed to do? We have always been so close. What is this all about?"

Jean says, "To tell you the truth, Mother, I don't feel I have ever had the right to have my own feelings. I've always worried about your feelings and dad's feelings."

Think about what you may now do as the director. What is Jean telling us? For one thing, she is showing us that the generational boundary has frequently been crossed. She is saying, "I am not differentiated from my parents. What they feel, I feel." It is now important in the drama for Jean to see concretely what is going on. Often a protagonist needs to go back to a specific encounter so that the psychological conclusions formed at previous times may be reframed to represent current reality.

I ask Jean, "What needs to happen?"

Jean hesitates but finally says, "My mother needs to let go and let me be me. She always pulls me into everything. I let her do it, but I need to do something to make it stop."

I ask, "Can you take us to a time when recently your mother was pulling you into something that made you angry or at least annoyed?"

Jean says, "Last week she did it again. She asked me what she should do about Dad. I mean, this was too much. She wanted me to tell her how to get Dad to give her more affection. That isn't even fair."

"Can you show us what happened? Where were you?" I say.

Jean has become accustomed to showing rather than telling, so she sets the scene. "I had come home from work. Mom was in the living room. She gave me the BIG sigh. I knew something was up."

"Take us to your living room," I say.

Jean walks around the stage showing us where things are, what colors exist, and where she and her mother are. She shows her mother and her sitting across

from each other on two recliners. Scene setting is essential so that the protagonist as well as the group join in the moment of the action.

“Show us what happened,” I say.

Jean asks Alice to join her on stage. She hesitates, begins to say something to her mother, and stops. She looks at me and says, “I know what I want to say, but it won’t come out. I need help.” Jean selects Paula as a double who joins her on stage. It will be Paula’s role to capture the essence or the core of Jean’s needs and provide dialogue as well as body language to help Jean.

Jean, her mother, and her double gather their thoughts for a moment. Then the double (Paula) says, “Mother, you know I love you and have never tried to hurt you or Dad. But Mother, it often seems we are laced together like two pair of shoes tied together. We just stumble along.”

This metaphor seems to be an important picture for Jean. She straightens up, looks her mother in the eye, and says, “Yes. That is it. We need to be separated. We need to think and breathe for ourselves. We need space. You can stumble along by yourself. I need my space.”

Alice instinctively moves close to Jean and puts her arms around her, sending a clear message of “I’m not going to make this easy.” Jean moves away and out from under the arms of her mother. But her mother persists. This dance continues around the stage with Jean’s double close by saying things like, “Mother, I am tied to you. I must loosen the strings.” Paula’s job in this drama is critical. She is doubling from deep in the heart of Jean. She tries to amplify the tiny voice crying out to be disengaged. So Paula tries to concretize the dilemma. She moves in close to Jean, doubles all of her gestures and stature but reaches out to Mother and pushes. Alice (Mother) also instinctively pulls in tighter. So here we are: Jean pushing away while Mother is hanging on.

I motion to half of the group to help Jean push and the other half to help Mother hang on. This struggle has been going on for quite some time, so the process of disengaging cannot be easy. Everyone gets it.

Paula (the double) continues to cry out louder, “I love you, but I am going to let go. I need to let go. I cannot be tied to you. I am my own person. I will not be your surrogate parent!!!!!!”

The physical contact from the group along with the help of her double makes it possible for Jean to disengage from her mother and literally fall into the hands of the group behind her. She begins to cry and hug her double (Paula).

The final scene is Jean with her mother and father in their living room. Jean, in a very adult and assured tone, tells her parents that she needs to let go, that she needs to find relationships on her own that will reinforce her need to feel worthwhile. She affirms and asserts that she will be in and out of their life, but she will listen to her own voice as well as theirs. They embrace and Jean leaves.

The power of the drama rested heavily on the spontaneity of Paula and her metaphor that helped Jean hold a visual image throughout the drama. The group also keyed off the metaphor, and the metaphor was based on the messages that both Paula and the group were getting from the protagonist.

The next phase of the drama was the sharing. It is easy to understand how important it was to derole Alice (Mother). The group shared how they connected to the drama while Jean listened. Her gift had already been given to the group.

Now to the idea of spontaneity. I have said that according to Moreno's theories, spontaneity cannot coexist with our collective fears, anxieties, and anger, or alongside devoting excessive energy to controlling childhood angst and sorrow. Nor can we be spontaneous when we manipulate and pressure others to change in order to avoid having to change ourselves. We cannot be spontaneous when we are in a constant struggle for power and control.

Working through issues under the protective shell of surplus reality can augment or implant new scripts into memory, making enduring changes. Jean's script changed. Her perception of boundaries, power, and control changed and may remain changed.

This drama could have migrated in many different directions. The existential moment of the psychodramatic encounter has something to do with how the drama goes. In this case, the strength of the double influenced the flow of the drama. The director also influences the drama by what he or she attends to. The point is, the most important element of a drama is that it takes place in this simulated time and space called surplus reality. Within the surplus reality the protagonist experiences more of her spontaneous self. During that suspended time, Jean has greater freedom from the normal constraints of her life and can experience greater levels of spontaneity.