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The Spirit and Purpose of Role Reversal Opening Up Fresh Possibilities

Placing Role Reversal into a Broad Context

From time to time a meeting takes place with an enthusiastic individual who has been inspired by a discovery about the workings of our world. I met such a person in East Gippsland in the early sixties. He was the Department of Agriculture Inspector.

He was absolutely enthralled by the complex social structure of bees. He gave introductory lectures and entered freely into informative conversations on the adaptive and complex system the bees had developed. He loved the bees. He exuded a spirit of joyfulness that such a wonderful social system existed on this earth.

I noticed that his explorative spirit was infectious and that those who spent time with him went away somehow enlarged. Another perspective on the world began to be born. His name was Arthur Cole.

I had not thought it possible to generate such interest in bees. Prior to this bees had stood for fear and the pain of a sting. Now they became living beings to be respected, observed, and part of an interactive universe. Formerly, the bees were enmeshed in a warlike situation that seemed to be everlasting. Men, women, and especially children projected the frightening fantasies they created onto the bees, developed habitual patterns designed to protect them from the bees, and attacked any bee that flew too close. Now the bees became a source of new knowledge and elicited a warm-up to imagination and new creative actions. A mutual and sustainable relationship system has grown up.

Imagine what happens when there is an open interchange between the different elements of the systems within which we live and move and have our being.

In such a situation of open interchange we are transported to positions that are far removed from those we have previously taken. Our life is transformed into something like a Harry Potter movie in which we are surprised by an environment that is ever new.

Once this transformation has taken place and the experience has become part of our regular life, then we can rightfully see ourselves as systems people. We have consciously entered into a world that is always in flux. We are re-discovering the perspective of the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus who reflected on the ever-changing nature of a river as it flowed past. We have embraced fluidity. We have gone through a process in which the western mind that has produced a particular scientific world view has been transformed into something that is suitable for the rapidly changing world in which we find ourselves.

*It is possible for us to say that the imbibing of the waters of interactive systems gives us the ability to enter into the values of any group or individual. That is, we can **truly** role reverse.*

Taking this point of view brings about a number of consequences.

One consequence of this is the dropping away of any notion that role reversal is a technique.

Let us pause for a moment and reflect on this. *Would you visualise this person directing a psychodrama session.*

The session has largely involved two people, the protagonist and the work supervisor. *The first scene* has consisted of an enactment of the protagonist's warm-up to the supervisor. *The second scene* sees the protagonist and the supervisor interacting with one another.

The interaction proceeds like this:

Protagonist: I don't think your decision is fair.

Director: Reverse roles.

Auxiliary as Protagonist: I don't think your decision is fair.

Protagonist as Supervisor: Well, its been made now.

Auxiliary as Protagonist: I know that. That's why I'm talking with you.

Protagonist as Supervisor: There's nothing to talk about.

Director: Reverse roles. (Said with an animated voice)

Protagonist: Your decision is 'nt fair. You have to face up to that!

Auxiliary as Supervisor: Look, I've told you the decision has been made.

Stop wasting my time and get on with your own job.

Protagonist: I can't do that.

Director: Reverse roles. (Said in a matter-of-fact, less animated, disappointed tone)

Here we have an interesting sequence of events. The director gives the direction to reverse roles the first time. It is said with conviction. There is a voice level that matches the volume of the protagonist. The tone is well modulated, interesting. The director clearly has a strong connection with the drama. Later, the director gives the direction to reverse roles in a flat, disinterested tone. The director is beginning to withdraw. In fact, the director is disappointed that the drama has not developed in another way. The director has been hoping that the drama would quickly progress to a satisfactory climax and conclusion. Instead the interaction appears to them to have become repetitious.

The technique of role reversal was seen as a means by which a new solution could be forged. The fact that this does not occur influences the director to lose confidence in role reversal. They continue to use the technique in a dull, stereotyped way, but the spirit that breathes life into the technique has gone away.

In contrast on this it is possible for a director to sustain an intense interest in the emergent nature of this social system, to continue to produce enactment, and to highly value role reversal for a sustained period of time.

Such a director remains involved as they say the words 'reverse roles', sustains an animated tone of voice, and varies the volume, sometimes speaking loudly, sometimes whispering. Such spontaneous expression results in a lifting of the spontaneity level of the protagonist, auxiliaries, and group members in the audience.

Likewise, an intense interest in the values and lifestyle of each person has a profound effect on the interviewing of a protagonist who is in the midst of enacting their own role or enacting the role of another significant person.

It is most needful that we continue the business of warming up more and more to different cultures, to the point of not judging or distancing ourselves from the roles, but experiencing their nature and their meaning for the people involved.

Development of Interest in a Broad Context

The continuing development and refinement of an interest in a broad context is a major task for any person who works in the field of human relationships, and indeed, for any developing human being.

Those involved in the practise of the psychodramatic method who have absorbed themselves in other cultures in the course of travelling the world have developed a pretty good foundation for sustaining interest in the unfolding world of a protagonist. It is needful that other means are also explored. Ongoing training of practitioners and the training in training institutes can be further developed so that our focus expands and our vision includes more and more of the breadth and depth of human experience.

Five Specific Purposes of Role Reversal

1. Role reversal has the function of generating knowledge of a social system.

Since role reversal assists in creating knowledge of a social system it is normally a significant feature of the early part of the enactment in a psychodrama session. This early part of the enactment, the production phase, involves acting through the aspects of life that are significant for the protagonist. It may involve the acting through of an incident or a series of incidents or acting through a theme.

In order to bring about an adequate production of every aspect of a situation attention is given to what actually happened overtly, as well as to what was not said and not done. Therefore, a range of psychodramatic techniques may be utilised. These techniques were developed by Dr. Moreno for the specific purpose of enabling a protagonist to warm up to their total experience and to express whatever is stirring in their soul.

In the production phase there is virtually always some interviewing. This interviewing warms up the protagonist, director, and group to a situation. Usually there is role reversal. We may also witness the use of the aside, doubling, mirroring, concretisation, and maximisation. Very rarely do we see the use of only one of these techniques. They are used in combination. Through the development of such combinations the warm up of the protagonist increases, leading to more complete production and the fulfilment and completion of the next phase of the enactment.

A working psychodramatist who is continuing to enlarge their level of spontaneity is continually refining their capacity to produce a drama that results in the development of knowledge of the protagonist's social system. There is refinement of the the work of selecting a protagonist, establishing an area of focus, interviewing for role, production of interaction, and role reversal.

Role reversal usually results in a greatly enlarged perception of a social system. The importance of appreciating the value of role reversal and becoming more and more adept at producing appropriate and well-timed role reversals cannot be over-emphasised.

With respect to the timing of role reversal it is good to develop the simple practice of timing a role reversal as soon as possible after a question is asked. This assists the continuous development of a seamless warm-up for the protagonist and the auxiliary. *And let there be role reversal when a protagonist has completed some meaningful expression for the first time in a drama.* When the protagonist has just arrived at the point of completing some expression their warm-up is high. *Let the role reversal take place immediately while the warm-up is at its height.* This warm-up is the engine that causes the protagonist to enact the role of another person without them having to rely solely on a mental process to warm up to the new role.

2. Role Reversal is for the Purpose of Socialisation.

There was once an extremely isolated person who engaged in a brief enactment in a psychodrama session directed by Zerka Moreno. There was a lengthy interview after which the man expressed himself to his mother and then played the role of his mother for only a short time. There was a brief interview by the director and minimal outward expression. Afterwards there was a profound change in the man's warm up. A greater interest in socialising developed.

In role reversal a protagonist comes to experience the values, the feelings and emotions, and the impact of their physical body and actions on the people with whom they have contact. While a protagonist is in role reversal concretisation and maximisation may be used to assist the warm-up. The warm-up area of the stage can be used extensively.

3. A Third Reason for Role Reversal is to Present a More Clear Picture of Oneself.

Through role reversal one's own functioning is clearly displayed by an adequate auxiliary. The mirroring back of one's own functioning produces a shock and associated with this a new warm-up develops. There tends to be the development of greater reflection about oneself.

The constant appearance of visual images of oneself through repeated role reversals can be of great assistance to a person in the development of a true picture of themselves, neither too low an opinion or too high.

4. A Fourth Purpose of Role reversal is the Development of Self Control.

Any person who has over-developed aspects of themselves will benefit from role reversal. A person who warms up to being a close friend with someone and who then looks at themselves in a state of depression, or being over-active, or being too talkative, or acting mildly violently, frequently takes quite decisive action to stop this functioning from continuing. Their expression to themselves while in role reversal may very well be more strict than the expression of anyone else toward them.

5. A Fifth Purpose of Role Reversal is Social Atom Repair.

Through role reversal a person plays a much wider range of roles than they would normally do. Their experience is enlarged. Their physical movement becomes more flexible and there is a wider range of movement.

A retiring person plays the role of an extravert. A serious-minded person comes to know the experience of a playful person. A person who occupies themselves with 'practical' things such as sewing, cooking, cleaning, mowing the lawn, or doing the accounts comes to know the value of fantasy, and their intuitive and imaginative quality develops and becomes integrated with the rest of their life.

Such role expansion brings delight to other people. For some it is a cause of consternation. Nevertheless, whether there is acceptance of the new functioning or whether there is rejection of it, the person's social atom is no longer the same and will never return to its previous configuration. A person's idea about life has enlarged as a result of repeatedly entering into the lives of other people. Their relationship with themselves becomes easier. They see the outside world more sharply and clearly. Some see the trees more clearly and appreciate beautiful things. Their creative function appears more often.

Such creative functioning is enhanced by the use of concretisation, maximisation, and extensive use of the stage.