

The Dynamics of Catharsis

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An understanding of the dynamics of catharsis can help the practitioner of psychotherapy and psychodrama to utilize this aspect of healing in a more rational fashion. The emotional release that is expressed as catharsis reflects an expansion of the sense of self on four levels: abreaction and an awareness of previously disowned feelings; integration of those feelings; experiencing being included in a social network; and participating meaningfully in the universe. Some practical implications of this approach are discussed, and it is related to role theory and everyday life.

Catharsis has a rightful place as one of the original basic elements of dynamic psychotherapy. The literature on this subject, however, both psychological and psychiatric, is relatively sparse.

Nichols and Zax offered an excellent review of the available views of this subject (1977), and so did Scheff (1979). However, neither of these works provided a really practical theory of catharsis. The integration of psychodramatic methods offers a technology that can be a vehicle for understanding as well as facilitating the process of catharsis, and the principles of this essential dynamic will be discussed below.

Theoretical Foundations

Earlier analytic metaphors suggested that the psyche was a repository of energies that required periodic discharges. We now prefer to consider it an opened system. (Paradigms in medicine and

psychology tend to reflect the most advanced technologies of their times; thus, what was an electrical-hydraulic model at the turn of the century has now been replaced by a computer-holographic model.) The psyche, rather than simply seeking homeostasis, is continuously integrating new elements. Beyond the terms used by Piaget for the cognitive modes of coping, "assimilation" and "accommodation," one can also use a role-theory description which includes other modes, such as mastery, receiving validation and reinforcement, and the expansion of the somatic, psychological, and social role repertoire (Slavson, 1951).

Nevertheless, it is phenomenologically descriptive to speak of a discharge of energy when people go through certain kinds of role transitions. If a person is yearning for something, and then receives it, or, on the other hand, if one feels burdened by something, and then is relieved of that burden, in both cases there is indeed a release of psychic energy. It is the energy of attention, and when a given task is completed, that attention is free for another task.

There are other ways of describing this process. In the above mentioned sense, the gestalt therapists' speaking of closing the gestalt takes on new meaning because emotional unfinished business continues to draw a certain amount of conscious or subconscious attention in an effort to cope with the issues of vulnerability or lack of mastery (Latner, 1974). Moreno writes of the disequilibrium that comes in certain processes of role transition, such as taking on a job for which one is unprepared (1940).

From this point of view, it can be seen that there are many catharses in life, most of them occurring in small ways outside of the therapeutic setting. Passing an exam, sensing one's existence at one's own birthday party, mastering a skill or a challenging task, coping with the poignancy of a loss—all result in a release of emotional energies and a shifting of attention.

Repression vs. Catharsis

In a sense, the ubiquitous process of repression prepares the psyche for catharsis. In the course of development, the immature mind copes with stress by magical maneuvers. One way to deal with the tensions generated between child and parent is for the child to hypnotize itself, as it were, to become unaware of the emotional pain and its associated longings, memories, and ideas. Not only that, but part of this autohypnotic process has a built in posthypnotic suggestion that the act of avoiding or forgetting the uncomfortable feelings is also forgotten. This has been called "dissociation" by Janet and "repression" by Freud.

Repression is an unstable process; it takes a continuing drain of attention to behave as if certain feelings or situations are not present. For example, a child may cope with fears of abandonment by repressing those vulnerable dependency needs, angry impulses, hostile thoughts, and/or sexual interests. Actually, these basic motivational complexes cannot be really eliminated; they are simply compartmentalized. There remains an ongoing burden of anxiety lest the conscious self be faced with these issues, and overwhelmed by them.

As a result, other neurotic or characterological defenses often are used to elaborate this primary act of repression, and these involve further self-deceptions. As a child lies to cover up a lie, and the lies multiply, it becomes harder and harder to remember them all. One of the defenses is simply to avoid activities that would remind the person of whatever is being repressed, and this in turn results in a constriction or rigidification of role behavior.

In the mind, as in physics, every action has an opposite reaction. Even as the ego seeks security by the primitive device of avoidance, there are also pressures to become free and whole again. Consciously or unconsciously, there is an associated sadness at not being able to express all of the intrinsic repertoire. It is as if one is forced to be separated from a close friend.

The catharsis is an expression of the re-uniting of these two old, dear friends. The essential feeling is, "Oh, how much I've missed you and how I've needed you! I cry for all the pain that I've held in. I even mix a little bit of laughter with joy and relief. But there are tears of anger that we had to be separated, and fear that we might be separated again in the future."

In terms of role theory, this mixture of feelings is no mere sentiment; it reflects the loss and gain of role components that have major functional value. In an external situation, such as a graduation or a wedding, we cry because a variety of psychodramatic scenarios are brought to a conclusion. We are losing certain treasured roles: having a child at home, for instance. We identify with that child's losing the freedom to date, the freedom from adult responsibilities. But we are gaining other treasured roles: welcoming a new family member; and recalling the struggles born of innocence. To return to the catharsis that signals the lifting of a repression, there too feelings surge forward to express the years of longing and constriction and anxiety that accompanied the disowning of a necessary part of one's holistic ecology.

There is an element of tragedy in these small shifts of consciousness on the human landscape: Repression is essentially unnecessary (in spite of what some Freudians might maintain), and it reflects the

limitations both of individual and social awareness in the realms of child rearing and education. As parenting improves, more people are developing methods to help children to experience and own the entire range of their feelings, and furthermore, to cultivate those youthful and immoderate impulses until they become refined and channeled into socially acceptable role behaviors.

Another form of catharsis comes from our repression of the essential paradoxical nature of reality, and that kind of repression is probably necessary or else we would be overwhelmed by schizophreniform imaginings. Yet, these paradoxes break through, and if they reflect some aspect that is fairly free of conflict, the breakthrough becomes funny or delightful. Thus, when in play we are able to unite two seemingly incompatible ideas or parts of the self, there is a catharsis of delight. For example, if a person discovers that he or she can do something that had previously seemed to be impossible or inaccessible, an outflowing of joyous energy is the result (Moreno, 1940). If there had been a significant amount of yearning built up for the goal, the laughter might be mixed with tears.

Categories of Catharsis

The point of this is that the concept of catharsis may be understood as a shift of the psyche into a new level of integration. Moreover, the varieties of catharses can be thought of as four separate but interpenetrating categories: abreaction, integration, inclusion, and significance or spiritual catharsis.

The Catharsis of Abreaction

This is the kind of catharsis that is most often referred to when speaking of therapeutic experiences in primal therapy, bioenergetics, gestalt therapy, and many encounter groups. It refers to the emotions that accompany the recognition of feelings that had previously been disowned. The classic work on *abreaction* was done on soldiers and veterans coping with post-traumatic neuroses during and after the second World War (Grinker & Spiegel, 1945).

It is an essential principle of *facilitating* catharsis that the patient not be simply re-experiencing the original trauma; some degree of anchoring and awareness that one is in a safe context must be part of the experience. (Scheff points out that this double-levelled awareness is an essential component (1979).) A key element in this is a positive therapeutic alliance with the therapist.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, when encounter groups had become a fad, untrained leaders often acted as if abreaction alone was therapeutic, and they would use all manner of techniques to provoke the expression of anger, helpless rage, and other forms of vulnerable emotionality. Angry confrontation, a residue of the "Synanon Games" of the late '60s, was sometimes used by the group leader in order to evoke "real feelings," but such behavior was usually destructive and sometimes resulted in emotional casualties.

Moreno observed that the catharsis of abreaction must be followed by a catharsis of integration (Branham, 1974). In other words, it is not sufficient that a patient discover certain complexes of ideas and emotions that have previously been forbidden. The recognition of these feelings, while lacking the compensating skills or cognitions to deal with them, in itself constitutes an emotional emergency. People must be prepared to cope with the feelings, must be able to discover that their anger, dependency, sexuality, or other disowned feelings can be constructively integrated into their lives.

The Catharsis of Integration

It is as powerful to discover that an enemy is a friend as it is to re-discover an old friend. *Integration* is an expansion of the sense of self to include the new role functions that had been previously experienced as incompatible with the identity. The clue that an emotion is not acceptable to the self is the phenomenon of resistance.

Moreno said, in effect, "I don't break down the walls. Rather, I try all the doors and see which ones open." This approach, one of working with the defenses, is a bit like aikido, and a bit like the hypnotic techniques of Milton Erickson. Eugene Eliasoph, as director of psychodrama, worked in a very methodical way, keeping his protagonist oriented to the process, integrating experiences cognitively as well as emotionally at every step in the session. Ultimately, when the person is able to integrate the feelings and experiences, there is a catharsis of relief and expansion. Rehearsals or psychodramatic ego-repair endings are often helpful in this regard (Hollander, 1969).

Another example of the catharsis of integration comes from finding that one can utilize two facets or interests in one's personality in a synergistic fashion. There is a mixture of creative triumph at being able to bring several roles into conjoint functioning. The result is experienced as being more authentic than simple competence in only one role dimension.

Mastering any skill also would fit into this category of catharsis. The

sense of competence, confidence, and knowing or sensing the knack all combine in an exhilarating experience. In addition to the triumphs of learning to tie a shoelace, ride a bicycle, swim, climb a tree, or ski, there are also more clearly psychological accomplishments, such as coping effectively with one's moods, habit control, or the exertion of discrimination in addressing an emotionally loaded issue.

There is a kind of integration also in purging one's self of undesirable elements. This purging experience is related to the other, original use of the term, in terms of emptying the bowels. Aside from repression, another early primitive defense mechanism is that of "introjection." The child says, in effect, "All right, I'll believe anything you say about me, just don't abandon me." Thus, the growing mind takes in definitions and injunctions about the self and how to be that very often become toxic, obsolete, or maladaptive as time goes on.

When a person can let go of a fear, a resentment, a guilt, a sadness, an envy, or a belief tinged with shame, one feels lighter. This may even be a vicarious experience, in which seeing or hearing another go through a similar conflict brings release and reassurance that one is not alone in having those problems or feelings.

Entire complexes of coping, the associated defense mechanisms as well as the underlying fears, all can be relinquished in some integrative processes. In psychodramatic terms, these complexes may be personified: the part of the self that is harshly critical towards the inner child; the unfair other who is kept as a focus of chronic resentment; the depressive and helpless chorus that acts as an excuse and smoke screen, concealing more relevant issues. These complexes usually functioned adaptively at some early and crucial point in psychosocial development, but they developed a life of their own, as it were, and later in life they come to interfere with effective functioning.

The process of re-evaluating and deciding in the present moment which parts of the self to keep and which to relinquish is part of this catharsis of integration. That higher, more integrated, choosing part of the self enjoys affirming more discriminating ideals, accepting realistic limitations, and purging negative elements.

The Catharsis of Inclusion

The third level of catharsis is that of *inclusion*—discovering that one "belongs" in a social network of one's choice. The need to feel loved, liked, and needed is a deep and powerful part of psychosocial functioning, and it should not be underestimated as a source of motivation for many kinds of individual and collective behavior.

Staying with the theme of catharsis being a kind of expansion of the self, it must be noted that the boundaries of the psychic realm are not limited by the skin. When the team you've been rooting for wins, you feel as if you won also. Thus, your sense of self naturally expands in some respects to include whatever groups you identify with and there may be a number of them. In turn, when a group that you like lets you know that they feel that you belong in their ranks, that expands your identity even more. Whether your chosen political party, team, or community wins in some way, or when they include you, you feel a catharsis of inclusion and exultation.

In the realm of therapy, people often feel somewhat alienated. They believe that their feelings, handicaps, and emotional weaknesses render them unacceptable. To discover that they can "be themselves" in a group setting, and find that they are accepted as such, results in a sense of relief and a catharsis of inclusion that extends the abreaction of yearning and need for social bonding (Carp, 1958).

When group members recognize and validate one another, the act of inclusion itself has therapeutic benefits. In a way, this is an extension of the catharsis of integration, for people discover that they can have a positive experience of being supportive. These exchanges of helping and being helped, self-disclosure and empathy, and forgiving and being forgiven are some of the components of the greater process of inclusion (Slavson, 1951).

A further level of the catharsis of inclusion comes with discovering that one can be not only accepted by others, but also actually enjoyed. Groups that encourage self-expression in many dimensions, such as the creative arts, facilitate opportunities for participants to share and cross-validate their talents. To find that one has stimulated another's aesthetic sense is likely to give a sense of expansion, a small catharsis of inclusion.

Thus, being included in a group or even in a one-to-one friendship opens the person's sense of the range of his roles. One of the additional elements of psychodramatic groups is that the spontaneity expressed validates the individuality of each participant in a way that more verbal groups cannot. Moreover, the more that people can begin to feel that they can continue to be a part of the group even when they are simply being themselves, the deeper their sense of belonging becomes (Jones, 1947).

Spiritual Catharsis

The fourth category is what Moreno called the "cosmic" catharsis, and it occurs when an individual experiences a degree of integration

with the greater wholeness, the universe, or with God. This is the phenomenon of emotional religious conversion, of ecstasy, of receiving the "holy spirit," of "being saved," and of mystical communion in general. People occasionally have these feelings outside of any religious activity, as spontaneous experiences in nature (Hardy, 1979). Many things, such as philosophical study, scientific discovery, or a near-death experience also may offer this kind of cathartic process.

This dimension should be included in the overall goals of healing and personal growth. Moreno used the term "axiodrama" to refer to enactments that deal with the individual's relationship with ultimate values and beliefs. The growth of such fields as transpersonal psychology, humanistic psychology, Victor Frankl's logotherapy, or Roberto Assagioli's psychosynthesis all reflect the growing awareness that this is part of a holistic therapeutic process.

In a more modest fashion, but nonetheless important, people can be helped to enlarge their own capacity to be open to and feel a part of beauty, the richness and mystery of their own unconscious, the magic of dreams, or the excitement of personal and cultural-historical evolution and discovery. Again it must be emphasized that these too must be integrated, in the sense of helping patients to work through the meaning of these events and to learn to evoke and use them on their own.

Therapeutic Implications

In this scheme of the dynamics of catharsis, the process of personal growth is seen as being a multi-dimensional and multi-leveled process. Overemphasis on just one area, such as the clichéd practice of "getting in touch with anger" can be misguided. Individuation should be addressed in its fullness, and, indeed, this is part of the educational task of therapy.

Catharsis, then, is not in itself a goal, but rather an indicator of emotional expansion and integration. Great dramatic break-throughs should not become the end-point of psychodramatist's work; small, gentle catharses can also be very healing.

When opening a dimension of the personality, we should consider that several of the four categories of catharsis may be involved. Thus, for a group member who is coming to an awareness of her sense of vulnerability, it is important to weave in her place in the group and to provide the potential for a constructive channelling of those feelings. Even the existential (spiritual) situation of all of our essential vulnerability may be addressed (Hardy, 1979).

Role theory may be useful in applying this approach to the need for

the psyche to expand along a variety of channels. For example, a review of the patient's roles, their balance and range, and his attitudes toward their definition and performance serves as a useful warm up to further work. There well may be significant dynamic material for re-integration related to any roles that are conspicuous by their absence. In other words, a clue to where the person needs to experience catharsis often lies in roles that exist in distorted form or only in "surplus reality." That is where the enactments can be focused.

Thus, the opening of repressed dimensions of the self can take the form of expression of neglected dimensions of the person's role repertoire. These roles do not have to be explored solely in enactments based on the patient's "official" roles in life; playful and imaginative roles may also serve as vehicles for arousing and embodying important parts of the psyche's vitality (Blatner, in press).

Ongoing Relevance of Catharsis

In the daily series of events, there are potential points of psychological and spiritual expansion of the psyche. The processes of healing and healthy development involve the discovery of disowned and new dimensions of the self, and these are rich with vital energies and creative resources. At the moment of catharsis, the self transcends its mundane existence and resonates with its greater (and, indeed, limitless) aspects, including its extended social networks and transpersonal fields.

It is not only in the formal theater that we encounter tragedy or comedy. We are all actors in the ongoing play of the human race. We encounter the consequences of our limited consciousness: if they are mild, we laugh; if severe, we cry. In sharing our catharses, we create bonds with each other, and in so doing, begin to partake of the greater catharsis of inclusion that is also the cosmic catharsis of a dramatically creative and evolving universe.

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