

**Gifts to the Self:  
The Development of New Roles  
in the Young Adult's Experience of  
Separation and Individuation**

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As the young adult struggles to define his identity, to achieve autonomy, and to develop intimate relationships, he experiences again the process of separation and individuation. He is challenged to expand his role repertoire and to modify role relationships with his family. It is hypothesized that when a disorder in the process of role reversal exists, the development of self-nurturing and self-expressive role is impeded. These roles are essential to individuation and to the ability to give to the self that which was inadequately received or experienced in the family. The individual psychodramatic treatment of a young adult experiencing difficulty in individuation is presented to illustrate the development of these two roles. Doubling, role playing, and role reversal recreate the life processes of individuation and are, therefore, uniquely formulated to enhance its development through psychodrama.

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The process of individual development occurs within the family and extends throughout life as human relationships are experienced and co-created. The self is an integration of somatic, social, and psychodramatic roles enacted in the context of these relationships (Moreno, 1948). The process of individuation is an ongoing aspect of human growth and involves the development of a role repertoire adequate to the challenges of life. As the young adult struggles to define and integrate his identity,

to achieve a sense of independence and an ability to commit himself to intimate interpersonal relationships, he experiences again the process of separation and individuation (Erikson, 1963). He is challenged to expand his role repertoire, to relinquish or modify role relationships with his family, and to develop new roles in the outside world.

Separation and individuation are first experienced in infancy. Initially, the infant feels at one with and attached to all aspects of the world around him. Moreno described this experience of symbiosis as the "first universe" (Moreno, 1946). In early infancy, the mother acts as the child's double, perceiving and meeting his needs, and interpreting the world for him. As the mother is naturally imperfect in her doubling, the infant gradually perceives her as separate and discovers that individuals and objects are outside his own body. He thus acquires awareness of himself as a separate being. The self and the capacity for creating human relationships develop from the infant's differentiation from the original dual-unity of mother and child. Self-differentiation reverberates throughout life and thus reflects the conflict between total fusion with others and total isolation within the self (Mahler, 1972).

Moreno hypothesized that a "cosmic hunger" develops for taking in all these objects and individuals perceived as separate, in order to restore the sense of wholeness that was experienced in the "first universe" (Moreno, 1959). The child, in his efforts to satisfy his cosmic hunger, learns to play the role of his mother and others important to aspects of his world. Later he learns to reverse roles, to experience fully the roles of those separate from himself. He is then able to perceive himself from the other's perspective. Role reversal clarifies and strengthens both the bond between the child and parent and the individuality of each. It is essential to the development of individuation because it provides an experiential perception of the other as separate from the self. Paradoxically, role reversal also allows the individual to return to the state of unity for which he longs. As he plays the role of the other, he finds the other within himself. The cosmic hunger has a source of satisfaction.

Individuation, then, is a developmental process and refers both to a quality of self-perception and to a quality of human relationship. A well-differentiated individual experiences a sense of wholeness and self-sufficiency. He has the capacity to perceive others clearly and to develop interpersonal relationships based on these perceptions. When a family has a strong quality of individuation, individual members' needs and emotions are accurately perceived and respected. Each is able to double, role reverse, and encounter the others in ways appropriate to their ages and relationships.

When family relationships impede adequate separation and individuation, it can be hypothesized that there is a disorder in the process of role reversal. Differences between family members are blurred and perceptions of each individual are less accurate. Thus, when parental self-concepts are less clearly defined, the parent tends to project his moods onto the child or else to respond selectively to those feelings of the child that correspond to his own. He cannot accurately perceive the emotional life of the child. The child does not receive the validation and feedback about his thoughts, feelings, and actions that are necessary to the development of positive self-concepts. He hesitates to express those feelings and needs that are different from his parents' expectations because he risks the loss of parental love or attention (Bell & Bell, 1979).

The problem being discussed in this article is the struggle of a young adult to achieve individuation in the context of a poorly individuated family. The sociometric configuration was a cross-generational coalition between mother and son that isolated the father. The focus of the family's concern was caring for the mother, whose needs were seen as paramount. The needs of the father and son were secondary and were not differentiated from those of the mother. The clinical result of this process was a depressed, angry, and suicidal young adult.

### **The Protagonist**

Jeff is a nineteen-year-old college student who first came to therapy feeling depressed and preoccupied with suicidal fantasies. He is a slightly underweight, dark-haired young man of medium height. He expressed fears that he would be like his mother, whom he described as a depressed and bitter woman, and that he might kill himself. He feared that his girlfriend, Nancy, would not find him lovable.

Jeff is the youngest child of Sharon and Bill. He has one older brother, Dan, and an older half-brother, Steven. Sharon, age sixty-two, was previously married to an abusive alcoholic. She works as a counsellor in a halfway house. Bill, in his early seventies, is a retired truck driver and janitor, with an eighth grade education. Both older sons live outside the home and both experienced bitter conflict with Sharon when they left home. Sharon had a major depression following Jeff's birth, which was treated by electroconvulsive therapy.

In describing his interactions with his parents, Jeff revealed the process by which he was triangulated into his parents' marriage. Sharon felt unable to take care of herself and was angry that Bill had not met her dependency needs. She expected Jeff to alleviate her disappoint-

ments and loneliness. Bill did not have the capacity to understand and express emotion in the way Sharon expected. He was frustrated and hurt by her inability to accept his modes of expression or to perceive his needs. He sought Jeff's help in relieving his feelings of failure by urging him to take care of Sharon. Sharon and Bill selectively responded to Jeff's needs and feelings, depending on the severity of their own conflicts. Jeff took the role of a good, compliant child, suppressing those parts of himself which did not meet with a positive response. He deeply resented the process by which Bill and Sharon failed to develop a mutually satisfying relationship that would enable them to accept his position as the child, rather than as his mother's caretaker. The development of Jeff's security, self-confidence, and ability to respect his own feelings and needs was impeded by the triangulation process. He doubted his self-worth, became intensely self-critical, and was fearful of expressing his feelings. He experienced a deep sense of loss and wished desperately for what he considered a normal family.

### **The Treatment**

As treatment began, the hypothesis was made that if Jeff were to experience the roles of his parents and of various parts of himself through psychodrama, he would develop a deeper level of individuation and be able to modify his sociometric position in the triangle. Individual psychotherapy utilizing psychodrama *à deux* was the treatment offered. Sixteen sessions focusing on family relationships were conducted. It was expected that the techniques of doubling, role playing, and role reversal would provide particularly therapeutic effects. Doubling would convey understanding and acceptance of Jeff's feelings and help him expand his self-expression. Role playing and role reversal would provide opportunities for expression of anger, hurt, loss, and love. Psychodramatic encounter with Sharon and Bill would provide the opportunity for clarification of each role and for evaluation of those aspects of his parents' personalities that Jeff had incorporated into his role repertoire.

Five of the sixteen sessions will be chronologically described here to illustrate the process of doubling, role playing and role reversal in Jeff's developing individuation. The therapist usually took the roles of director and double and occasionally played an auxiliary role. Jeff played all roles, utilizing chairs, space, and movement as needed in each session. He demonstrated a substantial level of trust in the therapist, who was perceived in the transference as a nurturing mother. The choice of auxiliary roles played by the therapist was made with the intention to

maintain the positive transference, which was expected to be a corrective emotional experience.

*Session Three:* The focus of this session was the difference between Jeff's self-presentation and his inner feelings. In the warm up discussion, Jeff expressed the weakness and self-hatred he feels when he does not express himself in his family. The scene he chose was a large family party. He first entered the scene in the role of his usual self-presentation. He was polite, quiet, smiled constantly, and was careful not to offend anyone. He took the roles of several family members and then reentered the scene to express his inner feelings. He told his mother that he was angry that she compared his accomplishments with those of his cousins. He stated angrily, "I'm not here to perform for you!" The concluding scene was an encounter between the two aspects of himself which Jeff had enacted at the party. First, he expressed his hatred of his performing role and the weakness he feels in hiding his expressive role. He then expressed the safety and security of his performing role and the pride he feels in using his strength to "keep it all in."

In the sharing, Jeff related the importance of two experiences. First, in reversing roles with his mother, he discovered the depth of her pleasure in his achievements. Second, he discovered the positive elements of safety and security in his performing role.

*Session Four:* In the warm-up discussion, Jeff described his fears of Sharon's anger about his desire to move out of the house and live at college. The scene was a discussion between Sharon and Jeff at the breakfast table. Bill was not present. Jeff, in the role of Sharon, stated "None of you really love me. You all leave me. I don't want you going." Sharon cried, pulled her hair, and rocked back and forth. Jeff's first response, in his caretaking role, was to reassure Sharon of his love. She continued with the same response, not accepting his reassurance. Jeff was then directed to double for himself and began to express his anger. He was given a scarf to twist and wring, as he shouted, "I could hit you 'til you shut up. Stop it! I can't be angry with you; you're just a nut." He threw away the scarf and went to another scene, his bedroom. He sat hunched over, crying, "I can't talk to her. I'm just like her." He stopped himself from crying and moved to another chair, stating, "I've collapsed. I have to recover." In the concluding scene, Jeff told his mother, "I'm really angry with you and I am leaving. I need to be a little disconnected from you, so I don't get so hurt and frustrated when you have your moods." Using gestures, he tenderly gathered up his collapsed self, comforted his crying self, and hugged them to his body.

In this session, Jeff's role reversal with his mother allowed him to ex-

perience her loneliness and his anger at her inability to give him what she herself lacked. Through enactment of several parts of himself, Jeff experienced the ability to nurture himself.

*Session Nine:* In this session, Jeff initiated discussion about his relationship with his father. He reversed roles with his father and experienced loneliness, depression, and powerlessness. He expressed his resentment that his father expected him to take care of his mother. He tearfully told him, "I wanted you to back me up, to stand up for yourself and for me. You're so weak. Where were you?" He expressed his need for closeness with his father. Jeff then played the role of the strong and supportive father for whom he longed. This father expressed confidence that Jeff could take care of himself. He assured Jeff that his feelings and needs were important and told him that he could stand up to his mother.

Through role reversal with his father, Jeff identified and experienced the differences between his own feelings and those of his father. He allowed himself to grieve for his disappointments. In the role of his fantasy father, Jeff experienced the security and power necessary to assert himself and received the support he needed.

*Session Fourteen:* Jeff reported that his plans for living at college had fallen through for financial reasons. He felt stuck and scared at home, but also safe and secure in familiar surroundings. He warmed up to a scene in which he had been watching home movies with his parents and his girlfriend. He first enacted a scene from the movie in which he is a toddler playing with his brother, Dan, and their dog. His mother appeared briefly, "looking like something out of a horror movie, bitter, scary." He expressed his fear of her anger. He then returned to his current age and addressed his mother on the screen, stating, "It hurts me you're such a nut. How come I had to have a nut, an angry, bitter nut for a mother?" He then told his father he was more of a husband than a father. He expressed his anger about his father's preoccupation with his mother and his understanding of his father's fears, after seeing Sharon's severely depressed appearance on the screen. Jeff's concluding action was to rearrange the movie scene. He pictured his mother playing with the children and the dog, while his father stood nearby "watching proudly and with pleasure."

In the sharing, Jeff revealed that his role reversals led him to a clearer understanding of his parents' limitations. In his final action, he created a picture of the nurturing, involved parents that he wanted. The incorporation of this image was an essential component in Jeff's developing ability to give to himself the caring he had not adequately experienced in his family.

*Session Fifteen:* Jeff's warm up focused on his decision to request that his parents come to therapy with him. He wanted to be able to "cry and be weak" with his father and to express his anger to his mother. Jeff described himself as "in the middle," between his parents. In action, he hovered near his parents, closer to his mother, but not physically between them. Sharon told Jeff that he is her "miracle" and her "savior," born to take care of her and make her happy. Jeff left the scene, overwhelmed, crying, "I can't do it." He looked back and imagined himself being held by Sharon and comforting her. He returned to the scene, pulled both Sharon's and his own imaginary arms apart, and forcefully grabbed himself away. The final scene was a role confrontation between the two parts of the self involved in the preceding action. In one role, Jeff expressed the desire to be home and to stay in his mother's arms. In the other role, he expressed his feeling of being trapped by his mother's expectations and his father's passivity. He expressed acceptance and tenderness toward the frightened part of himself and admiration for the strength and courage of the part that "rescued" him. "You're like a big brother to me," he said.

In this session, Jeff experienced the conflict between his desire to be close to his mother and his need to separate and take care of himself. His interactions with roles within himself demonstrated the growth of an ability to satisfy his own needs.

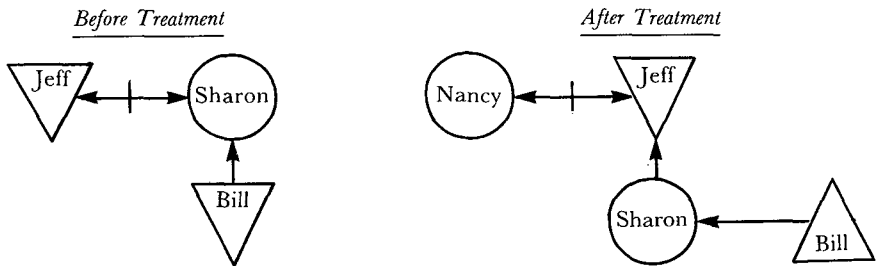
## Discussion

The process of separation and individuation begins in infancy and is experienced throughout the life cycle. As individuation becomes clearer, a sense of inner wholeness emerges. Disturbances in the process of individuation reflect limitations in the development of spontaneity and of adequate role repertoires. In the case presented here, Jeff's role repertoire was predominantly compliant, approval-seeking, and need-suppressing. The development of a broader role repertoire had been inhibited by the dynamics of his family relationships. Both Sharon and Bill had selectively responded to those needs and feelings of Jeff's that corresponded to their own and were not able to reverse roles adequately with each other or with him. As Jeff experienced his parents' limitations, he developed doubts about his self-worth and became fearful of revealing himself to his parents and to his girlfriend.

As Jeff encountered himself and his parents through psychodrama, he began the process of giving himself the acceptance and validation he had not experienced with his family. Doubling, role playing, and role reversal fostered the expression of his anger, grief, and self-hatred.

Doubling conveyed acceptance of his feelings and validation of his internal reality. Role playing and role reversal allowed him to differentiate his feelings and needs from those of his parents. Jeff then developed two roles that are essential to the process of separation and individuation. These were his self-nurturing role and his assertive, feeling-expressive role. One role states, "I can give myself what I need." The other states, "I can share my feelings and ask for what I want." Jeff's experience of these two roles led to greater assertiveness and self-disclosure and to a change in his socio-metric position. On the criterion of closeness, Jeff's position shifted from a reciprocal pair with his mother to a reciprocal pair with his girlfriend (see diagram).

Sociometric Configuration



The change was experienced by Sharon and Bill as a loss and they were challenged to reevaluate Jeff's role in meeting their emotional needs. Jeff became more accepting of his father, demonstrated a greater ability to distance himself from his mother's anger and dependency, and established a deeper level of communication with his girlfriend. Jeff's separation from his parents and greater ability to involve himself in an intimate peer relationship developed as his self-nurturing and self-expressive roles emerged.

The use of psychodrama in individual psychotherapy brings the client's life experience directly into the therapeutic encounter. The powerful impact of the method calls upon the therapist's spontaneity, creativity, and clinical judgment in exciting and challenging ways (Stein & Callahan, 1982). It is important to adapt the use of psychodrama to the strengths and needs of the individual patient. Jeff's ego strengths were evident in his reality-testing, social skills, ability to integrate abstract concepts, and in his ability to trust the therapist. When lesser degrees of ego strength are observed, the psychodrama

method must be simplified. While the treatment goal of developing the self-caring and self-expressive roles may be the same, the warm up processes evolve more slowly and action is shorter. More doubling is necessary and fewer auxiliary roles can be introduced in one session. The therapist may need to help the patient interpret and integrate the drama.

Psychodrama recreates the process of life experience and is therefore uniquely formulated to enhance the development of individuation. In the case presented here, individuation was impeded by the dynamics of a family where role reversal was inadequately conducted and experienced. Through the process of doubling, role playing, and role reversal, Jeff changed his self-concept and improved his ability to create satisfying relationships. He began to develop the ability to give to himself that which he had not adequately received or experienced within his family. The author has experienced and observed this ability to be necessary to the accomplishment of the sense of wholeness that emerges as separation and individuation progress.

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