

THE JUDGMENT TECHNIQUE IN PSYCHODRAMA

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Employing specific, structured techniques in psychodrama would seem overly restricting since the director can normally operate better on the basis of general principles, trusting the group process and his own spontaneity to evolve scenes which each individual situation requires. Still, the "behind-the-back,"¹ the "magic shop,"² the "empty chair"³ and such bag of technical tricks, if not used in a wooden or mechanical way, are often helpful. They are especially useful with patients who become more inhibited rather than freer when they are required to structure their own scenes. If nothing else, these techniques increase the director's confidence by giving him something to fall back on when his own spontaneity lags. Even psychodrama directors do not have infinite tolerance for ambiguity. With this apology I should like to describe a particular scene which I have found provocative in a large number of groups.

The sense of being judged is often mentioned as an inhibiting feeling even when no actual punishment is expected. For this reason, one of the essential characteristics of nearly all forms of psychotherapy is that they be "non-judgmental." Many patients continue to see themselves in a defendant-judge relationship even when the therapist has been consistently non-evaluative. He remains alert for fantasied signs of acquittal or conviction from the therapist. Rather than rely on the therapist's acceptance alone to overcome the patient's apprehensions, the protagonist in psychodrama is encouraged to explore the judgment situation by role reversal. This can be done by placing him in the role of the judgmental figures in his life or by the use of partially hypothetical situations such as courtroom scenes.⁴ The example here is from the powerful symbolism of religion—the tribunal of divine judgment. Most protagonists tend to be diffident at

¹ Introduced by J. L. Moreno as a mirror technique; described by R. J. Corsini, *Group Psychotherapy*, Vol. 6, 1953.

² See J. L. Moreno, *Psychodrama*, Vol. I, Third Edition, p. X-XI; also Z. T. Moreno, "A Survey of Psychodramatic Techniques," *Group Psychotherapy*, Vol. 12, 1959, p. 13014.

³ Rosemary Lippitt, "The Auxiliary Chair," *Group Psychotherapy*, Vol. 11, 1958. J. L. Moreno, *Psychodrama*, Vol. I, First Edition, 1946, p. 3; Third Edition, p. 3.

⁴ Moreno, "Psychodrama and the Psychopathology of Interpersonal Relations," *Sociometry*, Vol. I, 1937, p. 45-46. "Psychodrama of an Adolescent," *Sociatry*, Vol. II, 1948, p. 7.

first about role reversal with God and they are therefore permitted to remain nominally in their own role but to act as a sort of advisor to Him in deciding the destiny of the people in his life who make application for entrance to heaven.

The timing of the scene is important since it usually requires considerable warm-up and much knowledge of the protagonist's immediate emotional status. For this reason, it is best used late in the session, often as a climatic scene. Considerable discussion time should be left after such a scene since it frequently mobilizes guilty and depressive emotions which must then be resolved with the help of the group. As will be seen, this scene is especially applicable with protagonists who are suppressing emotion, especially hostility, which the director feels is ready to be exposed on the psychodrama stage.

The scene may begin as follows: An auxiliary ego is selected to take the role of God. "God" then takes the protagonist to the back of the stage or on to the balcony. He explains to the protagonist that, unfortunately, he has died but that, happily, he has been living in heaven where he will spend eternity. He then explains that the person against whom the latent hostility is directed has just recently died and is now at the door of heaven applying for admission. "God" explains further that he has not yet decided the fate of the applicant but he makes the alternatives clear: heaven, which may be described in terms which the auxiliary feels would be most favorable in the protagonist's values, or hell, which may be described briefly as being filled with the horrors of physical torture, etc. "God" may then ask the protagonist for his advice as to where the applicant should be sent. Even when the protagonist feels conscious hostility to the applicant, he nearly always advises "God" to have the applicant admitted to heaven. Occasionally, the protagonist will hesitate about advising that the applicant should be admitted because he does not want to share his company for eternity. This fear may be explored itself or it may be alleviated simply by telling the protagonist that in the expanse of heaven privacy is available to everyone and that the two of them may live their own versions of paradise without ever seeing each other.

Another auxiliary ego in the form of a soul-hungry Satan waits eagerly on the side of the stage while the auxiliary taking the role of the applicant approaches the bar of justice. "God" now explains that only one impediment stands in the way of allowing the applicant into heaven—he has not repented his sins. He may have stubbornly insisted that he lived a life of perfection or he may have pretended repentance by some insincere confessions but he has shown no evidence of honest acknowledgments of his

misdeeds. "God," however, is still willing to be convinced. He agrees to permit the protagonist a given period of time to bring the applicant to repentance and win his admission. The period of time is set at 5 or 10 minutes to give a note of urgency to the protagonist's task but the time limit need not be adhered to if the scene becomes productive. While the protagonist may have been reticent about taking the applicant to task for his faults in a realistic scene, in this situation his guilt feelings become even stronger if he *fails* to confront the applicant effectively with his complaint since he would thus condemn him to damnation.

The protagonist now tries, in one way or another, to convince the applicant that he has been selfish, cruel, neglectful, etc. Whatever he is accused of, the applicant denies and demands proof. He asks when he has ever done such acts and forces the protagonist to leave the level of generality and recount specific instances. The applicant then minimizes and rationalizes these incidents, insisting that they were not really sins at all. The protagonist is thus not only encouraged to recall these significant events but to allow himself to appreciate the full emotional significance of them in his attempts to influence the applicant. If the protagonist wavers in his rhetoric, satan moves closer and pulls on the applicant's arm. The stage which has been in a soft blue light flashes red. From the events which the protagonist uses to confront the applicant, later scenes can be developed.

After the maximum catharsis has been achieved, the applicant breaks down and confesses to the accusations. He may ask for the protagonist personal forgiveness. Granting this, usually helps relieve the protagonist of some of the residual guilt which his outburst may have caused. The applicant is always admitted to heaven in the end.

According to the time available, as many of the significant individuals in the protagonist's life as possible apply for admission to heaven. One by one, his parents, his wife, his boss, his children, etc., place themselves under his scrutiny. "God's" final judgment may be delayed until the end and given *en masse*. Just before the judgment, the protagonist may stand above and behind a semi-circle of the people in his life and in a sentence or two summarize to each of them in order how, in his view, they have fallen short. In another variation, despite the seeming illogic of it, just when the protagonist has finished with the last applicant and is fully warmed up to his role of the incisive critic, he is told that he himself has "died again" and is applying for admission under the same conditions. Most protagonists have no difficulty in this separation of the ego and are often able to be quite constructively self-critical.

The subsequent discussion may follow many directions but is usually

best heavily weighted with emphatic testimonials from other group members who have had similar emotions. Analytic interpretation by the therapist or by the group members is discouraged until the initial residue of guilt feelings has been dealt with.

The director must make a judgment about the protagonist's readiness to face the material which the technique may expose. The technique is contraindicated when the potential material would be too threatening for the protagonist to integrate. He will either resist totally or will feel increased guilt and anxiety after the session. A second contraindication is the case of individuals with overt paranoid attitudes. Instead of exposing new material, these patients simply use this opportunity to further reinforce their blaming defenses. When the situation inadvertently arises, it can often be turned to advantage by reversing the roles of the protagonist and applicant.

In actual practice, of course, the scene cannot and should not follow this rigid format. One sullen young man, for example, detested his mother so intensely that, when asked where she should be sent, he coldly consigned her to hell. The director then asked him to prove his case to God by extracting a confession from his mother so that he would have a basis for condemning her. The same kind of scene followed, during which the protagonist had an opportunity to examine the nature of his long cherished hostility to his mother. After the cathartic effect of the session, he relented on his decision to damn her and, having worked off his anger verbally for the moment, he lost his sullen look and with a smile decided that he might forgive her as long as he would not have to live with her. Another protagonist insisted that the middle ground of purgatory was the only appropriate place for his sister.

The reaction of religious protagonists to this scene has been interesting. Many of them, especially religious psychotics, who do not easily distinguish reality from the psychodrama fantasy, are deeply offended at the whole idea of such a blasphemous enactment. They may refuse to participate. It rarely helps to interpret this attitude since the religious defense is so strongly rooted in consensual validation. It is best to allow such individuals to remain in the role of observers. Healthier religious people are often excellent protagonists with this technique since the religious content of the scene has deep emotional associations for them. One clergyman learned much about himself from his behavior while indulging himself freely in the ultimate grandiosity of the God-role.