

# A THEOLOGY FOR PSYCHODRAMA<sup>1</sup>

In Memory of Jacob L. Moreno, M.D.,  
Founder of Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama

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In the imaginative spirit of psychodrama let us attend on Sunday afternoon a session in the Theatre of Reconciliation, of the Wesley United Methodist Church in downtown Minneapolis.

A group of people are sitting in the theatre facing a stage that is built on three levels: the lower level runs entirely around the action level and above and in back of these two levels is a third section reached by three steps. All this is lighted by colored lights controlled by a rheostat to set the mood of a particular scene.

The director begins the session by talking with the audience to get them "warmed up" to a subject or theme of common interest to them. When they are sufficiently involved to produce a protagonist, the drama is ready to begin.

The protagonist or star is invited on stage to talk with the director about whatever in his life he feels he would like to deal with. To further warm him up to this situation he is asked to choose a scene that will illustrate his problem and then arrange some simple props—chairs and a table—to represent the actual setting in which the action takes place. All action is in the here and now. If the scene to be enacted took place when the protagonist was five years old—he is now five. The drama begins.

When the director senses that it is time to end the action, the third part of the psychodrama—sharing—enables everyone present to share any feelings the psychodrama has aroused in them. When they are able to tell the protagonist how they felt in a situation similar to the one he has just enacted, it is a catharsis for them and support for the protagonist. It is encouraging to know he is not alone in his feelings. The session closes on this note of warmth and supportiveness.

Why call it a Theatre of Reconciliation?

The "Theology for Psychodrama" is based on the Doctrine of Reconciliation. It is a Theology of Relationship.<sup>2</sup>

The director's basic theological views, whether consciously or unconsciously held, are inseparably bound up with the way he structures the development of the psychodrama. Our concept of God, even if it is one which says there is no God, has a bearing on everything we do or say.

Our psychodramatic work with people invariably gains flavor and quality

from our concept of man. This concept, along with our belief in the purpose of this world and individuals in it, cannot be separated from the idea of a creator or prime mover. What we mean by "salvation" (whether used psychologically or religiously) determines how we work to bring the resources of our being into the lives of people in helping them overcome their sense of frustration and failure.

A "Theology of Relationship" assumes the dynamic quality of life as a process of achieving identity that sustains and moves life toward its fulfillment, that is, not a static state of mind or fixed and final states of being. It is intended to aid man with his daily living and the process he chooses to attain his goal.

A Theology of Relationship is built on the premise that what man does is important to himself, to his fellow men, and to his God. It involves an endowment, which is the potential, as well as an achievement, which is the actual. There is an element of being and, at the same time, becoming. It is a challenge to a man's nature to accept the inheritance and fulfill the true dimensions of his nature.

We have all been computerized. There are certain givens over which we had no jurisdiction. We did not choose our parents, the time and place of our birth, nor our sex, etc. But we do have the freedom to do with these givens pretty much as we choose in finding our place in life. Therefore, the Theology of Relationship is not remote. It is engaged in the day to day struggle to find meaning and purpose. It is, as Viktor Frankl has pointed out, *our* meaning, not someone's else. This meaning gives us "power to become."

The Doctrine of Reconciliation is concerned with right relationship with the self, since the attitude a man has toward himself becomes a source of his action. We confuse issues if we consider action apart from attitude.

Most of the turmoil and confusion of life occur when the multiple emotions of life develop without any hierarchy of values. When one feeling is considered to be as good as another, the inner conflicts of feelings pull us apart. When the emotions of life are organized around a purpose large enough to demand that each emotion take its proper relationship to the others, a well ordered, healthful integration of being develops.

Psychodrama is intended to help troubled and confused persons to re-order the emotions of life, so that the potential for love can become the actual of love. It is hoped that each psychodrama will help the protagonist deal with his frustrations and futility in such a way that he will gain insight that will lead his life in a more positive direction.

This Theology for Psychodrama holds that one has to achieve an inner mastery that will give a person power over the things of life rather than letting them have power over him. When one resolves the "conflicts of values," which is the basis of neurosis, it brings the inner self into healthy

cooperation with what the protagonist considers to be the best for *him*. Right relationship within the self is the essential for all other relationships. The ability of a person to value himself, even to love himself, is basic to self-fulfillment. This kind of high self-regard increasingly makes one a responsible person.

What is true for the individual is also true for the structure of relationship we call group life, that is, spouse, children, family, work (employment), neighborhood, community, state, nation, and the world. No one can live apart from others, but no one can enjoy the relationships with others unless he has a healthy attitude toward himself and them. So, the Doctrine of Reconciliation must eventuate in forgiving and forgetting (acceptance) which is necessary for this second phase. Meaning disappears and life is threatened when the structures of meaningful relationships are broken. It makes no difference whether the relationships are broken by chance, carelessness, or design, the end result is the same.

Accidental separation from the social structure which gives meaning to life may be the result of unemployment, illness, physical accident, death—whatever it may be that has broken the human relations. When this happens, the community (in the case of a psychodrama, the group or the audience attending the psychodrama) works to overcome the alienation.

The sustaining relationships may be broken by carelessness. The person did not intend that it happen. He simply became preoccupied and lost sight of the interpersonal relationship factors that are so important for health and a sense of belonging. When it was too late, he realized that he was "lost." *Lost* is a theological word, meaning to be displaced or to have taken the wrong turn. Such a person can, through psychodrama, be restored to the community. Only then, will he be safe from those dangers that may destroy life without such reconciliation. The concerned community (and this is what the ideal church should be) does not really care whether it is by accident or by carelessness, that separation takes place. It is only interested in restoring the essential relationship so that life can function as it was intended.

Here, the Doctrine of Freedom of the Will is manifested. Man has the capacity for free choice. We may choose the creative or the destructive life. We may follow the way of resentment, anger, revenge and self-pity. We may do as many do, run away from responsibility, squander our God-given capacities, violate the law, and bring suffering to ourselves and those who love us. We have the choice of being faithful or unfaithful, temperate or intemperate, responsible or irresponsible. We only can be responsible for ourselves—what we say and do.

The person who merely wants to be let alone so that he can "do his own thing" of course, is not amenable to the therapeutic values of psychodrama.

If one gets separated from meaningful relationships he must "come to himself" if there is to be reconciliation. This is not a religious experience, it is

a very human common sense desire to re-establish himself to the framework of persons and values that he had turned his back on.

In psychodrama the emphasis is on restoration to the relatedness that gives meaning to life. This leads to the third level of relationship—the bond of communication between creature and creator.

R. R. Neibuhr explains man's predicament as "anxiety." Harry Stack Sullivan, the eminent psychiatrist, said the same thing. Soren Kirkegaard was the first "Psychological Theologian." To him, mankind has a feeling of alienation—despair. Humanistically we call it loneliness. This basic feeling of "sickness unto death"—lostness, he thought, is a universal. The same thing holds true for the feelings of guilt that is the predicament of the human race.

For the past two generations our verbally sophisticated culture has found increasing numbers of journalists, scholars, and philosophers translating our previously used religious, biblical, and theological terminology into a secular vocabulary.

There is nothing wrong with this! In fact, it may have a very salutary effect upon the thinking of the public. Through this kind of up-dating of our vocabulary, we no longer speak about "prevenient grace," but about the experience of being forgiven and accepted. More and more persons are coming to believe that we humans are a unity—holistic; that man's predicament, which in the past was always referred to as "sin," means alienation: that is, we are not in touch with ourselves and our feelings. Psychodrama is an effective tool to interrupt this behavior so the protagonist can no longer unconsciously engage in this particular "sin."

We are moving from a mechanistic psychology to a belief that we are not pushed from the rear but we are lured forward. We are not the victims of our emotions, but rather we use our emotions to get what we want. As we become increasingly aware of a holistic view of man, we think in terms of wholeness, which, theologically, has its roots in holiness. Sins are no longer considered "acts" but "attitudes."

What has been happening on the academic frontiers since the turn of the century is incalculable. For instance, we are realizing that when one becomes aware of his feelings of isolation it is at that point he recognizes his humanness. This means we can accept our feelings of alienation, despair and loneliness as being basic to all men. We are, therefore, not peculiar.

Psychodrama offers a very practical way to help persons with their feelings of separation and confusion. In becoming aware of self and learning to relate with others and with their creator a new equilibrium comes into their lives.

We are finding through the use of the psychodramatic method that when a person really becomes accepting of "what" they are—then the despair and depression diminish because they know "who" they are. I am convinced that the *only* way we can be healed (made whole—holy) is acceptance!

We are intensely individualistic and so each of us has his own kind of anxiety and despair. The third force psychologists call it the existential vacuum.

One Systematic Theology professor has said that people today feel like orphans because the "greats" in their lives are dead. Psychodrama is equipped to cope with this by making it possible for a person to complete unfinished childhood business with these "greats"—significant others, as mother, father, etc. This gives the protagonist a new sense of his own power to be self-determining.

Someone has pointed out that the normal human attitude is one of anticipation. This can be positive unless it becomes a "passive waiting for Santa Claus." A most devastating condition of our humanity is a feeling that we are underpowered! Another is the insult that our ego has to sustain in recognizing that we are finite and therefore, someday, must die.

For a religious person the main purpose of life is to know and do the will of God.

The strength of his life grows from his undivided loyalty to that will. "Acceptance" is man's ultimate religious experience.

Life brings its frustrations and suffering. One Viennese psychiatrist has said that our main concerns are with pain, guilt, and death. This may explain why we engage in destructive acts knowing full well that we must suffer the consequences. Men sometimes do what they know is wrong, injuring and destroying themselves as well as others. This behavior could be the result of their feeling of low self-worth.

Being and becoming can never be separated. We can, through psychodrama, develop the courage to be imperfect and to freely ask and receive without the neurotic fear that these will put us under obligation.

Privileges place restraints on life. We are aware of the impulses that are not easily tamed and at the same time we are most anxious to set our natures free to achieve life's richest meaning. Again, our existential situation makes us constantly aware that we are creatures of space, time, habits, impulses and *death*. If we are to succeed at all in our struggle for values, we must relate ourselves to something beyond ourselves that strengthens our spirits and becomes a perpetual source of guidance and strength. Only then can we begin to be the persons it is possible for us to be. That is a part of the Theology for Psychodrama.

This is where the director achieves his function as guide, teacher & counselor—a model. He is engaged in a way of life that communicates a way of life.

A Theology of Relationship is never remote and abstract. It is inevitably relevant. The necessity for making psychodrama relevant depends upon recognizing the relevance of theology for all of life.

In a psychodrama we are challenged by the claim of freedom and the obligation of mutual trust and respect.

Let us now deal with a subject that, until recently, has been taboo in our culture. Paul Tillich's theology puts an emphasis on ethics and morality, making it a "cultural theology" with Jesus as the teacher, in a moral sense, with a curriculum for doing the right things. Organized religion has done an excellent job in teaching a catechism of "do's and don'ts." But, a theology that makes sex sinful is ignoring the most powerful form of human communication. The problems and privileges of sex are rooted in relationships that can warp and destroy, or strengthen and fulfill.

One does not begin to understand the meaning of psychodrama until he sees it, not as an end, but as a means to an end. Within its frame of reference an individual can develop his own beatitudes (beautiful attitudes). Within it the group life can be cultivated so that in mutual concern people may practice the virtues of acceptance, understanding, and good will.

Here in the safety of an empathetic audience the injured person may be able to express the feelings he dare not express anywhere else. The Theatre of Reconciliation may become a microcosm of group living within which the processes of experimental living can be moved forward, and the discipline of practical brotherhood be realized. A psychodrama becomes a reconciling factor when it is the means of helping men and women understand and accept themselves and others as they grow in their awareness of their creator.

Time and time again I have heard people say in the warmup or on the actual psychodrama stage, "What can give my life meaning?" or "What is the matter with me?" or, "Why can't I find inner peace?" Here the theology of relationship has a special relevance. A skillful and dedicated psychodrama director can inevitably help the protagonist to see that his failures need not be conceived of primarily as a signal for cosmic retribution, but rather as an invitation to accept God's forgiving love which is the first step towards self-forgiveness.

Inevitably there are theological aspects of psychology just as there are psychological implications in any theological insights. But life can never get started, let alone, arrive, unless it achieves a meaning and a purpose for the processes in which it is participating. The supreme relationship is found at the point where life discovers its most abundant meaning. Theology in that light is not so much a study as it is a resource for self-actualization.

Then the traditional elements for the theological structure take on new meaning and relevance for the work of psychodrama. The place of man in his own sight, in the sight of his fellows, and in the plan of God, becomes the starting point in the adventure to finding life's fullest meaning.

## NOTES

1. This theology applies also to individual and group psychotherapy.
2. I am indebted to Edgar N. Jackson for the theological terminology which I have applied to Psychodrama.