



Surfing through the Wobbly Waters of the Theatre of Life

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Finding My Light through the Wobbly Waters of the Theatre of Life

Dear Reader,

From the rich journey of my psychodrama training – wherein each part of me, from head to toe, has been completely engaged and immersed over the last two and half years, I am writing this paper toward becoming a Psychodramatist. My paper is based on my experience of conducting a session for the Theatre of Life (ToL). The Theatre of Life is based on the Theatre of Spontaneity (ToS), which the Moreno Psychodrama Society has been running once a month for over ten years in Melbourne. It is an event open to the general public, where a presenter brings forward a topic relevant to our society, of interest to the presenter, or to events happening in our world.

I chose this to write about because it has been new and different and therefore the most unnerving and difficult part of my journey. It has made me realise that just like psychodrama, life is full of unpredictable twist and turns and I need to develop the ability to deal with each phase of life as it comes to me in every moment. I need to learn to let go of control and be okay about being wobbly at times. It is exactly from this wobble and uncertainty that I have spontaneously found my road ahead. I know today that I simply have to have faith and keep moving.

As to where I am today, I am happy to share that though I still don't feel as if I have mastered the art and skill of running a ToL with ease and flow however, I am much better than where I started from. I am stronger, more alive, aware. What I have done well and felt proud about is that the people who attended were positively touched in some way or the other. The ToLs helped them to reflect on either something to do with their lives or some social issues in a deeper way. Personally, I am now quite comfortable with the fumbling that still happens at times. Conducting ToLs has pushed me completely out of my comfort zone to develop loads of new roles (like the 'Dual Connector' or the 'Present to the Unnerved Me') that were either not in or minimally existing in my role repertoire. I am going to share with all of you, how I developed new roles through my experience of conducting ToLs. While a lot of my well-developed roles came in handy, occasionally, some of them, such as being a one to one therapist came in the way and others got developed anew!!

What follows now, is the description and illustration of some of these roles as they emerged in the Theatre of Life sessions in Ahmedabad, India in 2019-2020.

Aware that We are Always in Relationship Role (New)

I excitedly decided along with the Maanas team that we would be starting to do ToLs as a part of actively initiating some work under the MPS-India Chapter. The following discussions then were about, the frequency, the day of the month and the duration of ToLs. Up till then, the very well developed Scheduler Role in me was operating and I was completely at ease. Beyond this point, came the discussion of what topics we would do every month. I knew that all the trainees at this point did not feel ready to be presenters, so probably I would need to be the presenter for the first 6 months. The first realisation that came up strongly was "Oh My God,

ToL is not just about psychology but about Life in general”. I had mixed feelings. While on one end I was super excited but on the other end, I was extremely sceptical as the topics of ToL needed to be connected to many aspects of life. Right from current affairs, to social issues to culture to history to nature. I realised in that moment that because for 15 years, I was so involved only with the inner world of people, that though I have always been interested in everything that life is about, I had never conducted any workshop around these topics. This pushed me to change direction and instead of looking inside, I looked around me in search of topics.



Lover of the Diversity of Life Role (Eternal, Well Developed and Very Useful)

This brings me to the next role. As my direction changed and I started looking for topics from life around me, to my surprise I realised that there were a lot of topics from life that I liked and looked forward to conducting. I became aware that my entire body and eyes brightened with the fact that I was going to engage with people on varied topics. I realised in that moment that this role in me was eternal. I really felt that this role belonged to the soul I was born with. Just like the wisdom, the sufi, the teacher, the resilience, the lover of life's diversity was my inborn nature. This entire role cluster to me seems to have travelled with me through lifetimes. In writing this I have an image of myself traveling from village to village singing *kirtans* (devotional songs) and spreading the message of larger goodness through *kathaas* (stories and speeches) in some lifetime. I deeply believe that there are some aspects of us or some very strong roles in us that are a part of our souls. With my lover of the diversity of role completely alive in me, I excitedly got to making a list of the first 6 topics I would conduct. Roots - what gives all of us a sense of rootedness, what do our familial roots and geographical roots mean to us. The next one was Colours of India, the one after that was The Heroes of My Life and Culture, then Something around Parenting, The Navrasa (meaning the 9 juices/ 9 emotions of the Indian palette) and the Mahabharat (this is one of the biggest epics of India) – the way it plays out in our lives and in our country today.

Being Present to the Unnerved Me Role (New)

The next big and very difficult place for me to navigate was when I started designing the first ToL on Roots. In my designing of my first ToL I realised that this designing was different. My warming up to the ToL started from the 'Creative Thinker' in me. I saw myself thinking about the design elements of the ToL. How both the warm ups as well as the flow of the workshop needed to be more oriented towards sociodrama rather than individual intense psychodramas. The direction was not about taking people within but rather at the social level see, what rootedness meant in our and other cultures. It needed to be a design for people to see and experience the connectedness and diversity within the group that had gathered that evening. What I was naturally good at till then was directing people doing their own pieces of work and supervising others. But now I knew that I needed to develop something new. I needed a new role and different skills within me. In that moment with almost some amount of fear, I realised what I had gotten myself into. I knew that I was scared because I observed myself procrastinating sitting down to design this workshop. Do you identify with that dear reader. I have otherwise always found the phase of designing very exhilarating and exciting but here I was procrastinating. The change within me towards my fear was that, instead of being the earlier me who would immediately push myself to deal with any aspect of me that felt like a weakness, I was able to stay with the fear and sensation of being unnerved and therefore overcame the barrier. Gradually, as I felt calmer, I naturally got to designing the ToL.



Sitting on the Banks of My Self

The Faith-Filled Courageous Plunger Role (Old, Well Developed and Very Useful)

Once I got to applying myself and the design was put on paper, I was less tentative. The safety net still at the back of my mind was that ‘Sue being my supervisor, is always there to guide me’. It so happened that she suddenly fell ill in our week of supervision before this ToL. Again, I almost panicked. I saw the courageous plunger role coming up in me when I had to make a choice. I could either cancel the ToL because I had never designed one before, nor attended one before and had not gotten supervision for this one’s design. Or on the other hand, I could continue presenting it because we had committed to an audience outside, people had registered and I had committed myself to starting the Theatre of Life as a part of the MPS-India chapter. After weighing all the pros and cons, I decided to trust the method. In my heart, I took blessings from Sue Daniel, J.L. Moreno and Zerka Moreno and took the plunge. My well-developed role of the Brave Adventurer of the Unknown that was present in other areas of my life had found its way and integrated into the developing psychodramatist in me!!

The Comfortable with an Imperfect Job Role (New)

For the longest period, I have been a perfectionist and nothing less than excellence from my end has been acceptable to me. The positive side is that, due to this I have a strong and well developed, ‘Committed and Dedicated Perseverer’ role in me. The flip side is that I have had a very strong critical voice in me that hasn’t allowed me to take things easy. The change that I saw in myself was around how I took the first ToL. It was nowhere close to what I had wanted it to be. It wasn’t bad or completely useless but even though I did not want it, the direction of the audience did move towards people wanting to do their psychodrama pieces that were intense. When I gave the audience an option whether they wanted to move forward to explore where their geographical roots are or whether they want to look at what gives them rootedness as a person, most of the people in the sociometric line, chose the second option. I followed the direction of the group but as I kept on looking at the audience and especially the ones new to psychodrama, I could sense that they were disconnecting from pieces due to the intensity of the work. I could sense then that giving the audience a choice was an error and that I had lost the authority I needed to keep the group in sociodrama direction. As I saw them disconnecting, I felt a sense of disappointment within me, as if I had not done enough to keep everyone engaged. This was my first experience of the direction of the program being driven by a group completely converse to where I wanted to take it. I felt the evening going out of my control but respected the wish of the majority of the audience. In retrospect, if in the design itself, I would have kept only the geographical exploring of roots, probably the evening would have gone into a more sociodramatic direction. But then what was done was done and I wasn’t beating myself up. Looking at the possible goof ups that evening, I learnt that on another evening, I would keep the choice with me to keep committed to the course of a ToL or a workshop. What did go well was that, the participants who came up as protagonists and looked at what their familial rootedness meant to them, gained a lot from their work. Some people in the audience also connected and were moved as one protagonist was exploring whether familial rootedness meant support or meant being stuck and chained. The protagonist laid out 2 concretisations - one about her family of procreation where she felt supported and the other about her family of origin where she felt stuck and chained. I

asked her to role reverse and she did that with both concretisations. It helped her to say to her family of origin that she had moved on in life and did not want to be chained or pulled down by them anymore. I was glad that this protagonist, the auxiliaries and the audience did connect with themselves and took back something valuable. However, I was a little worried about the people completely new to psychodrama getting somewhat unsettled by the depth of their own connectedness.

Dual Connector Role (New)

An extremely important addition to my role repertoire as a psychodrama director has been the one of 'Dual Connector'. All the time before starting ToL, one of the major developmental hurdles for me while directing had been, maintaining an eye contact with the audience and remaining connected with them. Though I had been a group therapist for long as well as an individual therapist for long, till Psychodrama, both these processes were mutually exclusive. Either I was working one on one with an individual or I was working with a group. **(Old, Well Developed Individual and Group Therapist Roles were coming in the way)** Psychodrama threw me into situations, where, while I was working with one protagonist, I had to remain aware and take care of not only the protagonist but all the auxiliaries and the audience at the same time. My supervisor Sue said 'This was no mean feat'. I would quite easily be able to attend to the auxiliaries as they were in close physical proximity to me. But even though I wanted, I would always get so immersed in the drama that I would lose contact with my audience. Even being mindful about this did not change things for me. With my first ToL though, a completely new and welcome change came into me. There was a heightened awareness within me of the people in the audience who were completely new to psychodrama. This fact activated the protective side in me and in order to ensure that they were safe and comfortable at all points in time, I could experience myself periodically and consistently looking at my audience and maintaining eye contact with them. I am so thankful to ToL that in this one evening, it helped me to develop this role that I had been struggling with for quite a while.



Focusing with
Two Lenses
Now

The Learner from My Mistakes Role (Old, Well Developed and Very Useful)

This role has been present in me since very long. It has been a very healthy and useful role. I guess I have developed this role because of my mother. She never made a big fuss about our mistakes. Instead she helped us learn from them and move on quickly. Her permission to us to make mistakes has become a very internalised useful role within me. I observe myself extending it to all my students and colleagues. I am very okay and encouraging them to experiment even if they make mistakes because it tells me that they are risking movement and doing something of their own. I have personally been a quick learner from my mistakes. I rarely indulge in self-bashing if and when I do not do well in anything. I simply become objective and look at where all I can improve. After the first ToL also, I went over my designing and looked at how and why or what kind of warm up took people within rather than around. Based on this, I designed the nature of my warm ups for the next ToL. This ToL, Colours of India, has by far been the one that I am personally most satisfied with because I remained connected to the audience and their processes at all points. I could keep the dramas and engagements more social in nature and though people connected in pairs and small groups over many areas such as the colours they like; or the colours of their community, I could build up the evening to a sociodrama on what the different colours of India meant to the group.



The Depth and Time Estimator Role (Old yet New)

Encouraged by this, I developed the next ToL on the Heroes of My Life and My Culture. Here also, I was largely connected with my audiences and the processes between them. The evening remained sociodramatic in nature. While I was satisfied about the directionality of the evening, towards the end, I found that I had under-estimated how much time it would take for the audience to discuss what the Indian culture meant to them. Due to this, though

we could explore both what the word hero meant to each of them and who the heroes of their life were, quite well, we couldn't explore the heroes of our culture part of it that well. The discussion in groups of three or four, about what the Indian culture is and what it meant to them went on for longer than I had anticipated, therefore it ate away from the time needed for sharing the heroes from our culture. Again, I sensed that disappointment in me about not getting or doing something absolutely perfectly. I became aware of it because I observed myself letting out a big breath, my chest sinking down a little and my face getting into an inverted smile. The audience was very engrossed in discussing our culture, so no one saw me and I quickly recovered. I became aware of my fumble but I carried on with the workshop and closed the evening. I also became aware that this is a role that I have been struggling with for quite many years now but it is not yet resolved. In most of my workshops and teaching classes, I feel like and want to give or share a lot. **(The overdeveloped over-giver role in me comes in the way of accurate time estimation.)** Due to this, even during my classes and training workshops, I miss out some of the topics or feel that I wasn't able to do justice to a topic. I guess my need to give is always more than the time container. It is a role that I need to work on.

The Quick Spontaneous Creator Role (Dormant Role that got Reactivated)

However dear reader, let me share with you how I closed that evening. The audience had gotten very engaged discussing our culture and I knew I had only 5 minutes to wrap up. So, I asked everyone to make one final group sculpture of everything that our culture meant to them. This closing came to me spontaneously as I was thinking on my feet about creating a closing that was quick and yet didn't feel abrupt at that time. Everyone like small children, started running and exploring around the room to get things that represented our culture. They animatedly discussed with each other and quickly arranged themselves into one sculpture depicting about the culture of India. It was fun and quickly brought the whole evening into a close.



My Deep Learning from the Diverse Experiences of ToL

In conclusion, I want to share with you all, the deep learning I experienced in conducting the ToLs. I have developed a new perspective about living life. I have had a need up till now to have structure and predictability as it makes me feel that I have some control over life and that sense makes me feel safe. Now I have realised that if I allow myself to flow with life, just the way I am learning how to flow in my ToLs, I will develop more faith in my ability to spontaneously engage with life. I wouldn't need life to be either predictable or perfect for me to feel secure and grounded. Even through wavy or choppy or uncertain waters, I would be secure and grounded. My sense of security would not be based on the ground beneath my feet but rather in my own psychodramatic, mental and soul muscles that are agile enough to swiftly respond to change. This sense has begun to be embedded within me. My sense of safety is now slowly coming both from my belief in being a spontaneous actor and a wise voice within me that recognises that life is about change. I am glad that this role of the **Spontaneous Dancer through Life**, is growing stronger in my identity now. I am so much looking forward to the person I will evolve into, once this role is fully developed. I guess once that happens, the *Sufi* part of my soul would be actualised more fully!!!

Thank you all so much for the continued love and affection. A big, big thank you to Sue for always guiding me, teaching me, supervising me and coaching me both in learning psychodrama and in the art of living life. Most of all a big thank you to Sue for putting faith in that I could conduct ToLs. Her faith in me has always been a major propeller for me!!!

Always

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