THERAPEUTIC VEHICLES AND THE CONCEPT OF SURPLUS REALITY*

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PART ONE

I. THE VEHICLE

The significance of the "vehicle" in the development of the great religions is well known. It represents in an aesthetic and symbolic form the meaning of a particular religion, as the Catholic Church, the Synagogue of the Hebrews, the Mosque of the Mohammedans, the Byzantine Church of the Greek Orthodox, Buddhist Temples, etc. In the Catholic Church this meaning is conveyed in the sculptures and paintings of the saints and prophets, the altars, and the engraved scriptures, all of which in themselves tell the dramatic story of the Catholic faith. In other words, each vehicle represents the philosophy of that religion in a physical, tangible form. The worshipper is immediately involved and almost hypnotized by the atmosphere of the church as he enters it.

There have been thousands of religious theories and therapies in the course of time. Most have vanished and are forgotten. It appears that the few which have remained and survived have done so because they had a specific vehicle of expression which conveys the religious theory in such a way that it captures the imagination of people and gets them involved, especially the intuitive and naive participant.

In the psychotherapies vehicles are rare. There are two outstanding psychotherapeutic vehicles in practice today, the psychoanalytic couch and the theater of psychodrama. Vehicles give to psychotherapeutic processes a vivid anchorage. Just as religions without vehicles did not survive, psychotherapies without vehicles may vanish. In this context it may be of interest to compare psychotherapeutic vehicles with religious vehicles. The couch does not compare favorably with religious vehicles. It is an abstract bed; it leaves out life. It represents only the abstractions of life, but not life and love itself. It tries to convey life in an intellectual sense, but not as it is embodied in action. It leaves out many important aspects of a therapeutic conveyance, for exam-

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ple, the element of beauty, which was integrated into all the religious therapies. The Cathedral of St. Peter is not only a gathering place for the believers, but also a monument of beauty. In a similar sense, the therapeutic theater of psychodrama emphasizes love and beauty in all its forms, for example physical levels of action, colors and movement. Catharsis can take place through aesthetic participation ("aesthetic" catharsis) and be an important extension to actional and emotional catharsis.

The architecture of the theater of psychodrama is conceived in several dimensions, horizontal, breadth and length, vertical, height and depth. It is structured in many levels, each signifying a different niveau of life, unstructured, minimally structured and highly structured, each requiring a different degree of warm up; finally, the superstructure, a kind of balcony. There is no distinction between group and action portion, they flow into each other so as to convey the idea of total participation and all embracing love. This architectural concept influenced the development of the theater-in-the-round (1924). At least in principle, the architecture is so conceived that every form of physical and mental life should be portrayable. It permits or invites every form of consciousness and unconsciousness, all its most imaginative extensions to be acted out. The emphasis is on living and doing.

The theater of psychodrama has three types of participations: therapists (directors and auxiliary ego), actors or protagonists, and the group members. When there is no stage available, an empty space is used for the portrayal of action, the group facing it in circular arrangement. The "circle" is not a vehicle in itself but a part of the total setting.

II. Surplus Reality

Psychodrama consists not merely of the enactment of episodes, past, present and future, which are experienced and conceivable within the framework of reality,—a frequent misunderstanding. There is in psychodrama a mode of experience which goes beyond reality, which "provides the subject with a new and more extensive experience of reality, a *surplus reality*."[1]

I was influenced to coin the term "surplus reality" by Marx's concept of "surplus value." Surplus value is part of the earnings of the worker of which he is robbed by capitalistic employers. But surplus reality, is in contrast, not a loss but an enrichment of reality by the investments and extensive use of imagination. This expansion of experience is made possible in psychodrama by methods not used in life—auxiliary egos, auxiliary chair, double,

[1] See *Who Shall Survive?*, p. 85.

role reversal, mirror, magic shop, the high chair, the psychodramatic baby, soliloquy, rehearsal of life, and others. These methods[2] have been frequently described, but it may be of value here to point out their meaning in terms of surplus reality.

A. *Auxiliary Ego*

An *"auxiliary ego"* is usually defined as a person portraying an absentee, but in terms of surplus reality he can transcend boundaries of sex, age and death. In psychodrama, therefore, a man can play a woman, and vice versa. There is no sex in psychodrama. An old man can play a child, a child can be an old man. There is no age in psychodrama. A dead person can be brought back to life. There is no death in psychodrama. It is literally the return of magic into science. Hence, psychodrama brings the entire cosmos into play.

B. *Empty Chair*

An *"auxiliary or empty chair"* is usually defined as a chair portraying an absentee. However, the representation may not be a chair, it may be another object; but it must be an object which is somewhat related to the person or object for which it stands. For grandfather it may be an old comfortable armchair which he always uses; for an infant it may be a crib, in which he rests; for a minister it may be an empty pew in a church in which he is preaching; he addresses himself to the empty pew as if they were the people who should be in the pew; for a son coming home there may be several empty chairs around a table, each representing a member of the family, father and mother, sister and brother. It is, however, significant that a chair, or pew, or crib is imagined to be filled with a concrete person, with whom the protagonist communicates as vividly as if that person were really there. The involvement may be even greater because the actual person is not present to block or counter his spontaneity. In moments of high excitement the protagonist takes the part of the other, sits down on the chair and represents the other, speaking back for him; the same goes for the minister who assumes the part of every worshipper in the pew who should be there, or the mother takes the part of the baby in the crib whom she expects to be born or who has died.

[2] For more detailed description of numerous techniques, see J. L. Moreno, *Psychodrama, Volume I & II*; Chapter on Psychodrama in S. Arieti (Ed.), *Am. Handbook of Psychiatry*; Zerka T. Moreno, A Survey of Psychodramatic Techniques, *Group Psychotherapy*, Vol. XII, 1959; and Psychodramatic Rules, Techniques and Adjunctive Methods, *Group Psychotherapy*, Vol. XVIII, 1965.

The empty chair technique has often been used in political controversies, as for instance, in the recent Keating-Kennedy senatorial campaign. I was amused to see on television and on the front pages of the New York newspapers, with headlines like, "Never Before a Debate Like This," Senator Keating gesturing to an empty chair during his television appearance. The empty chair was there, but when Robert Kennedy tried to fill it, Senator Keating would not give him permission to do so. This is an untherapeutic, unloving, diabolic use of the empty chair. It may very well be that it had some psychological repercussions on Election Day and had harmed Keating's chances, since the dialogue was witnessed by millions of television onlookers.[3]

In this context, it is possible that a wife does not want to face her husband, not even as a symbol in an empty chair. It becomes then a very profound experience. A recent protagonist in psychodrama began to cry when faced with the empty chair of his dead father; he experiences his father as being present and continuing to censor him as he had done in life. This "psychodramatic extension of consciousness" by means of the empty chair is a rather frequent occurrence. The empty chair is particularly effective when a person has profound feelings of guilt and needs to work them out.

C. *Role Reversal*

"*Role reversal*" takes place when two individuals, intimately related, change parts and represent each other. The purpose is, of course, that each should experience not only on a mental level, but on an actual level, what happens to his partner. In terms of surplus reality, this technique has a wide variety of applications. The individual with whom the protagonist reverses roles may not be his father or wife, but an auxiliary ego, a symbolic representation.

A particularly interesting application of this technique was my suggestion, during my visit to Soviet Russia in 1959, that Premier Khrushchev should reverse roles with President Eisenhower when he meets him in Washington, D.C. for the first time.[4]

D. *High Chair*

A rarely described technique is the "high chair," an extension of the empty chair. The protagonist who is in a position of inferiority, often confronted by a hostile world, gets up on a chair, towering over all members of

[3] *The Evening News,* Beacon and Newburgh, October 31, 1964.

[4] Moreno, J. L., "Encounter in Soviet Russia," *Prevention* Magazine, Sept. 15, 1965.

the group, and talks down to them from his lofty height, or to the person in his life who he perceives as his antagonist.

The protagonist's place high up on a chair symbolizes for him a sort of superiority which he does not have in life. He may confront his boss or his father, but he is now bigger than his father, richer or more powerful than his boss.

E. *Rehearsal for the Future*

Whereas the above techniques have a great deal to do with the development of sensitivity, or, as we usually call it, telic sensitivity, there are numerous techniques whose aim is the training of behavior, especially the rehearsal of future behavior or "rehearsal for life." We are often training individuals for situations which are expected in the near future,—employment, an encounter with a prospective marriage partner, or training for situations which may never take place—training for general or symbolic sensitivity for future events.

In the prospect of encountering situations of great personal or social importance, such rehearsals for life are very helpful. I remember a young woman who was engaged to be married, but when she rehearsed her matrimonial situation several years hence with her fiance, she changed her mind and broke her engagement.

F. *Psychodrama in Politics*

An amusing report in *The New York Times*[5] describes how President Lyndon Johnson used psychodramatic rehearsal for the future. It was reported that he used role playing and psychodramatic methods to prepare himself for an important political meeting.

> "On Thursday and Friday, Harold Wilson, chubby, pipe-puffing and formidably articulate, called at the White House. Mr. Johnson prepared for the encounter by having the American Ambassador to Britain, David Bruce, play Mr. Wilson's part for two hours so he could get a better feel for the problems that would arise."

The President's motive was to get a better feel for a situation ahead and to get the most out of it in the shortest time. It would be interesting to find out whether he found that the rehearsal helped him to fulfill these goals.

Another rehearsal for the future in the political sphere was reported in Jack O'Brien's column in the *Journal American,* entitled "Abe the Giant

[5] *The New York Times,* Sunday, December 19, 1965, Section 4, p. 2E, "The News of the Week in Review."

Killer."[6] It seems that the political battle preceding the installation of John Lindsay as mayor on January 1, 1966 has had a number of interesting psychodramatic episodes. The two men confronting each other, Abe Beame and John Lindsay, were as different in background and personality as are rarely found. Beame, 5′ tall, versus Lindsay, 6′4″; an immigrant Jew from the East Side versus a highly polished Yale graduate, would have made a dramatic scene anywhere, even in vaudeville. Jack O'Brien reported how the two camps were preparing for the final showdown. Beame had agreed to have a debate on Channel 11, Saturday night, October 30, and to the great surprise of the millions of onlookers, encountered Lindsay better than ever before. As Jack O'Brien says, "he finally was Abe the giant killer. He didn't let Lindsay get away with one political smear, and smear is the word for what this outwardly waspish, clean American boy has been trying to do to the spunky Beame. Whichever candidate wins tomorrow's election, one will have to live with his conscience."

Lindsay was surprised at the masterful performance of Beame. As O'Brien describes:

> "Lindsay probably had no way of knowing how intensely Abe Beame had prepared for that one big Channel 11 debate. No less an in-fighter than Bobby Kennedy had rehearsed Abe Beame all Saturday afternoon in the Waldorf Towers. *Sen. Kennedy played the part of Lindsay and fired every possible dirty question at Beame in rehearsal.* The exhaustive briefing apparently was the perfect preparation. It gave Abe Beame the poise and purpose his predicament needed against a youthful opponent who looked more like the star of a TV Western than a politician whose litany of accusations were coldly, cynically geared to tearing down Beame's political character and reputation."

Conclusion

These are only a few illustrations. The dimensions of the cosmos which the concept of surplus reality has taken in the course of Man's habitat on this planet are enormous. One can describe the entire cultural evolution of Man in terms of surplus reality, the religions, the arts and crafts, the philosophies. Like the astronaut who moves into physical space, the "psychonaut" moves into all dimensions of the cosmos.

[6] *New York Journal American*, Monday, November 1, 1965, Jack O'Brien's column, "On the Air."