

## REDEMPTIVE ENCOUNTER: ITS USE IN PSYCHODRAMA, ANCESTRAL SOCIODRAMA AND COMMUNITY BUILDING\*

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Psychotherapy is based on the concept that the significant encounter is the essence of the healing process.<sup>1</sup> Moreno has defined the encounter as:

A meeting of two: eye to eye, face to face.  
And when you are near I will tear your eyes out  
and place them instead of mine,  
and you will tear my eyes out  
and will place them instead of yours,  
then I will look at you with your eyes  
and you will look at me with mine.<sup>2</sup>

There are many overtones to the way the word encounter, is understood. Basically it is a meeting of two, with an opportunity to reverse roles. But the two people can only look at each other with the other's eyes when the relationship is basically equal, that is, both have the same amount of aliveness. There are obvious problems in encountering God, nature, and animals, in the sense described by Moreno, but also problems with people. What if one person goes through life feeling more dead than alive? What happens to the encounter then?

The encounter also needs a place where the two can meet. The place must provide enough time and stability to let this process happen. At this moment in history we are very much aware of the threat to the continuation of life itself, both from all environmental hazards and the ever-present danger of nuclear war.

While the responsibility for a therapeutic encounter is encouraged and understood to be between the two people who are meeting, the responsibility for the continuity of the *place* of the meeting is clearly in the hands of the therapists. It is a little like old-fashioned wars. One could keep on fighting and killing because it is God that keeps the world going. Mankind is not powerful enough to destroy life. But does this approach prepare people for life today?

Responsibility for the continuation of the universe needs to be part of the

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*process of the encounter. The knowledge that one has the responsibility of keeping life going influences and changes the interaction of the encounter. Two people will fight differently in a rowboat than on land.*

If 'a truly therapeutic procedure cannot have less an objective than the whole of mankind<sup>3</sup>, then therapeutic processes cannot be divided from social aims. What goes on as a method of therapy has to be good for the society at large.

## MEANINGS OF ENCOUNTER

The origin of the word encounter is the Old French word 'encontre', meaning opposite, and carries with it a meaning of meeting with an adversary—to confront as in a battle, to assail.<sup>4</sup> It is a very different definition from a meeting with an opportunity to role reverse. Yet, several contemporary experiences help people understand it as an encounter-as-in-a-battle, rather than a meeting or an intensive group experience.

This popular understanding of an encounter-as-in-a-battle has support from numerous group process experiences. In the intensive group experiences of the Basic Encounter Movement very often the first expression of real feeling between members is a negative attack on one member.<sup>5</sup> Somehow this functions as the ice-breaker; from that point on the entire group is willing to be more emotionally honest and genuine sharing begins to take place.

The same experience occurs in what is known as 'attack therapy', the aggressive, intensive interchange in group therapy developed by Synanon for drug addicts.<sup>6</sup> Since the drug culture considerably influences American life, it has added to the popular understanding that there is a great advantage in negative confrontation. It gets the show on the road, so to speak. It moves the group quickly to the heart of the matter and eliminates the cover-up small talk.

In politics the tactics of confrontation, with certain inherent dangers, are often successful in achieving goals where bureaucracy is as much the villain as is the opponent. Yet the active challenge of confrontation and the resulting counter-confrontation rapidly turns the encounter from the 'eye to eye, face to face' of Moreno's view, to the primitive 'eyeball to eyeball': often with violent explosive results, such as riots, shootings and of course, war.

## SETTINGS OF ENCOUNTER

The setting in which the encounter takes place is usually determined by the therapist. People can be involved for a weekend, a 10 session series, indefinitely once or twice a week, or be hospitalized. In spite of these differences, in all these situations, the 'patient' or client has only responsibility for himself, not for the continued existence of the group or institution. That responsibility belongs to the sponsoring hospital, mental health center, growth group, school or



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individual therapist. When people cannot assume responsibility for themselves the therapist or institution must do so.

The mental health institutions are not 'natural' maturation or growth environments as are the family, the tribe, the community or even the nation. While these settings have their own kinks that cause everyone trouble these are the environments that need to be therapeutically reproduced.

Moreno writes:

Man is more than a psychological, social or biological being. Reducing man's responsibility to the psychological, social or biological department of living makes him an outcast. *Either he is co-responsible for the whole universe, or his responsibility means nothing.*<sup>7</sup> (italics mine)

Here is the value of the therapeutic theater. With the stage as the basic location of therapy, rather than the office, it is easier to recreate the environment of the encounter. Thus when the encounter takes place on the stage, the subject, the protagonist can learn to become more responsible for his universe, as well as for the other person. The stage is his; the psychodrama director is the mid-wife of his creativity. The stage makes him develop responsibility as a cosmic man, not merely as a psychological or sociological being. If his 'natural' community is also in the theater, so much the better.

The ultimate encounter in the world is always with death, with nothingness, with chaos itself. As soon as the Other exists, it is possible to struggle for improved relationships. But what if the Other is not there? Then the encounter itself gets involved with the cosmos, the ultimate 'why are we here'? On stage, it is possible to practice reaching across death, for a meaning to life.

## PSYCHODRAMATIC REDEMPTION

The word redeem,<sup>8</sup> in one sense, means to *buy back*. It can refer to payments made for property, or an object held by another, such as a pawnbroker. One then redeems the watch and it is restored to its rightful owner.

The same process applies to people. To redeem means to *ransom*, to buy back a person from captivity, to free, to liberate. One redeems prisoners or hostages held for ransom and restores them to their family or country.

On the spiritual level, the New Testament responds to the view that mankind has become its own prisoner—alienated from or separated from God.<sup>9</sup> People have become so tied up in knots of their own making, they cannot see beyond them. To show the way out, to *redeem* and restore the cosmic identity, the Creator took on the role of Man (Jesus).<sup>10</sup> In this role reversal, mankind received 'new life', renewed creativity, to find a way out of alienation. Redemption restores cosmic wholeness to all who got themselves tied up in various kinds of double binds.

There are many complexities to redemptions and many different under-



standings. Here the concern is with the therapeutic application on the psychodrama stage. This is the setting where the individual portrays his universe—his social atom. Here he can learn to be both creator and redeemer.

● The smallest universe Moreno calls the *social atom*. It is the smallest constellation of psychological relationships in which an individual participates. As the child grows older, his social atom expands if there is normal development. The particular role relationships the individual takes within his social atom are described as his *cultural atom*.<sup>11</sup> These together make up his universe, the individual's permanent community.

To become co-responsible for the 'universe' involves first of all the awareness that each person to some extent, has decided how many and what kind of psychological and social relationships to participate in. ● One's life is not just decided by other people or circumstance. The person, as protagonist, accepts this responsibility of co-creatorship simply by being willing to get up on the stage. Then as a redeemer, the individual can begin to bring to life, on the psychodramatic stage, the relationships that the natural world left out. The cosmic wholeness of mankind can begin to be restored.

On the therapeutic stage, the social atom of each individual becomes visible. The private home is the customary place to begin. But for many people the private home is badly undernourished. There are gaps, holes, where relationships should have existed. ● The absent person, the YOU needed for the therapeutic meeting, needs to be rescued from oblivion—from nothingness. This is the process of redemption. As the absent YOU becomes embodied and alive on the psychodramatic stage, the relationship gap is filled. ●

● In the complex cultural atom of the individual, the absent YOU could be part of the family, the community or the nation. There are lost tribes and forgotten nations just as there are orphans and step-children. To stop the process of alienation these community gaps need to be redeemed just as family relationships are redeemed.

Mankind's deprivations are of the natural order, the natural psychological and social atoms based on blood ties. Once enough spontaneity can be summoned to leap across natural death, the spiritual world is always big enough to give what is needed. People do adopt one another as 'spiritual' sons and daughters or mothers and fathers. We are all the adopted sons of God. (Galatians 4:5) People adopt a second homeland or country. In this way, the needed interaction takes place. This time it is a matter of choice, not an accident of birth.

The therapeutic stage is an excellent place to practice making the leap out of the natural bonds and into an adoptive relationship. Since there is no prepared script, encounters on the stage can include both the past and the future as Here and Now. For future actions, the stage is used as a rehearsal for life, for the experience of trying out a relationship in a safe setting BEFORE doing it for real. For the past, the therapeutic stage can be used to re-do certain



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crucial events the way the *protagonist would have liked them to happen*. In this way, no one is trapped by history, either of family or his community, race or culture. Each can be co-creator of his own spiritual birthright.

### REDEMPTION PROCEDURE

The normal procedure in re-creating an absent person on stage is to ask the protagonist to be the Other, acting 'as if' he were the absent YOU. This is role reversal as Moreno describes in his poem. Once the missing characters are described the scene is set and another member of the group is asked by the protagonist to 'stand in' for the Other. In this way all the characters normally needed for a scene come to life.

Sometimes the protagonist is not able to do role reversal. He is blocked. The director then has to try psychodramatically to work through that struggle.

Yet, as will be illustrated, many people have a hidden agenda of people they would like to redeem. They have both the information and the skill and only need an opportunity to 'do the scene as it should have happened'. This is personal social atom redemption.

Other times the protagonist may have the skill, he just does not know enough about the other to embody him on stage. Sometimes he does not even realize he does not know, but is ready for an encounter-as-in-a-battle. This kind of problem can be helped by the community—the group—if in some way they are part of the protagonist's social atom. They can provide the information he does not have.

For example: a young man came up on stage, angry and upset at his mother. "I want to have it out with her," he exclaims. "Something happened to the family years ago, they are still upset by the skeleton in the closet, but no one tells me what it is." An empty chair is set up for the absent mother. But when role reversal takes place, the son as mother, obviously does not know either.

It is premature to encounter this not-fully-alive-yet psychodramatic mother. The best the son can do now is to encounter Silence, and Mystification and develop the courage to go home and ask questions himself. Perhaps some relative does know what happened to the family and can explain what is missing. Then when the mother can be embodied or redeemed psychodramatically, the son can challenge "Why didn't you tell me this?" • Premature encounters do not heal alienation, they merely add to the frustration.

This example shows the meaningful function of the group—the community. Each can fill in part of the historic puzzle that affected all. With people that have been uprooted, enslaved or displaced, family details may not be known, but the general history of the community usually is known. • The responsibility of redeeming the YOU from oblivion is a group process more than an individual process.

The term ancestral redemption will be used for this process, for many people



share the same ancestors. Just as the social atom portrays current relationships, an *ancestral social atom* would portray how the protagonist relates to his personal, social and cultural heritage. The resulting *ancestral sociodrama* enables him to re-create his own personal heritage—his own birthright. One can love or hate ancestors, but at least acknowledging them gives continuity back through time.

To be without any ancestors whatsoever is to be a cosmic orphan. ●

### EXAMPLE 1. FAMILY REDEMPTION

J. came to the open session alone, ready to work. "I have a problem with a friend, and also some unsettled business over my mother who died recently," she said. We began with the friend. After some trivial scenes I asked what she liked about her friend and why did she put up with all this nonsense? "Well she takes in foster children and my mother was a foster child," and the tears came and also a story. When J's mother was a foster child, a painful Christmas scene occurred. The protagonist, J., directed it herself as she sat with the audience. We reconstructed a family with 3 children plus the foster child. Everyone got presents except the foster child, whose mother for some reason did not send her one. When the children were sent to bed the foster child took one of the dolls given to the natural children and hid it in bed with her. This was discovered and the father proceeded to spank the foster child for stealing.

I then asked the protagonist how she thought this situation should have been handled. We redid the Christmas story with J. in the role of foster father. This foster father had presents for all the children—no distinctions made—and then bunked the foster child in with his own children. That was a happy Christmas!

Here are some excerpts from a letter I received a few days later, for it illustrates changes made in life from a redeeming act on stage.

(You) made it possible for me to act out the Christmas scene; it was as painful for Mom to tell about as it hurt me to hear about . . . I will long remember and cherish and realize things later on about coming to grips with my feelings of helplessness in both situations. Today I feel strong and free. I love my children and my husband.

*Last night at 1 AM I called my 16 year-old sister who I'd had little to do with since Mom's passing. I had to share my experience with her. My four other younger brothers and sisters will come closer to me too as I reach out with understanding of the guilt they, too, have shared.*

(italics mine)

The session was effective even without the encounter. J.'s redeeming action for her mother stopped her from continuing to alienate herself from her brothers and sisters. It lessened the feelings of helplessness and guilt that



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were causing them to let the family drift further apart. The redemptive scene enabled J. to assume her responsibility for keeping the family in touch with one another—in keeping family relationships alive.

### EXAMPLE 2. ANCESTRAL REDEMPTION

In looking at the larger community I can only speculate and describe the need for ancestral sociodramas, for I have not yet conducted one. The need for them seems obvious; there are all kinds of isolate groups that are just as outcast and orphaned as isolate individuals.

In a recent issue of the Public Employee Press appeared an account of a visit of a delegation of black American civil service union members with their African counterparts. The purpose of the visit was to improve international union solidarity. Here is the report of the answer to the question: "How does the average African view the average black American?"

... It all depends, and maybe there is no definite answer; but I will describe my experiences on this subject. I became engaged in several conversations with Africans and discussed the matter of brotherhood between the two groups.

I was told: "Blacks in America have many material advantages and Africans admire them for their achievements, their high standard of living, their modern facilities, and their style; but we feel great regret that they have lost a part of their heritage, their culture and their identity. These things are important to any race of people. Our brothers and sisters in America have absorbed their culture from their native country, but this is understandable and only natural."

As a consequence of this, American blacks may not be as closely knit within their family in the truest sense of the word—not as they would have been under different circumstances. I was told that Africans feel that, in spite of our advancement in many respects, we still have a lot of catching up to do, culturally. Maybe they are right.

I recall having a discussion with a Nigerian one evening as I sat in the lounge of the Bristol Hotel in Lagos. He said something that really shocked me: "Every time I see a black American I feel guilty for my forefathers. They allowed your forefathers to be sold as slaves and you have had to live with this problem ever since, while we have been free." At the end of our chat he still ended up saying "I can't help it, but most of my brothers and I just feel guilty!" I asked him if he was serious and he said "Yes." As I went away I kept on wondering whether all Africans feel the way he did towards black Americans. What I did learn, however, was that *we are regarded as Americans first and as being their brothers and sisters second.* . . .<sup>12</sup>

(italics mine)

What an opportunity for some ancestral social atom repair work! The



therapeutic stage would be the meeting place of tribal leaders 3 or 4 generations back, re-doing the sale of their people, played by both African and American blacks! There would be the opportunity to encounter across generations. The group could confront their forefathers (through role reversal) and each other, with the meanings of their common heritage.

In a world divided between 'haves' and 'have not's', resentment and guilt smolder. Why should the rewriting of the past be left to historians and politicians? Why cannot Everyman, upon the stage, embody *his* place in the past as he sees it and with help from others on how it really was provide for whatever ancestral redemption needs to be done? The study of sociometry (socius—companion, metrum—measurement) is the science of the choice process. "Freedom of choice and the choice process underlying human relations. . . ." <sup>13</sup> If the choice process is to be carried out throughout society it has to be extended to the past as well, for the dead hand of history hangs over all of us. People are influenced not only by human history, but by legends of national heroes, folk tales, gods and sprites, etc. All these heritages need to be integrated and chosen by Everyman.

While some individuals need more than others to be involved in the redemption process, all have enough alienation to be manipulated by sociopaths to the detriment of the group. The Linden, N. J. school system ran extensive group encounters in response to racial strife and concluded: ". . . most of what appeared to be racial strife was in fact the doing of a few socially maladjusted individuals who were unable to adjust within the mainstream of education." <sup>14</sup> The fact remains that everyone got caught up in it and a community education program had to be conducted to improve the situation. Like it or not, each is his brother's keeper!

The opportunity for Everyman to construct his own birthright would provide some safety valves for social pathology. It would not be a substitute for social change, but a help in the transition. It is well to keep in mind that every political ideology of the 20th Century promises a Utopia for the common man. Like most election promises, for the isolate, the outcast, the physically and emotionally handicapped, the homeless people, the Promised Land is always in the future and they sense, sometimes with fury, that the shortcomings are as much in themselves as in reality. One of Moreno's patients who thought he was Hitler put it this way:

"I had a dream since I was a little boy to conquer the world or destroy it, and I imitated Hitler because he tried the same." What helped him recover from his obsession? He said: "I was surprised to see in the group so many others besides me who had the dream of becoming Hitler. That helped me." <sup>14a</sup>

One of the best kept secrets is that all share in the brokenness of life. There is no real distinction between 'have's' and 'have not's.' What is pathological is only a matter of degree.



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### COMMUNITY BUILDING

Moreno writes:

Just recently I spoke before a group of theologians who asked me, "What is the difference between the old Christian hypothesis, 'Love your Neighbor' and your hypothesis?" I answered, "Well, we have not really improved very much on 'Love your Neighbor,' except that we have added, 'by means of role reversal'."

We do not practice such surplus reality techniques as role reversal in life, itself; that is why we have started them in therapy.<sup>15</sup>

The reply almost hides the significance of Moreno's contribution. It would seem that on the therapeutic stage the *process of redemption* and the *process of role reversal with the absent other* is the same thing. In both situations, 'new life' is put where previously little or none existed. As becomes clear with people who are not able to role reverse, a bit of the self—the ego— (in religious phraseology, pride or selfishness) has to be given up to be able to role reverse. Then as the absent YOU becomes more 'embodied' on stage, the universe of the protagonist is more unified. ● We see the life-giving paradox; the more the protagonist gives up of himself to be the absent YOU, the more the life of his social atom expands and he himself is healed. This process can be seen very clearly in the therapeutic theater. It is much harder to see and do it in life itself.

To make brothers and sisters out of neighbors, to create Mankind out of all the human pseudo-species alienated from each other—is part of the message of redemption. Hopefully Jesus was 'the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep'. (1 Cor. 15: 20)

The real work of worldly redemption is in creating a spiritual birthright for the 'have not's' of the world. The theater is only a rehearsal for life. The creation of the community of all mankind needs to be the end result of the therapeutic process. The universe includes ALL. When Jesus invited the just to 'inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world', He described the standards:

For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me. I was ill and you comforted me, in prison and you came to visit me. . . . I assure you, as often as you did it for one of my least brothers, you did it for me.

It is possible to only begin an outline of concepts that need to be developed.

- 1. *The adoptive family, not the natural nuclear family, is the basic social atom.*

A family or small community is first formed by a few persons who choose



to live together, not just by accident of birth; it may eventually include some people who many prefer to 'dump' into an institution. Such an institution not only gives everyone a 'home base', so to speak, but many emotionally and physically handicapped people need either to be redeemed or be redeemer for someone else before they will assume any responsibility for themselves. The adoptive family is basically therapeutic since relationships are formed by choice.

A community built on adoptive relationships is an old monastic ideal (—limited to single adults). Thomas Merton writes: "The period of monastic formation is a period of cure, or convalescence"<sup>16</sup> from the ills of the natural world. The monk is the man who seeks 'final integration', which "was in the past, the privilege of a few, (but) is now becoming a need and aspiration of mankind as a whole."<sup>17</sup>

The man who has attained final integration is no longer limited by the culture in which he has grown up. . . . He passes beyond all these limiting forms, while retaining all that is best and most universal in them, *finally giving birth to a full comprehensive self*. . . . He accepts not only his own community, his own society, his own friends, his own culture, but all mankind. He does not remain bound to one limited set of values in such a way that he opposes them aggressively or defensively to others. . . . With this view of life, he is able to bring perspective, liberty and spontaneity into the lives of others. The finally integrated man is a peacemaker.<sup>18</sup> (italics mine)

The sponsor of a person seeking rebirth as a finally integrated man could not view that person as a client, patient or representative of a special interest group. The integrated man calls for spiritual sponsorship by a guru or a community, in any adoptive relationship agreeable to both.

## 2. *Each individual has the right to choose his spiritual birthright*

Creatorship and responsibility are personal not collective attributes. While ancestral sociodramas could be sponsored by many cooperative-type organizations (Boy Scouts, trade unions, professional associations, religious groups, the United Nations), the limitations would be how sacred the individual's rights and responsibilities are and whether that organization itself is gaining from the division of Mankind into pseudo-species.

The concept that the basic human dyad is the person's co-creatorship with God, needs further exploration. It is frequently assumed that the male-female marriage union is the basic 'pro'-creative dyad, for society is structured around families. Genital-sexual maturity becomes the therapeutic goal.

With all the possible deprivations that occur in life and the limitations of what relationships are available at needed moments, is not the concept of a spiritual 'co'-creatorship a more appropriate goal for the therapist? Many people go in a sense, half-born, throughout life. They need to experience wholeness, aliveness, first. The creative result of 'fruitful virginity' is the psychodramatic baby,<sup>19</sup> the birth of the true identity of each individual, the



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embodiment of themselves. Then they can cope with 'natural family encounters'!

The person who knows God will be able to remain sane when the natural cultural atom falls apart or dies. At some time or another in everyone's life, this happens. From a spiritual co-creatorship will come the strength to bear solitude in the natural world, which no one, married or single can avoid. If the therapeutic goal is genital-sexual maturity not even any limited competency to deal with solitude is attempted.

3. *Role reversal in social encounter is very close to the concept of non-violent action and needs more study.*

Here is a statement made by a black grandmother when she was jeered at during the Montgomery bus boycott of 1964. The encounter occurs in all three dimensions of time, Past, Present and Future. Psychodramatic comments on time and the interesting use of role reversal are in brackets on the right.

Yes . . . I am very tired of  
walking on my old legs.

(Here and Now)

But please understand I  
am walking for my grandchildren,  
so that they may be free one day.

Future,  
(descendent redemption)

And then I walk in repentance for  
my sin, my cowardice at having  
taken part in the injustice of  
segregation for so long.

(Here and Now,  
self-redemption)  
(role-reversal with a  
non-cooperative Other)

And then I walk too for you!

For when I shall have paid the  
price for you,

as Christ paid the  
price for us on the Cross, then  
you will understand this injustice  
that we black people understand  
so well.<sup>21</sup>

(Past redemption)

Part of the skill of cosmic psychotherapy is the proper combination of the past and future as part of the Here and Now. Then with encounters possible on all levels, it is possible to live in 'eternal life'. Perhaps the hope that the 'Kingdom of Heaven is Among Us' can be realized when the process of alienation is reversed.

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