

HISTORY KEEPERS

— Jacquie Siroka —

— Robert Siroka —

We all have a personal journey leading us to our first encounter with psychodrama. Remember yours? Mine was in Lima, Peru in 1968. I was in between knowing/not knowing what the next step in my life would be. Shortly after I arrived in Peru I met Dr. Delilah Platerra, an Argentinian psychodramatist working in Peru for the Peruvian government. She asked me if I would work with her as an auxiliary. Dr. Platerra's designated goals were to build skills, esteem and spontaneity for people wanting to enter middle class jobs such as salesmen. With my limited understanding of Spanish I experienced the transformation of participants. I witnessed group members enter quiet, shut down, isolated and leave the training enlivened with new skills and perceptions of themselves that would change their personal and economic life. This was magical as well as powerful. In my auxiliary training with Dr. Platerra I experienced the power of sociometry. Choosing a middle age Peruvian man to be my mother, I felt in an instant the unfinished business I carried. I realized I was searching for something in my life I could trust, believe and have a career in. I knew I had found what I was looking for and was willing to commit myself wholeheartedly.

I returned to finish my college degree from American University. Afterwards, in 1973, I applied to St. Elisabeths, a federally funded teaching and training hospital. Jim Ennis, one of the original people who trained and studied with J. L. Moreno, established the Psychodrama program. St. Elisabeths was at the forefront of the field in psychiatry. Psychodrama joined other residencies in dance, art, nursing and psychology programs. It was a teaching and training hospital of the highest caliber. The structure of the program was a 40 hour work week which we received a stipend. Our days combined learning, practicing on the wards, leading groups, personal work and supervision. We formed a family and community in the basement of Hitchcock Hall. We studied and practiced the methodology of psychodrama, sociometry and group psychotherapy. We were immersed and had the opportunity to see all aspects of life through this lens. The experience taught me many things. It primarily fostered a world view and how to enter the world of another. Mostly it taught me the importance of being present. Authenticity was the only way of reaching this population. I recall Jim Ennis giving me a piece of advice before my first trip to a ward to conduct a group. He said, if you are present to others, they may join you. I hardly felt ready or competent enough to run a group on my own, but it was time and I had to trust my spontaneity. When on the ward,

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A Letter to J. L. Moreno from Bob Siroka

Dear J. L.,

It's been a while since we have seen each other but you are never far from my mind. It has been almost 60 years since we met. Of course, before we met in person I was aware of your reputation. CREATIVE, GENIUS, Megalomaniac, Innovator, Controversial Character. Yes, probably truth in each one of those descriptors.



For me however, the most striking thing was our instant connection (tele) which continued throughout our 12 year long relationship. Originally as your graduate student at NYU, I was deeply honored to have you ask me to join your faculty at the Moreno Institute, NYC. So many memories of the Moreno Institute, New York. First the lineup of Directors when I joined to conduct open sessions on Wednesday nights:

- Directors for Open Sessions, Moreno Institute:
- Tuesday, Walter Kalvon
- Wednesday, Bob Siroka
- Thursday, Hannah Weiner
- Friday, J. L. and Zerka Moreno
- Saturday, James Sacks



We had some pretty wild and controversial open sessions. Some-

times 6 people. Sometimes over 100. Visiting academics, international scholars, homeless people off the street, students and mystery bus ride passengers from New Jersey.

For \$3 (later \$4) what great happenings. It was the early 1960's after all. A well-known theater critic, Eric Bentley, said "it was some of the best theater in New York City". We did all manner of experiential interaction that would be impossible today (ethical considerations, HIPPA liability), but I would not have traded it for anything.

You may not remember, but I started my therapeutic career as a music therapist at Manhattan State Hospital and music has been intertwined in our pathway. In 1968 we joined you and Zerka in Vienna at the International Congress of Group Psychotherapy where the University of Vienna Medical School awarded you the "Golden Doctor" (a 50 year honor).

The Vienna City Hall was filled with over 1000 attendees, a 25 piece string orchestra was playing Viennese waltzes.

You had organized for the next week a Congress of Therapeutic Communities to be held in Prague Czechoslovakia. However as we all remember, the Russians had another idea. They moved their army into the Czech Republic to crush the freedom movement.

Shock-spontaneity-creativity. Over the next 2 days the Vienna Academy of Medicine moved the Prague meeting to

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I saw the drabness, I felt the isolation. I remembered Jim's words and tuned into the moment and how alone I felt and uttered, it's lonely and drab in here. That was the beginning of group members looking up and participating. Supervision was an important part of our learning. My first supervisor was Dale Buchanan who supported me as I learned the method, worked through my issues and felt my emotions. I learned to trust the method.

The training at St. Elisabeths Hospital began with a 200 hour series. The new interns were joined by mental health practitioners from the area to learn the basics of the method. Jim Ennis, the Director of the program, invited leading trainers to conduct training with the group. Bob Siroka was the first consultant. I recall meeting Bob in this moment, his presence so relaxed and present. I am remembering the skillful way he warmed up the group, creating an atmosphere that beckoned us to join and be present. I remember feeling like a flower opening. This experience confirmed again on a deeper level and risk learning about myself by surrendering to the method.

I remember thinking at the time that Bob Siroka was the most beautiful, profound and kind human being I had ever encountered. It never occurred to me that we would end up beloved partners.

The ASGPP conventions were well attended with over 1,000 participants from many disciplines. The dances were legendary with energy released from the workshops and the therapists' band made for quite an event.

In 1975 the field of psychodrama, sociometry and group psychotherapy responded to the need to professionalize. This was motivated by external and internal events. Before this time the Moreno Institute and St. Elisabeths were the only places that offered certification. In 1975 a Board of Examiners was incorporated. This was a group of elders: Zerka Moreno, Robert Siroka, James Ennis, Don Clarkson and Dean Elefthery formed for the purpose of professionalizing, creating standards and criteria for certification. There was a period of grand parenting for those who had been practicing. The credentialing was established. In the early 1980s the establishment of a group of trainers named The Federation of Trainers. The purpose of this group was to gather and discuss issues of training.

In 2007 when I turned 65, I had a felt sense that something was missing. That I completed my goals. I sat with what's next? I stayed with the question until I found the path. I attended an Omega workshop with leaders from Buddhist psychology, mindfulness and compassion. The focus was on opening to being intimate with your internal life. This brought light to the problem I was trying to solve. I wanted a way to be intimate with seeing the internal life as I had done with psychodrama. I completed a 2 year teacher training with Tara Brock. I returned to my roots in D.C. for the training. The curriculum included studies and training in insight and mindfulness meditation and compassion practices. I immersed myself in training and practice and am now dedicated to finding the weave between these two powerful paths.

Today I am a clinical director of the Sociometric Institute, have a private practice in New York, and co-lead a monthly group called *Time In* with Jaye Moyer.

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Baden, Austria (including translations into 4 simultaneous languages). We all pitched in. In addition to my scheduled presentation, I chaired 3 other panels to fill in for people who could not get there. We cheered as many of our colleagues behind the iron curtain who braved the Russian closing to show up at the Congress.

1971 The International Congress of Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama in Amsterdam Holland ...

You were not in the best shape physically and we were all concerned about you. You were to give the keynote speech "Goethe and Psychodrama". The large auditorium was filled with attendees. The Municipality of Amsterdam concert band marched on the stage and opened the event with rousing marches and anthems. You gingerly took the stage and held on to the podium. You, of course, had no script or notes. You paused, too long? We thought you lost it. Surprise! You gave a long eloquent exposition of Goethe and Psychodrama. (You paused often but were elegant and coherent. These public moments you shared with many. The two of us however shared some private moments that I am most grateful for. Back to the Moreno Institute, NYC. Friday nights you would give a talk or intro and handed directing to Zerka. You would retreat to your private office. I was extremely grateful the times you invited me to join you in your office while the sessions were in progress. We discussed many things. I felt our tele connection and made every effort to be present and take in what we discussed.

Back to 1968. The chaotic time in the world. Martin Luther King's assassination, Bobby Kennedy. We too had a rough spot in our relationship as well. You offered me the opportunity to become the Director of the Moreno Institute, NYC and we would be business partners. With much trepidation I declined your offer. I wanted to create my own institute. Fearful that this would end our relationship, I was greatly relieved that after the initial shock, though I felt you were disappointed, you respected my decision. The Institute for Sociometry, 1968-1991 and the Sociometric Institute 1991-present were born. Your ideas in creativity live on. I dedicated my professional life to carry on my own version of your work in Psychodrama, Sociometry and Group Psychotherapy. I trained many people in your methods (with my own variations). With my incredible partner, Jacquie for over 40 years, we trained many people in Europe, Turkey and Israel.

P.S. Since 1968 I have always had a theater of psychodrama in New York City. To this point I have had 14 different theaters til now. I still do. Your and Zerka's photos are on our walls. We are creating films which can instruct and elaborate on our work. I continue my friendship with Jonathan Moreno. Now in my 80th year I am still a student of Sociometry, Psychodrama and Group Psychotherapy.

Thank you for what you have given to the world and which you have given to me personally.

Your ideas help me to try to understand the way the world works. I am deeply grateful.

In closing,

Love
Bob