

The following is an excerpt from the book:

Insight Improvisation

**Melding Meditation, Theater, and Therapy
for Self-Exploration, Healing, and Empowerment**

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To learn more, please visit <http://www.insightimprov.org>.

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Coaching Psolodrama

The story is told that there was once a young monk who found a chrysalis in the monastery garden. He sat to watch as the butterfly emerged. The butterfly seemed to struggle, getting halfway out. The monk decided to help the butterfly, and carefully cut open the chrysalis. The insect flopped onto the ground. The body was large and the wings small and shriveled. As the monk sat and watched, the butterfly died.

Biologists now know that in a butterfly's struggle from the chrysalis, fluid is forced out of its body and into its wings, stretching and opening them. A butterfly needs that struggle to mature. By "helping," trying to shortcut the process, the monk had robbed the insect of its chance to fly.

Psolodrama is designed to give the psoloist complete autonomy, relatively free from the influence of the peer witness or therapist.

But with this freedom comes responsibility: the psoloist is playwright, director, actor, and therapist all at the same time. Not only does psolodrama demand a good deal of spontaneity as an improviser, it also requires the psoloist to be present, focused, and not thrown off by doubt, fear, or confronting strong emotions.

Coaching can help.

Especially for someone new to psolodrama, a witness experienced in the practice and acting as a coach can provide simple and clear guidance, helping the psoloist refocus and return to action. By listening carefully and coaching only when requested, the witness/coach can strengthen the sense of safety and support necessary for the psoloist to explore deeply.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the principles of spare and effective coaching, as well as offer examples of where psoloists tend to get stuck and tips for the coach on how to respond.

Coaching Psolodrama	
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Coaching Psolodrama—in Brief

Coaching in psolodrama is an extension of the witness role. The witness only coaches if requested by the psoloist beforehand or during the psolodrama; this is called the *coaching contract* (described in greater detail, below).

When coaching, the witness typically remains seated, and is neither in physical nor eye contact with the psoloist (whose eyes generally are closed).

A good coach is succinct: she keeps her words to the absolute minimum required to be of help, so as not to unnecessarily disturb the psoloist's process. She intervenes as little as possible, offering coaching only when needed.

The coach typically does not ask questions, unless absolutely necessary, nor does she engage the psoloist in a dialogue.

When she offers coaching, it stems directly from what is already happening in the psolodrama, and does not introduce new ideas. For example, if the psoloist mentions his mother, it is helpful to say "become your mother;" but not helpful to suggest a new character or scene. (The Kelman rule—"if you have a good idea, don't do it"—applies to coaching psolodrama.)

The psoloist can choose to accept the coaching, or not—like the double in psychodrama, the coach is only offering a possibility, which the psoloist might actively disagree with, and choose a different path. This is not only okay; it can actually help the psoloist clarify what he wants.

The most important quality of the witness/coach is patience. Challenging though it may be, a good witness must often sit in the presence of the psoloist's struggle or stuck pattern, observing with mindfulness and *metta*, but not attempting to coach. Then, afterwards, in the sharing, she serves as a mirror, reflecting back what she saw, helping the psoloist see what he does in a new way. By *not* intervening during the psolodrama (even if she was given permission to do so by the psoloist), the witness allows the psoloist to struggle and grow, much like a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis.

The Mission of the Coach

The purpose of the coach in psolodrama is to support the psoloist in whatever ways he needs. Ultimately, the coach is trying to eliminate her own job; to transfer her awareness to the psoloist, so that he can develop into his own best coach. After all, psolodrama is designed to be practiced *without* coaching—thus the embedded “solo” in the term.

When providing coaching, a good witness balances three desired outcomes, two immediate and one longer term. These three goals parallel those of a good psychodrama director, who must help the protagonist progress in the action moment-by-moment, shape a satisfying psychodrama as a whole, and keep a broader awareness of the client’s long-term therapeutic goals:

I. Immediate Goal: Return the Psoloist to Action. In most cases, the psoloist who seeks or needs coaching is lost, confused, stuck, trapped in a pattern, overwhelmed, or over-intellectualizing (see the chapter “Troubleshooting Psolodrama” for more on all of these pitfalls). What’s missing, nine times out of ten, is the ability to move forward, to embody roles and have them interact. A few words from the coach can help: what may be murky to the psoloist is often obvious from the outside perspective. Achieving this immediate goal also means the coaching is *brief*; returning to action does not mean engaging in a long dialogue with the psoloist.

II. Desired Outcomes for the Psolodrama: Insight and Catharsis. A good coach also maintains the broader perspective of where the psolodrama as a whole may go, and what the purpose is. For example, a psoloist on the edge of a cathartic release may not

need guidance to reverse roles (typical coaching for goal #1, above), but instead could probably use encouragement to stay with his feelings, and express them fully.

III. Overarching Objective for the Work: Empower the Psoloist. Finally, a good coach is always aware of the broader goals of doing psolodrama—to empower the psoloist to trust his own inner wisdom, to discover his own story without others’ guidance, to explore his own feelings (and, by extension his life and world) with courage and curiosity. In the process of learning and doing psolodrama, this overarching goal eventually supersedes the other two: a good coach can tell when the psoloist is ready to find his own way, without intervention—to let the butterfly fly.

Coaching Contexts

There are three different situations in which one may be called upon to coach, each of which requires a different orientation and approach:

Peer practice. When working with someone new to psolodrama, the witness may need to begin by teaching her the form and then offer to guide and/or coach during the process, until the psoloist feels she “gets it” and can proceed on her own. When a more experienced peer asks for coaching, the witness must remind himself that he is not her therapist, and keep his interventions to the minimum necessary to be useful.

Individual therapy. As a drama therapist, when *not* using psolodrama, I am constantly shifting roles: empathic listener, witness, and coach, as well as at times psychodrama director, auxiliary ego, and double. Clients who are ready to do psolodrama have already grown used to my directing/coaching other forms—leading meditations, structuring role plays, and facilitating other exercises, such as authentic movement,

shared *vipassana*, role stream, and scene stream. The client expectation is that I will continue to coach. At first, psolodrama with coaching feels like a natural extension of the monodramas (one-person psychodramas, directed by me) that the client is already doing. When I feel a client is ready, I introduce the idea of psolodrama as a truly solo, autonomous form, and, over the course of several sessions wean the psoloist from being coached. This change marks an important shift in the therapeutic process: the client, no longer dependent on the therapist for “what happens next,” continues to build the awareness and self-confidence to go on her own journeys, still held within the safety of the witnessing therapist’s presence—and still able to discuss with the therapist what happened, afterward. (*More on the use of psolodrama and Insight Improvisation in therapy appears in the chapter “Working with Individuals” in Part IV.*)

Training. It is not unusual for participants in Insight Improv training programs to encounter challenges when trying psolodrama for the first time. For this reason, when practicing psolodrama in dyads, witnesses are encouraged to offer support and coaching to their partners. The workshop facilitator may also coach when an individual is doing psolodrama before the entire group; however, as in peer work, it is key to clarify the coaching contract (see below) with them before they begin.

Variation: A More Active Coach

In either individual therapy or the workshop context, if the client or participant requires extra support, and if the therapist or workshop facilitator is an experienced psychodramatist or drama therapist, a different kind of coaching becomes possible: the coach can enter the space and work with the psoloist, asking the types of questions a

psychodrama director might, helping guide the psoloist to follow imagery and role into dialogue, conflict, etc., and using touch when appropriate to provide support. Once the psoloist is on track or back on track, the coach can return to her seated witnessing role, or she can remain standing to observe and be ready to step in once again. This more active form of coaching can be useful in several situations: if the psoloist is working very quietly, calling out coaching from the sidelines can feel intrusive, whereas coming nearer and whispering may be just right; for a psoloist feeling overwhelmed by strong emotions, active coaching provides added support; for a new psoloist working for the first time in front of a group, active coaching can help alleviate the sense of isolation and pressure to perform.

The Coaching Contract

Questions to Establish the Contract

When in doubt, particularly in a peer or workshop situation working with someone new, it always helps to ask the psoloist his preferences for being coached, before he begins his psolodrama. Answers to these questions help establish the coaching contract:

- ⊙ Would you like me to provide coaching from outside if you get stuck?

If the answer is "yes:"

- ⊙ Would you like me to offer coaching spontaneously or wait for you to ask me?

And, for a more experienced psoloist who wants to be coached:

- ⊙ Anything in particular that tends to come up for you that you would like to be coached on?

Coaching Without a Contract

It almost goes without saying (but not quite!): ***Never coach someone who has not asked to be coached.*** It is a serious disruption of the psoloist-witness container to speak or try to coach during psolodrama without prior agreement.

That said, if coaching was not discussed before the psolodrama begins, and it becomes evident during the process that an inexperienced psoloist has become stuck, and does not know how to ask for coaching, the witness might venture to gently ask “would you like some support or coaching?”

However, it is not always clear when the psoloist is stuck versus exploring something in a different way. A psoloist who sits without speaking or playing any roles for a very long period of time, looking troubled and/or crying, may be stuck—or may simply be very present to his feelings. Tread carefully. And with an experienced psoloist, never coach without prior permission.

Coaching Examples

Good coaching is a spontaneous act, adapting itself to what is needed in the moment. No two psolodramas are the same, nor two psoloists. The examples which follow, therefore, are not exact recipes to be followed precisely, but rather representative situations in which coaching may be called for, accompanied by tips for what *might* work

in such situations. Nor is this an exhaustive list; one's first time coaching psolodrama may present a completely novel challenge.

Note that many of the examples below assume that the psoloist has given the witness license to coach without waiting for a request from the psoloist, something which is common in the therapy context but less common in peer practice or a workshop setting.

Some of the coaching interventions below may feel more appropriate for a trained drama therapist or psychodramatist than for a peer coach. In general, the witness should only coach in a way that she feels personally comfortable with, coaching the psoloist on things that she has experienced in psolodrama herself. If at any time the witness does not feel comfortable coaching, it is important to remember that simply witnessing—listening, observing, and holding the space for the psoloist in a nonjudgmental, compassionate way—is the most important contribution any witness can make.

Psoloist is moving, perhaps making sound, but not speaking words.

Coaching: "Speak aloud—use words."

Speaking aloud helps a shy or inexperienced psoloist get out of her head and break free of repetitive thought patterns. The voice also makes possible a dialogue between protagonist and auxiliary ego (as well as the other psychodramatic roles), and can be a powerful vehicle for accessing emotion.

Most psoloists benefit from starting their psolodramas with silent authentic movement, progressing to adding sound, words, roles, etc.—if the psoloist is not speaking early on, wait a few minutes more to see what unfolds.

Although there are experienced psoloists (e.g., those with a strong background in authentic movement, meditation, focusing, or similar disciplines) for whom a completely

wordless psolodrama can be very powerful, for those new to the form it is more typical that not speaking is a way of keeping one's thoughts/feelings inside, perhaps out of fear of exposing them to the witness, out of shyness, or just because they are not used to speaking their thoughts aloud with eyes closed.

Psoloist is speaking in a monologue, in the role of protagonist (P1) only.

Coaching: "Try reversing roles—become the auxiliary ego."

If an auxiliary ego role has yet to appear in the psolodrama, encourage the psoloist to return to authentic movement and then to role stream to discover the "other" role and become it. If necessary, guide the psoloist to create a dialogue between the protagonist and that auxiliary role.

(Note that if the psoloist is having trouble entering other—non-P1 protagonist—roles, or having trouble reversing roles, some training steps may have been missing, particularly empty chair, role stream, and scene stream.)

Psoloist, lost/confused, stops and asks for coaching—but has not yet accessed his own inner wisdom.

Coaching: "Become the director role."

If the psoloist is new to the form, ask "what would your inner therapist, your wise guide, say to you or ask you right now?" If the psoloist is still at a loss, remind him: "The director can ask a good question, such as 'how do you feel?' or 'what do you need right now?'"

Psoloist rushes by a potentially emotional moment in his psolodrama, perhaps even opening his eyes to self-distract.

Coaching: “Close your eyes once again; let yourself feel the feelings you are having.”

Encourage the psoloist to stay with the feelings, to experience them fully, to notice where the feelings are in his body, and to keep breathing and relaxing the body. If tears are there but being stifled, reassure the psoloist that it’s OK to cry—that crying is part of the process.

Tone of voice is important in coaching. When encouraging the psoloist to close his eyes and get in touch with his feelings, a gentle, soothing voice works best. A good coach can communicate empathy, caring, clarity, and a sense of possibility, all through vocal quality.

Psoloist is talking a lot, being clever, intellectualizing, or performing—but not letting her body/gut lead the way.

Coaching: “Return to authentic movement.”

This kind of coaching can be especially useful for someone new to authentic movement, someone who is used to performing for an audience, or someone who tends to be very verbal/intellectual, not in her body.

One indicator that something is amiss is that the spirit of authentic movement is absent from the psolodrama. For example, the psoloist’s eyes may be open, or it may become evident that she is making decisions not based on information from her body, but purely from her head.

If the psoloist is new to authentic movement or psolodrama, she may need additional guidance: “Let your eyes close. Return to stillness and silence for a moment.

Notice your body. Notice your breath. Notice how you feel right now. Relax—let go of any tension or holding you are noticing. Now begin to notice movement impulse—it may be something tiny, some small movement already happening in your body. Allow yourself to follow that movement. Let your body lead the way to what’s next in your psolodrama.”

Psoloist is overwhelmed by emotion or the content of the psolodrama, and cannot proceed.

Coaching: Find out what the psoloist needs.

If the psoloist is able to respond, find out whether he would like to continue his psolodrama or not, and provide guidance to help him do what he wants—e.g., to return to silent authentic movement, letting the content of the psolodrama go; to transition to a completely new and different scene of the psolodrama; or to end the psolodrama and come sit with you to discuss it.

If the psoloist is wracked with pain or grief, with a lot of tears, physical contact such as a steady hand on his shoulder or back can help—ask permission first if you are unsure whether this is OK. (Avoid unconsciously signaling that you want the psoloist to stop crying: e.g., patting the psoloist or offering tissues without being asked.)

If the psoloist does not respond to you, he may be dissociating—lost in the drama, not returning to the present moment. Dissociation of this type is rare, but can sometimes be a sign of a more serious problem. Have him open his eyes, make eye contact with you (physical contact, such as taking/squeezing hands, can also help) and gently guide him back to the here and now: “OK. The psolodrama is over. You’re back here in the room with me. Let’s just relax and breathe together for a moment. How are you doing?” It can

also be useful to offer a drink of water. (*As cautioned earlier in Part III, it is not recommended to practice psolodrama with someone lacking clear ego boundaries or who is in danger of dissociating, such as a patient suffering from schizophrenia or a dissociative disorder.*)

Psoloist is engaged in an extended dialogue with the director (or another role), and is missing cues to action; —or—

Psoloist has a desire to break free of her usual pattern, to be more creative in the psolodrama, but does not know how.

Coaching: “Become the ___” (whatever the protagonist just said).

Sometimes the psoloist gets *too* comfortable in a particular scene, and rather than move the action forward, begins to talk in circles, with little progress made. This is often out of a hidden resistance to—fear of—change, growth, discovering something new. Or, in a variation on the above, the psoloist expresses a *desire* to change, to break out of patterns, to be creative (or less concrete) in the psolodrama, but does not see how to do it.

Meanwhile, the psoloist’s language—particularly those words spoken by the protagonist—are filled with unconscious clues to what’s next, cues which could be acted on immediately using role reversal, to become a new character, emotion, idea, etc. Especially for an inexperienced psoloist, the coach is often in a better position to hear and reflect back those cues.

For example, the protagonist (P1) might be saying to the director:

“...which my mother always warned me was too dangerous. But I wanted to cross that street by myself.”

The coach could say:

“Become your mother.” —or—

“Become the danger.” —or—

“Become the busy street.” —or—

“It’s happening now: you’re crossing that street.”

Doing any of the above would help break the psoloist out of talk-mode and return her to action.

Psoloist has very low self-esteem, e.g., buying into abusive voices of critique from auxiliary roles of parent, sibling, boss, etc.; —or—

Psoloist mistakes the inner critic for the director role, and is locked in a sadomasochistic pattern; —or—

Psoloist is too shy/stuck to speak at all about her real issues, spending the psolodrama on seemingly trivial things.

Coaching: Wait until the sharing process to reflect back the pattern you noticed, doing so compassionately but honestly; in her next psolodrama, if the pattern repeats, invite in supportive voices (e.g., a favorite relative, teacher, etc., in the role of auxiliary ego or audience).

It can be tempting as the witness/coach, if given license by the psoloist, to immediately intervene if you perceive a pattern that appears stuck or dysfunctional.

But like the monk and the butterfly at the beginning of this chapter, if one interferes prematurely, the psoloist may never experience her own struggle deeply enough to find the inner resources to overcome it herself.

The witness must sit with his own discomfort and trust that the psoloist will find her own way.

If the pattern repeats itself in the *next* psolodrama—the psoloist is truly stuck or engaging in a kind of repetition compulsion (i.e., repeatedly reenacting a memory of abuse)—then it may be time to offer coaching. One approach is to help the psoloist find a different kind of auxiliary ego role, a supportive role that can help her feel safe enough to journey more deeply, or to fight back against the abuse. Encourage her to pick a favorite relative, teacher, or coach, or even her favorite famous or fictional character expressing wisdom, kindness, or protection (the Dalai Lama, Yoda from *Star Wars*, Nelson Mandela, Jesus, Buddha, etc.).

Of course, any supportive role is really a conduit for the psoloist to access her own inner wisdom. The supportive auxiliary serves as an ally in talking back to powerful voices of criticism or abuse. And it can also model a more compassionate director role and inner-witness.

In Summary: Coaching Best Practices

Coach only when asked by the psoloist. Clarify the coaching contract beforehand.

Be sensitive and have restraint. Notice when the psoloist needs to be exactly where he is. Practice witnessing as meditation, learning to sit with the discomfort of wanting to coach but knowing the psoloist needs to work through his own struggle.

Return the psoloist to action; help her turn words/concepts into auxiliary egos she can embody and dialogue with.

When needed, **help the psoloist return to the entryway phases of the psolodramatic progression**—authentic movement, shared vipassana, role stream, and

scene stream—to return to bodily awareness, open to the senses, add the voice, discover new imagery and roles, and create dialogue.

Keep it brief. Avoid dialogue with the psoloist, complex instructions, questions, or anything that would pull the psoloist away from the reality of his psolodrama.

Avoid interpretation of the psolodrama, engaging in problem-solving, or offering brand new ideas to the psoloist; any coaching should be simple, concrete, and spring directly from what has already happened or something the psoloist has just said.

Balance short- and long-term goals. Return to action in the present moment, cultivating insight and catharsis in this psolodrama, *and* empower the psoloist to be her own coach in the long run.