

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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What is Psolodrama?

“Self-knowledge is not an ultimate end; it is the only opening wedge to the inexhaustible.” — Jiddu Krishnamurti (1956, p.45)

Cautionary Note: Psolodrama is a practice designed for those who can hold and support their own emotional process. It is **not** recommended to use psolodrama with those suffering from severe trauma, depression, anxiety, or other mental illness or disorder.

Psolodrama: A Drama Therapy Practice Based in Mindfulness

Psolodrama blends meditative awareness, authentic movement, theatrical improvisation, and psychodrama, to help one explore existential themes and personal challenges; uncover shadow material; reflect on memories, stories, and dreams from the past; and play out hopes, fears, and fantasies pointing toward potential futures.

Beginning with mindful stillness and authentic movement, the psoloist, observed by a supportive witness, follows her body, and notices as feelings, images, and roles arise spontaneously. She begins to embody and speak as those roles, improvising monologues

and scenes. In the process, she can distinguish and draw upon the psychodramatic roles of protagonist, auxiliary ego, double, director, and audience, reversing roles and exploring the deeper meaning behind the enfolding drama.

Ultimately what emerges is a spontaneous personal drama guided by the psoloist's intuitive sense of what feels most vital and alive, what takes her closest to her own personal growing edge.

Afterward, the psoloist meets with her witness to share her experience and hear what the witness observed. The witness provides supportive, nonjudgmental feedback, sharing not only what he saw and heard, but also what resonated for him personally.

The Power of Psolodrama

Why devote all of Part III of this book to psolodrama? As Parts I and II convey, Insight Improvisation consists of many exercises and techniques. Those in Part I are aimed at opening participants to contemplative practices like meditation and authentic movement; those in Part II are designed for actors and others to apply meditative concepts in improvisation. As described in Part III, psolodrama draws upon and integrates many of these techniques in order to allow practitioners to explore personal issues at a deep level.

As a Psoloist

The practice of psolodrama can be a profoundly moving journey, a path to insight, catharsis, healing, and growth.

I have taught the practice to hundreds of workshop participants and to many individual therapy clients over the years—both in the US and abroad—and the anecdotal evidence is that this is a form that encourages a deep exploration of core personal issues, producing insights that can be transformative.

In my own experience practicing psolodrama countless times over the last dozen years, witnessed by peers (or sometimes practicing without a witness), I have never ceased to be moved to find what lies buried beneath the surface of the psyche—that psolodrama so quickly invites to come out and play. I find that psolodrama complements my daily meditation practice, allowing me to express in words and embodiment so much of what I sit contemplating in silence each day—and by doing so provides a context to work through those ideas and feelings, and to share them with others.

Psolodrama is a form of self-therapy, an open space where almost anything can be shared and explored, powered by the psoloist's drive to seek depth, insight, and learning. The nature of psolodrama is that it tends to often, and rather quickly, unearth existential themes of life and death, one's purpose on the planet and relationship to the universe, and what it takes to lead an authentic life. At the same time, psolodrama is an individualized process; no two people approach it the same way, every psoloist having their own unique style as well as their own set of core themes.

As a Witness

Much of the power of psolodrama comes from the role of the witness, whose purpose it is to provide a safe, nonjudgmental, and caring container for the work.

The witness role in psolodrama is directly derived from the witness in authentic movement (see the chapter on authentic movement in Part I for a detailed description of

witnessing in that practice). What's added to this role in psolodrama is an explicit invitation in the sharing process for the witness to not only be a good mirror, reflecting what he saw and heard (authentic movement reflection), but also to share what resonated with him personally, from his own experience and feelings (psychodramatic sharing), and, if appropriate—e.g. as a therapist or peer empowered by the psoloist to speak openly—to share any insights he may have had into the meaning of the psolodrama, in particular how it relates to the psoloist's life (interpretation).

Above all, the witness practices *metta*: his words and actions are kind and supportive, completely in service to the psoloist.

Having practiced psolodrama over the years with many different peers, I feel privileged and blessed to have been able to witness their psolodramas, which have conveyed such a wide range of personal issues, in such a creative, compelling, and moving way. Being a witness in psolodrama is like being the sole ticket-holder to a great and little-known play: it is opening night, and no one has ever seen this particular drama before. What unfolds can be delightful, scary, moving, disturbing, hilarious, deeply meaningful—a good psolodrama has all the qualities of great theater. I have learned as much witnessing psolodrama as I have practicing it as a psoloist.

(More on the role of the witness in psolodrama and the different types of sharing appears in the chapter "Witnessing Psolodrama.")

As a Therapist

As a therapist, I find psolodrama a helpful and effective approach to use in my practice, for a number of reasons.

Psolodrama gives me a deeper window into who my client is, their strengths, challenges, patterns, etc. What gets revealed in psolodrama is often several levels beneath my client's presenting problems—yet in most cases informs those issues. As a therapist, when I witness my client's psolodrama it is as if I had the direct ability to peer into their head and observe their dreams, innermost thoughts and feelings, inner imagery, and inner roles. And following their psolodrama, in the sharing process, the two of us are able to reference both the literal and metaphorical content of the drama, which can help us frame and work with the client's issues in new and creative ways.

Psolodrama gives me a progression to teach my client, from meditation to psolodrama itself, with several steps in between—there is a developmental path to take with them, and each step along the way is rich with learnings, and useful in the therapy process. Also, I can provide outside coaching as needed, reducing the amount of coaching over time, until the client is truly self-driven.

Teaching psolodrama is a gradual process that allows me to hand the power over to the client, giving them greater control, while at the same time inviting them to be more vulnerable. What begins as a teacher-student relationship or coach-coachee, over time morphs into artist and appreciative audience: ultimately, the psolodrama is the client's and I am merely a witness, a friend to their process.

(More on the use of psolodrama and other Insight Improv techniques in individual and couples therapy appears in Part IV, "Insight Improvisation in the World.")

Origins

“Psolodrama”...suggest[s] a mixture of solo, drama, and a bit of psyche, and the solo may even suggest soul.

— Adam Blatner (personal communication, January 30, 2004)

The origin of the practice—and the name “psolodrama”—was spontaneous rather than thought out. When I first offered the structure of psolodrama to my friend and colleague Jonathan Stein to try out in a movement studio at Lesley University one evening, the name popped out of my mouth as an inevitable twist on “psychodrama.” What would you call a one-person psychodrama? A psolodrama, of course!

At that point I did not yet know about Moreno’s techniques “monodrama” and “autodrama”—ideas similar to but distinct from psolodrama (see the next chapter, *Foundations of Psolodrama*, for more on these approaches). And psolodrama was more than a one-person psychodrama: it was a way to take the inner journey of meditation and the physical journey of authentic movement into language, voice, role, and enactment.

What preceded that evening with Jonathan was more than 20 years of exploration in theater and improvisation, meditation and psychology. In some ways, I’d been searching my entire life for a practice that would allow me to explore, express, and embody all that was inside—to have a mindful and open space for that exploration, and to have a committed listener and witness who could hear and reflect on that expression. As I began to develop and practice psolodrama, and teach it to others, I gradually realized how truly effective the form was, and that others could find it just as helpful as I did.

Locating Psolodrama

Drama therapy is one of the creative arts therapies, along with art therapy, dance/movement therapy, music therapy, and poetry therapy. There are many kinds of drama therapy, some 15-20 distinct approaches (Johnson & Emunah, 2009), including Moreno's psychodrama and sociodrama (the original, oldest forms of contemporary drama therapy), Landy's Role Theory and Method, Johnson's Developmental Transformations, Emunah's Five-Phase Model, Fox's Playback Theater, and Wiener's Rehearsals for Growth.

Insight Improvisation is a form of drama therapy—a use of theater techniques for therapeutic ends. What makes Insight Improvisation unique is its integration of meditation and mindfulness, as well as its emphasis on individual improvisation—the client making his own discoveries in the presence of a supportive witness. Psolodrama is one technique within Insight Improvisation.

(See the last chapter in Part III, “Further Exploration with Psolodrama,” for a comparison of Insight Improv and psolodrama with others forms of drama therapy.)

Who is Psolodrama Safe For? How Is It Used?

When I determine that a client is open to and capable of doing psolodrama, I introduce him to it through a progression of activities, therapeutically useful in themselves, that form the “entryway” to psolodrama, including meditation, authentic movement, shared vipassana, role stream, and scene stream (all described in Parts I and II of this book). By the time I introduce psolodrama, the client is quite comfortable

improvising in the presence of a witness, and the amount of external instruction or coaching I need to provide is minimal.

Psolodrama is not a recommended form of therapy for everyone. To be the psoloist demands a certain level of ability and resiliency. Those who—at this moment in their life—lack strong inner resources or ego boundaries should not be practicing psolodrama. This includes individuals with mental illness (such as schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, bipolar disorder, major depressive disorder, and some dissociative disorders); those dealing with serious and unexplored trauma or abuse; and those whose mental or emotional capacities are not yet sufficiently mature (such as children or some developmentally delayed adults). For these individuals, other healing modalities—such as talk therapy, play therapy, or more traditional drama therapy or psychodrama—may be more appropriate, typically providing a more structured container and a more active role for the therapist.

Some individuals may be capable of entering into psolodrama, but may require additional support during the process. In this case I recommend working with an experienced drama therapist who can provide live coaching. A comment or question from a good coach can help the psoloist get unstuck or address a repeated pattern. (*See the chapter entitled “Coaching Psolodrama” for best practices.*)

Psolodrama can also be used by two individuals who wish to support one another on their paths of growth. Used in this way, psolodrama bears some similarities to co-counseling, a set of practices for engaging in therapeutic work with a peer (CCI-USA, 2014). The exchange of witnessing that occurs when two peers or friends practice psolodrama together is one of the most exciting and rewarding aspects of this work. Part

III of this book is mainly oriented toward helping peer practitioners learn and use psolodrama.

Finally, for those experienced practitioners who are ready for new challenges and insights, psolodrama can be practiced alone, without an external witness. The chapter entitled “Psolodrama Alone” is devoted to exploring the benefits, best practices, and obstacles when doing psolodrama solo.

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