

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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Witnessing Psolodrama

The art of living... is neither careless drifting on the one hand nor fearful clinging to the past on the other. It consists in being sensitive to each moment, in regarding it as utterly new and unique, in having the mind open and wholly receptive.

— Alan Watts (1951, p. 95)

The role of the witness in psolodrama—modeled after the witness role in authentic movement—is unusual in drama therapy.

In most forms of drama therapy, there is a therapist who is an active participant, either directing the client, as in psychodrama, Landy's Role Method, Weiner's Rehearsals for Growth, and most other approaches, or improvising with the client, as in Johnson's Developmental Transformations.

Psolodrama is designed to be a peer practice as well as a clinical practice. So the witness may be a therapist, but can also be anyone the psoloist is comfortable working with—a friend, colleague, coach, etc.

In practicing psolodrama the psoloist plays many roles. But the witness, too, wears many hats: supporter, facilitator, friend, co-counselor, appreciative audience, and fellow meditator. The witness provides the supportive container within which the psoloist does his work.

To witness another person—to take responsibility for being present, to be a nonjudgmental container for their process, to be in service to them—is a rare and valuable thing. It is a great responsibility to witness another’s psolodrama, and a great honor. The witness is given a window into the psoloist’s life, his psyche, his greatest challenges and recurring themes. If the psoloist feels comfortable with the witness, he is able to go to places of uncensored vulnerability. He is also capable of flights of unexpected imagination, beauty, and raw emotion.

How the witness approaches her role, how present she can be, and how open she is to receiving whatever arises in the psoloist’s work, helps determine the quality, depth, and impact of the experience for both.

(This chapter explores the act of witnessing itself. How the witness and psoloist share with one another after the psolodrama is discussed in the next chapter, “The Psolodrama Sharing Process.” For additional information about witnessing, see the chapter “Authentic Movement” in Part I.)

Witnessing Psolodrama	
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Witnessing Psolodrama In Brief

The witness provides a supportive, nonjudgmental container for the work. He observes and keeps time. The witness maintains the container by practicing mindfulness—with the psoloist as the “object” of his meditation—and simultaneously noticing his own feelings and experience.

When time is up, the witness says “slowly, in your own time, bring your psolodrama to a close,” and then, once the psoloist is settled and ready, the witness asks the psoloist whether she would like to speak first. When it’s his turn to speak, the witness reflects back what he saw and heard during the psolodrama as accurately as possible, and may also share what personally resonates from his own life. His witnessing and sharing comes from an intention of *metta*—lovingkindness and appreciation for the other.

The Intention of the Witness: To Be in Service to the Psoloist

Although being a good audience is part of the witness role, being a witness is quite distinct from being an audience member. An audience expects to be entertained and engaged. The witness in psolodrama actively lets go of any expectations.

Instead, the mindset of the witness—both in observing and sharing—is *to be in service to the psoloist*. This means that although psolodrama in its basic form is a two-person process, its outcomes are focused on the psoloist's experience: the witness will get what he gets—which may be little, or may be quite a lot, as his perception and understanding grow with his experience witnessing.

As in authentic movement, witnessing, when done well, provides a model that helps the psoloist develop his own supportive and nonjudgmental *inner* witness.

Being in service to the other may feel more natural for some when the roles are truly distinct, e.g., if the witness is a drama therapist and the psoloist her client. However, when the two are peers who are taking turns doing psolodrama and witnessing, there is a noticeable shift in focus and intention demanded by the role of witness.

One question that can help the witness clarify her role at every stage is:

“Am I serving the psoloist's process?”

If the witness notices, for example, that she is not fully present while witnessing, her intention of service can help her return to what is happening now. Or, in the sharing process, the witness may think of a personal story that echoes some aspect of the psolodrama. But before she tells that story aloud, she should ask herself: “Will sharing this story serve the psoloist's process?” (perhaps telling it briefly would, but at length

not). The witness needs to practice discernment. Her primary responsibility is to reflect back to the mover that he has been seen and heard for what he did.

Preparing the Safe Container

From the outset of their meeting, the witness looks for how he can help create a safe container for the psoloist's work, even before she starts her authentic movement. *(Several points below are described in greater detail in the chapter "Warming Up to Psolodrama.")*

The witness helps make sure there is a good **connection** between the two, by taking time for a thorough check-in and clearing process. This helps the psoloist warm-up and lets her know it is safe to share feelings and personal issues.

Especially if the two are new to one another, it is important to agree on **confidentiality**—that nothing personal will leave the room or be shared with others.

The witness also takes part in preparing the **physical space**, helping the psoloist clear away anything that might impede her movement, and asking her where she would prefer he sit.

The witness checks that all **devices** such as cell phones are silenced.

The witness clarifies the **timing** the psoloist would like, and if she would prefer bells or verbal signals.

If he likes to take **notes** as the witness, he can ask whether she is OK with that. (The psoloist might appreciate being given the written notes afterward to remind her of her psolodrama. But some psoloists may prefer the witness not do anything but observe during the psolodrama.)

Finally, the witness can ask if there is **anything else** she needs before starting—a drink of water, etc.

Using Skillful Means: Witness as Mediator

Knowing how to speak and reflect back to the psoloist in the sharing process afterward is no easy task and requires discipline, discernment, and practice. But an equal challenge in witnessing is to be fully present throughout the process, particularly when being still and silent, observing the psoloist in action.

It is helpful during the psolodrama (and, ultimately, throughout the entire witnessing process), **to see the role of witness as that of a mediator, where the psoloist is the object of the meditation.** As a mediator, the witness can work with herself moment-by-moment to be as present and receptive as possible, and thus be fully active.

Mindfulness: Returning to Awareness of the Other

As I settle in as witness, I notice the quality of my attention. Where is my mind?

As in a meditation on any object—such as the breath—I notice if my mind has wandered away from the object (in this case, the psoloist) and then gently bring it back to the object.

I also notice the quality of my attention to the object—am I present enough to notice the small details? Can I see the psoloist's breathing, notice the subtleties of her facial expression, what is happening with her feet, etc.?

If the psoloist is difficult to see or hear, do I need to move to a new position to take in every detail?

Later in the psolodrama, as words are added and roles appear, what has happened to my focus? Am I present to the unfolding story, or have these roles/images sparked thoughts/memories in my own mind that are taking me away from what is happening?

Like a cowboy bringing his wandering horse back and re-hitching it to the post, I bring my mind back to the present moment—if necessary, over and over again!

Choicelessness: Openness and Acceptance of All that is Arising

Openness to the Six Sense Doors

As a vipassana meditator, I consciously and choicelessly open to all the channels of awareness.

Not only do I proactively bring an intention of interest and focus to my senses (as well as the mind), but I also let those sense stimuli “choose me” moment to moment—rather than I (my conscious mind or intention) choosing what specific object or channel to focus on.

The channels of sight and sound are most obvious—to see and hear what the psoloist is doing. But what are my other body sensations telling me? For example, is my own body tensing during a certain part of the drama? Am I breathing faster? In psychotherapy terms, this is noticing the somatic countertransference: how are my feelings about what the psoloist is doing being communicated through my own body?

The sixth sense door, that of thought, is also open and available. Can I notice my thoughts during the psolodrama without being swept away by them? Can I notice thoughts of comparing myself with the

psoloist, judging the psoloist, judging myself, etc., without identifying with those thoughts? Am I myself experiencing images or fantasies as the psolodrama unfolds—can I note them, and then bring my attention back to the action at hand?

Acceptance: Non-judgment

Like a good meditator, I receive everything happening without judgment, opening my mind and heart with an attitude of acceptance. I practice letting go in the moment, not attaching to anything, not defending myself from anything.

Perhaps something in the psolodrama is triggering me. It could be a scene that echoes a traumatic moment in my own life. It could be content that I find offensive or unpleasant. It could be a role that frightens or angers me. It could be attitudes or beliefs of the psoloist, being expressed through the psolodrama, that I disagree with or judge. Perhaps I find myself comparing myself with the psoloist—and making a negative comparison. Perhaps I feel bored by the psolodrama: there's not enough action. Or the psoloist just doesn't seem to be doing it "right."

Can I be the kind of witness—both for myself as well as for the psoloist—that can hold anything and everything with equanimity, and not push anything away?

As a meditator/witness, I notice my thoughts and feelings—see them swim by in the stream of awareness like fish flitting past—but I do not grab on and attach to any of them. Perhaps inadvertently one of these fish has grabbed hold of me! I notice I am caught up in an unpleasant (or too pleasant!) thought/feeling and I am no longer present and available. Can I disentangle from this grasping or aversion and return to an attitude of openness?

I return my focus to my own body, my own breath, for an instant, to relax and remind myself of my meditator stance—and as soon as I can bring my attention back to the psolodrama.

Ultimately, I must remember, all these thoughts and judgments do not actually exist—they are just phenomena of my mind. This is what minds tend to do: generate thoughts, judgments, likes and dislikes, all day long. If I can see them as essentially meaningless, not to be identified with, I can be truly open and available for my partner.

Lovingkindness: Opening One's Heart to the Other

As I sit and observe the psoloist in action, can I relax and open my heart to him? Can I send him lovingkindness, wishing for him to have a wonderful, joyous experience in his psolodrama?

As he goes deeper into the process, exploring his personal demons and shadows, can I allow myself to empathize, allowing my own body and emotions to fill with his conflict, anger, shame, or grief? Even if the psolodrama feels alien to me, different from my own life experience, can I ask myself: what if I were in the same situation—how would I feel?

As I send the psoloist metta, can I also take joy in his success, as his story leads to a personal breakthrough—a moving moment of release, a new insight? Can I let go of my competitive, comparing mind (which may be busy asking: When is it my turn? Will my psolodrama be as good? Why can't I have a psolodrama like that? Etc.)?

I remind myself that we two, and all beings, are ultimately equal—all living, aging, and dying—and that my purpose is simply to remain present, open, calm, and listening, with equanimity.

“Witnessing For”

As in authentic movement, witnessing in psolodrama is a truly multidimensional experience. There are many ways to experience the psoloist’s work, and the more of these I can open up to, the richer my own experience can be, and the better I can be of service to the psoloist—particularly when it comes time to share with him.

As mentioned in Part I, the chapter on authentic movement, contemplative dance teacher Alton Wasson refers to the “chest of many drawers”—kinds of awareness that lay dormant, unopened, in our own body, heart, and imagination. As I witness the psoloist’s movement, I may choose to open the drawer of physical position, noting specifically the psoloist’s posture, the curl of his fingers, the placement of his feet. Or I might open the drawer of empathy, allowing myself to tune in to the emotional state of the psoloist, and let myself feel what he might be feeling.

These different ways of seeing the psoloist can also be likened to different lenses, metaphorical eyeglasses that allow me to see different things—some are colored in a certain way, some zoom in to fine detail, some have x-ray vision, some use fisheye lenses to see the big picture. For example, I may choose to look through the lens of rhythm, noticing the pattern and speed of movement or speech. Or I may look through the lens of “story,” noticing how the narrative of the psolodrama is constructed, and how interactions between different characters shape the plot.

These drawers or lenses are something we use everyday, whether we are conscious of them or not. For example, in conversation with a friend I may choose to “listen for” something specific—listen for my own emotional resonance with what she is saying, listen for what she cares most deeply about, “listen” for what her body language

is telling me. As a psolodrama witness, I can similarly “witness for” many things. What follows is a breakdown of some of the more important aspects of the psolodrama to witness. This list can also serve as a guide to the many aspects of the psolodrama that the psoloist’s own *inner* witness may be aware of during the action phase.

First are those concrete aspects that can be observed directly and to some extent, objectively:

Physical position. Includes shape, stance, posture, facial expression, still gesture, contact with floor or self, straight versus curved, levels (high/low), etc.

Movement. Awareness of speed, direction, rhythm, changing form, gesture, posture, motion of certain parts of the body (while others remain still), quality of movement (gentle, sharp, etc.), subtle movement (breath, vibration), changing facial expression, use of the space, etc.

Sound. Listening for pitch, volume, rhythm, timbre, clarity (or its lack), accent, breath, sound versus speech, gibberish, the distinct voices of different roles, song/melody, pauses/silences. Also noticing sounds of objects in contact with the psoloist: creak of floorboards, pounding on wall, etc. Also opening to indoor and outdoor sounds that may affect or interact with the psolodrama (e.g., a thunderclap, sounds of crickets, traffic noise).

Other elements to “witness for” are more subjective—meaning that the witness may perceive something very differently from how the psoloist experiences it:

Emotion. Noticing what the psoloist’s feelings seem to be; how they are expressed (through a facial expression, a tear, a yell, a joyous dance, etc.); what may have caused or triggered different emotions; and what overall emotional mood or energy is conveyed by the psolodrama.

Image. Early in the progression, before words are added (in the authentic movement phase), the witness may perceive a number of images arising and passing away—including some that the psoloist is unaware of. As the psolodrama evolves, more concrete pictures may be painted by the psoloist’s position, gestures, movement through space, as well as her use of sounds and words. Images can evoke activities (swimming, pulling on a rope, dancing in a ballet), elements of nature (a flower growing, snow falling, a rotting log, a butterfly emerging from its chrysalis), locations (a room with smooth walls, the depths of the ocean, the back seat of a car, a dark cave), unusual situations (a nuclear explosion, walking on the moon, being pregnant), fantasies (touching the sky, fighting a dragon, transforming into an alien)—anything imaginable that can be depicted physically and/or aurally.

Role. On the more objective side, the awareness of how a character is expressed physically and through sound and words. On the subjective side, the perception of the human (or non-human) attributes of a role (e.g., the age of the role, its gender, nationality, race, personality/character, sexuality, goals/hopes/fears/desires, etc.); the type of role (real, imagined, mythological or archetypal, familial, etc.); the likely psychodramatic classification of the role (protagonist, auxiliary ego, double, director, audience—or

unclear); the nature of the relationship between the role and the psoloist herself; and any change, transformation, conflict, story, or emotional arc involving that role. (For more on the range and variety of potential roles, see Robert Landy's taxonomy of roles—1993, pp.163-243.)

Story. Noticing whether the psolodrama is comprised of one scene/story, a series of related scenes forming one coherent story, a series of loosely related or unrelated scenes/stories—or the lack of a clear story/progression, or constant change. For each scene or story, awareness of the structure (e.g. beginning—middle—end, exposition—climax—resolution, vertical take-off, cliff-hanger ending, etc.); the characters involved in the story and what function each serves; the passage of time during the story, when in time it takes place, and the time relative to other scenes (e.g., is the psolodrama in chronological order); the conflict at the heart of the story (if there is one); the emotional journey of the story; and the meanings, messages, themes, or morals of the story.

Metaphor. Awareness of the psoloist's use of metaphor on the level of language (“my anger is a volcano!”), image (creating the volcano through body language and sound), role (becoming and speaking as the “Volcano of Anger”), story (a tale of a volcano ready to burst), and meaning/interpretation (how the image/role/story of the volcano parallels some theme, person, event, or cognitive/behavioral pattern in the psoloist's life).

Interpretation. Noticing links and parallels between the content of the psolodrama and the psoloist's life, as well as potential messages or lessons the psolodrama may have for the psoloist, the witness, or for others. Note that it is important for the witness to notice his own interpretive thinking—and to avoid attaching to those

thoughts as “real” or “important.” One’s interpretations are just thoughts, and may or may not be useful for the psoloist to hear. Often, by letting go of the need to interpret, the witness can reopen to the present, becoming more aware of what the psoloist is actually doing moment-by-moment.

Countertransference. Although this term is usually used to denote the feelings (conscious or unconscious) of a psychotherapist in reaction to her client, in the witness-psoloist relationship it can be used to signify self-awareness on the part of the witness: noticing what effect the psoloist and psolodrama are having on the witness’s own physical, emotional, and mental state. This can include empathy with the psoloist (or a lack thereof); humor, laughter, being entertained; attraction or aversion to the psoloist/psolodrama; physical reactions (somatic countertransference) such as sleepiness/fatigue, discomfort, nausea, pain, etc. (perhaps caused by a dislike or avoidance of the content of the psolodrama or of the psoloist himself), or conversely warmth, comfort, sexual attraction, etc.; wishes for a particular outcome to the psolodrama; a desire to help (or harm) the psoloist—or to support (or disrupt) the psolodrama; a sense of comparison or competition with, or envy of, the psoloist/psolodrama (including feeling “one up” or “one down” in relation to the psoloist); and an awareness of how one’s perceptions of the psolodrama—including one’s interpretations on a metaphorical and psychological level—are colored by one’s own feelings in reaction to the psoloist or to the content of the psolodrama.

Gestalt. Finally, taking a mental “step back” from the psolodrama, noticing what impression it leaves as a whole: its impact (or lack of impact) on the dimensions of depth, emotion, and insight; whether it seems to open new doors for the psoloist or cover new

ground—or, instead, repeat previously established patterns or habits; how well the witness feels he can understand and personally relate (or not) to the journey of the psolodrama.

The lists above convey only some aspects of what the witness can be present to. There may be infinite ways of viewing a psolodrama, e.g. through an aesthetic/artistic lens, a political (e.g. feminist) lens, a psychopathological lens, a cultural anthropological lens, etc. The witness is limited only by his creativity, his ability to be present, and his openness to being moved by what is unfolding before him.

(For an approach to training as a witness in using these different elements, see the exercise Lenses of Awareness in the chapter “Authentic Movement.”)

Interaction During the Psolodrama

Now and then, during the process of witnessing the psoloist, the witness may be called upon to take a more active role.

Coaching the Psoloist

As described more fully in the subsequent chapter “Coaching Psolodrama,” the witness may at times be asked to provide coaching—e.g., when the psoloist feels lost, confused, stuck, or overwhelmed.

When working with a peer, the witness should never coach unless explicitly asked by the psoloist, before and/or during the psolodrama. Any coaching given should be very

brief and aimed at returning the psoloist to action, e.g. “become your mother,” or “try talking with your director.”

Note that in the client-therapist relationship, coaching may be the norm rather than the exception. Depending on the client’s preference and need—and especially early in the process of learning about psolodrama—the therapist may take a very active role, speaking up often to help encourage the psoloist or to focus on a particular role or scene. (*More on the therapist’s role appears in Part IV, the chapter “Working with Individuals.”*)

Caring for the Psoloist

When the psoloist is alone in the space he may feel so overcome by strong emotions—e.g., sadness, loneliness, alienation, depression, grief, rage—that it becomes difficult to continue.

Usually in these moments it is best for the witness to first wait in silence and simply hold the space, allowing the psoloist time to experience his feelings. Typically, the wave of strong emotion passes and the psoloist continues his psolodrama. Or he may decide he cannot continue, and would like to transition to the sharing process.

However, if the psoloist appears to be lost in his emotions, overwhelmed, or asking for help, the witness can ask gently whether it is OK to come sit with him to provide support. Quietly sitting near—and perhaps (first asking permission) holding the psoloist’s hand, or touching (not patting) his shoulder or back, etc.—can communicate caring and help the psoloist either continue to express the emotion he is experiencing, eventually resume the psolodrama, or transition into a sharing dialogue, whichever occurs naturally or feels most comfortable to the psoloist.

Other Aspects of Witnessing Psolodrama

Taking Notes

At times—particularly when I am in the role of therapist, observing a client doing psolodrama—I find it useful to have a pad at hand and jot notes about what I am noticing. As therapist, I sometimes take notes during a session, which I then review prior to the next session to refresh my memory of what occurred. Taking notes can sometimes help me stay present and focused, and in the sharing phase makes it easier to recall certain moments, roles, and key phrases or lines of dialogue.

However, I do not recommend taking notes when *learning* how to witness. In my own case, having practiced for many years, I am able to take notes while staying connected with the psoloist. But writing can steal one's focus, drawing the inexperienced witness's attention away from the subtle stream of detail and moment-by-moment changes in what the psoloist is doing. (In fact, I often see new witnesses in workshops, even without notes to distract, only listening to their psoloist, not watching them.) When teaching authentic movement and psolodrama to new groups, I like to introduce witnessing in its pure form—as a meditation, in which the psoloist is the object—with nothing (no pen and paper) coming in between the witness and the psoloist.

Later, as witnesses become more experienced, they may wish to try taking notes and see how this affects the experience for themselves and for their psoloist.

Moving: the Active Witness

It is fine for the witness to quietly change positions—e.g., to find a new place to sit or stand—while observing the psolodrama. This can help if, for example, the psoloist is facing away from the witness, or is difficult to hear.

Active witnessing (described earlier in the chapter on authentic movement) goes beyond merely shifting positions or points of view. When being an active witness to authentic movement, the witness—either from the sidelines or entering the space—uses her own physical movement to echo the body positions and movements of the mover. This can help the witness empathize with the mover, to better understand how a particular position, posture, stance, facial expression, or gesture feels. Active witnessing can also help the witness stay more alert—and therefore more present—to what is happening moment by moment.

For witnessing psolodrama, doing some subtle active witnessing from the sidelines (e.g., mimicking the psoloist’s facial expression or a certain gesture to feel how it feels) is fine. However, so as not to interfere with the psoloist’s process, the witness should remain silent and keep a sufficient distance from the psoloist so her movement is not perceived. It is not recommended to enter the space with the psoloist.

Overcoming Obstacles: Sleepiness, Restlessness, and Distractedness

As in meditation, witnessing requires skillfulness in dealing with the habits of the mind/body, such as sleepiness, restlessness, or a wandering mind. As mentioned above, taking notes, changing positions, and active witnessing from the sidelines can all help the witness wake up and refocus.

It is also helpful for the psoloist to remember his mission: to be in service to the psoloist. Knowing that he will be responsible for sharing afterward with the psoloist what he saw and heard can also motivate the witness to remain attentive.

When sleepy, the witness can simply stand up, or, alternatively, try sitting for a while with hands on head or arms sticking straight up in the air. Taking a few deep breaths (quietly!) can also help, as does a drink of water (or even better, tea). Note that it does *not* work well to just try to hang on and “get through it”—a drowsy witness can miss many details and does not provide a trustworthy container for the psoloist’s process.

If the witness is feeling restless—itching to move or take action—standing up can also help; he can even move quietly if needed, or try active witnessing from the sidelines. Channeling his energy into jotting notes may also work well.

For a wandering, distracted mind, it is important to remember the analogy to meditation: to notice the horse has wandered and re-tether it to the hitching post. This means the witness continually returns to the psoloist as the object of his meditation. The witness can challenge and refocus his mind by intentionally noticing different aspects of what the psoloist is doing—being aware of what he is “witnessing for,” the lenses or chest of drawers described earlier. For example, if he finds he tends to focus on the psoloist’s words, it may be helpful to notice what her body language is saying, or what exactly is differentiating the different roles being portrayed: is the psoloist shifting posture, changing the pitch of her voice, etc.? He can also briefly shift the focus to himself, noticing what effect the psolodrama is having on him physically and emotionally—and then return focus to the psoloist to find what in the psolodrama is causing him to feel that way. For a wandering mind a little subtle active witnessing—

mimicking the psoloist's gestures and facial expressions—can also help reconnect the witness to what the psoloist is doing.

Final Thoughts

Learning to be a good psolodrama witness is useful training for anyone, including therapists, counselors, coaches, facilitators, and leaders of all kinds. Being mindful, attentive, and nonjudgmental when observing another takes time to learn and can bear many fruits. One needs to learn how to be a meditator while interacting with another; to sit with what's arising, in oneself and the other, including difficult, personal material; to practice acceptance; to be supportive and nonjudgmental. It's an attitude and skillset that one can bring to one's work and also to one's personal and family life. It is a gift to those one loves and a way of relating to others on a daily basis, in whatever context one finds oneself in.

Finally, learning to witness is part of training to be a psoloist: how I witness another is also how I witness myself; learning to support another in a nonjudgmental way expands my ability to do that for myself.

Witnessing during the psolodrama is just one part of the witnessing role, and therefore only one way in which the witness is in service to the psoloist. The witness's responsibilities continue in the psolodrama sharing process, described in the next chapter. As we shall see, the same care and discernment discussed in this chapter applies to the sharing process.

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