Using Psychodramatic Methods for Theological Reflection in Clinical Pastoral Education:
An Introduction

The Diana Goss Professional Paper Award 2017

Australian and New Zealand Association of Clinical Pastoral Education
Using Psychodramatic Methods for Theological Reflection in Clinical Pastoral Education:

An Introduction

In my experience theological reflection has always been part of Clinical Pastoral Education. It was a heading in every verbatim presentation, to which most presenters, including myself, would write a few lines. However, invariably there would not be enough time in the presentation to do it justice. Occasionally someone would write or say something that was wise and perceptive,¹ but more often than not it consisted of a scriptural reference or something remembered from Sunday School or a sermon. When later we changed the heading from ‘theological reflection’ to ‘spiritual reflection’ nothing substantially changed.

It was in fact not until I became aware of the Education for Ministry program from the University of the South that I began to appreciate that theological reflection was an emerging and noble tradition seen to bridge the gap between academic theology and practical theology. It was being pursued far more widely than in CPE; it was a valued part of the seminaries and theological colleges. It was in fact part of the more general interest in processes of reflection in adult learning generally, especially within the professions. It found classic expression in a number of books such as Killen and de Beer’s *The Art of Theological Reflection* and Graham, Walton and Ward’s *Theological Reflection: Methods*. Frameworks for reflection, for both individuals and groups, were offered that enable experience to be distilled into a text of some sort that in turn could be brought up against the Christian heritage or tradition, so leading to insight and the possibility of new action and experience in the light of this ‘theological reflection’. It is a valuable process to deepen a person’s faith and ministry, their self-understanding and their appreciation of their social and cultural milieu. But it takes time and commitment as a process in its own right; it doesn’t work all that well tacked onto a verbatim presentation. Certainly some ‘theological reflection’ issues may come up in the main body of the supervision session; but this is not necessarily following the frameworks classically offered in the discipline.

The matter goes deeper and further however I think. It involves both the nature of reflection and the nature of theology.

¹ The most striking example in my experience of theological reflection, in fact theological reflection-in-action (see below) that has stayed with me was part of a presentation many years ago by a religious sister. In it she was attending a dying man surrounded by family and medical staff. The decision had been taken to turn off his life supports. He had asked that he have one last glass of whiskey. He took a sip and passed it to the next person. And so it was passed around the circle. At one point the sister said quietly but audibly ‘The Last Supper’. The atmosphere changed immediately. There was a sense of the sacred, if not the holy. People quietly wept. What was happening had become intensely real in a cosmic sense.
The reflection that the art of ‘theological reflection’ presupposes is reflection-on-action. We experience something in our ministry that we wish to present to supervision. When we get home we write it up as a verbatim or case study. We have completely withdrawn from action to reflect. Maybe we try to bring our theology into the reflection also; we may even work through one of the frameworks suggested in a text like Killen and de Beer. We then present this to our supervisor or group and together further reflection is engaged, still well and truly withdrawn from the original action. This can be a most valuable and important exercise. It may well lead to renewed and more effective action later in our ministry.

But as Donald Schon showed in his influential *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*, the type of reflection that also needs to be cultivated in the caring professions generally is reflection-in-action, the capacity to reflect while we are acting and so to adjust our action accordingly. It is this ability that enables spontaneity and real engagement with the other person. May it not also have a theological dimension, namely theological reflection-in-action. I think it does.

One of the most significant thinkers on the issue of action and reflection was the Scottish philosopher John Macmurray. He advocated that action is prior to reflection, practice to theory. Action in his analysis contains and is constituted by feeling and thought, into which we withdraw to reflect. As other thinkers have done, he saw the three personal pronouns common to all language as fundamental views of life and the world. The third person perspective (the ‘he, she, it’) is a reflective withdrawal not only from action, but also from feeling; and in its extreme form is the basis of science, objective and impersonal. The second person perspective (the ‘you’) is a reflective withdrawal from action into feeling; and is the basis of the arts, objective and personal. The first person perspective (the ‘I’) is action, under motive and intention; personal and inter-subjective. In Macmurray’s terminology this is the basis of religion. He does not mean ‘religion’ in the sense of the empirical religions but as a form of reflection about personal community and how such community forms and sustains itself. Religion in Macmurray’s sense contains and is constituted by art and science. Alongside the withdrawal into reflective feeling and thinking, it has its own unique form of reflection that guides action while acting, namely reflection-in-action; and it is this form of reflection that informs spontaneity and self transcendence.

For Macmurray, the way to develop the capacity to reflect-in-action is to gain flexibility in the intention of the act. Acts have both motive and intention. Motive, which can be unconscious, is in broad terms for pastoral care established by the values the person has in his or her life. It is intention, which is always conscious and needs to be, that determines our
actions moment by moment. It is dependent on the changing knowledge we have of where and toward whom we are acting. To develop the capacity to reflect-in-action we have to develop the capacity to ‘know’ the situation, and the people within it, in which we are acting; and this means increasing our ability ‘to attend’ to the Other. This is a skill we can develop. The more our attention is on the Other, the less our attention is on ourselves; and the more trusting we become of our intuitions and the flow of our consciousness as we process our increasing knowledge of the Other. As our ‘self consciousness’ lessens, our consciousness of the Other takes over and our intentions alter with a sense of spontaneity and life which is engaging and even healing.

So I have believed for a long time that the reflection we should be focussing on in CPE is reflection-in-action, while not neglecting reflection-on-action. And by the same token our theological reflection, given the whole nature of pastoral practice, should be primarily theological reflection-in-action, and the ways it can be encouraged and grown within our pastoral practice. I think psychodrama methods have much to offer in this.

But before that, I want to also say something about the nature of theology. It is not unusual for professors of theology in secular universities nowadays to declare themselves to be atheists. Universities are centres for knowledge from the third person perspective, knowledge ‘about’ that is objective and impersonal. That there are other forms of knowledge equally important can even be denied. So it is possible to treat theology entirely as a third person perspective discipline looking objectively at texts, archeology, history sociology, and so forth. Is that what we want in pastoral practice and CPE? What about the personal, the subjective and inter-subjective? Even in some theological colleges there can be a strong commitment to theology as rational and objective, a third person discipline. How else can it be taken seriously in our culture? But the ‘living human document’ as a subject can be left out.

That science is believed to be the only legitimate form of knowledge is thought by some to be a cultural crisis we are currently experiencing. Science is important. It reveals truth as a correspondence between what we think and what is really ‘out there’. But feelings, the basis of the arts, are equally important. They also reveal truth not as a correspondence but as a coherence reproduced in the art as a reflection of ‘what is out there’. So also actions, containing both thought and feeling; truth in action is found in actions, such as care and love, which build and sustain personal community. And the knowledge shared between two people as friends is not scientific knowledge. I can have the sense of knowing someone without in fact knowing very much ‘about’ them. They are different forms of knowledge, one objective and impersonal, the other subjective and personal. That is the essence of the
cultural crisis some think we face.

I regularly ride my bike down to the local cemetery which is on a promontory overlooking the sea. I sit looking out to sea, the mountains behind me; a 360 degree wondrous view all around me. I talk to God and Christ and the Holy Spirit there. I speak directly in the first person. I feel the Spirit in response. I come away knowing I know who I have been talking to, and of being myself known in that relationship; very personal, very subjective. The other day I was riding back when I held open a gate for a car going the other way. The driver stopped, wound down the window, and said, ‘Hullo Reverend’. ‘You know me?’ I said, ‘I am David’. ‘Yes, I know. I have seen you in Tilba. I wanted to tell you that I walk in the Holy Spirit. I feel the Spirit in my heart as this wonderful presence’. ‘That’s wonderful’ I said. I had just come from a particularly powerful time in the Spirit myself. I was bowled over by his openness and directness. He had no teeth, he was a battler. There was no third person theology here. Just first person personal, subjective knowledge of the Other that we shared as two human beings.

This for me is the crisis in theology. And because pastoral care is so much about the personal and the subjective, we can’t duck it. Theology locked in the third person perspective can and often does leave the personal reality of God out of the equation. Can the three personal perspectives on life and God be brought together in our training and supervision?

The answer is of course ‘yes’, if we make action the primary focus, not just in theory as CPE has always done, but in training practice as well. Action contains both thought and feeling; and focus on action in training can highlight both reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action. This is what the theology and philosophy and practice of JL Moreno, the founder of psychodrama makes possible?

In an earlier essay, My Use of Psychodrama Method in Clinical Pastoral Education Supervision, I dealt generally with the use of psychodrama in CPE training. I want now to concentrate on its potential for theological reflection.

Moreno never doubted the cosmic dimension of human life following a profound experience in the early twenties. He felt he was receiving Words from God. He wrote them down in red pencil on the walls of the house he lived in, later to publish them as The Words of the Father. When they were translated into English in the forties, he added a good deal of commentary. Up to that point he had shown a profound interest in religion and had founded a group he called the religion of encounter. He was a Sephardic Jew and had been raised in the
traditions. The idea of encounter was very much in the air in Vienna at the time; Martin Buber started his I and Thou in 1916 and published it in 1923. In the analysis that developed in Moreno’s thought, he believed the God of the Old Testament was the remote third person perspective God, the He-God. With Christ the Son, God came close as the You-God.

To conceive of what is most universal and most distant as being so near that it can be felt and touched is the paradox of the Christian God. It is only a short step from the father-concept of God to the love-concept of God; then there is a final step, presented in this book - which is also a return to the beginning - to the creator-concept of God.²

The ‘return to the beginning’ was Moreno’s experience of the I-God which produced The Words of the Father. Rather than name the I-God as the Spirit, as he might have done if he had been more steeped in the New Testament, he reverted to the Father, but not now remote and distant but as someone he was experiencing directly within his own subjectivity. He had ‘role-reversed’ with God personally. He now knew God as pure subjectivity and spontaneity, as the Creator who is still creating and calls us to be co-creators with Him. And this was a universal experience, God without religion, applicable to all humanity. The first Christians, filled with the Holy Spirit, no doubt felt something similar.

All theology, from whatever personal perspective, first, second or third, is in some sense a ‘role-reversal’. The academic theologian, while writing predominantly from the third person perspective, nonetheless is claiming that what he or she is writing is truth, is how God sees it. So also the Christologist, taking personal relationship into account, is also putting him or herself into Christ’s ‘shoes’, seeing it as he saw it. But in Moreno’s psychodramatic stage, we are invited to fully ‘role reverse’ with God (or Christ, or the Buddha, or Mary, or Krishna, or dear Grandma, or my Higher Self, or anyone I might look up to and esteem whom I have internalised); to be that person and speak as him or her. In the spontaneity of the moment, what we say as that person in response to the situation on the stage will come from our deep sense of relationship with that person within us. Personal knowledge is far more complex and multifaceted than objective, impersonal knowledge, and can come forth from us when we are warmed up and spontaneous.

Moreno’s psychodrama stage itself aids cosmic or theological reflection. It consists of three main parts; the warm up stage, which surrounds the enactment stage where the drama takes place, and the balcony. In some of the stages Moreno built, the balcony was some nine feet about the enactment stage. People looked down from a height; a sense of a God’s eye or cosmic view came spontaneously. But the balcony can be just as effective if only a small

2 Moreno - Words of the Father p.166
In using psychodrama method in CPE group supervision, God (or Christ, or Mary, etc.) can be brought onto the stage at any point as the presenter or protagonist requires. For most of us in the work of chaplaincy and pastoral care, God or Christ or Mary or Buddha, etc. are already a central part of our inner resources and resilience, our strength in the engagement of our work. An auxiliary, a member of the training group, takes up the role, and positions themselves on the balcony. In the re-enactment of the pastoral encounter, the protagonist can refer at any time, while under direction, to ‘God’, etc. and ask ‘Him’ a question. They then exchange positions with the auxiliary, who re-asks the question to ‘God’, now the protagonist, and ‘God’ answers. The embedded wisdom and knowledge of ‘God’ in the presenter can come forth in the answer. If need be there can be further role-reversals with the auxiliary. It is a spontaneous theological reflection-in-action. Such a process can also help instil a ‘God-place’ in the psyche of the presenter which can become readily available with practice as a source of intuition and insight in their everyday work.

Invariably in any pastoral presentation, the presenter identifies a critical point in the original pastoral conversation they want to particularly focus on in the supervision. This is likely to involve mirroring and modelling, using other members of the training group, as explained in my earlier paper. The presenter can stand on the stage viewing this as themselves and witness the mirroring and modelling, or he or she can role reverse with their nominated figure on the balcony; or both. Each position will draw out a different reflection from the presenter. It is the director’s role to help draw out the presenter’s reflection and insight.

In such a situation where a presenter has identified a critical point in the original pastoral conversation, and then seen in the supervision how he or she might have acted differently and hence been more effective, it is typical for the next stage to be a role test, to cement the learning. He or she re-enacts the original pastoral conversation, but now incorporating the new learning, in the here and now. Further cementing can take place if the scene is re-enacted again, but with an auxiliary as the carer, and the carer now taking up God’s position on the balcony. Then, in a brief series of role-reversals, the presenter can affirm and further cement their learning from their God-within, or their Higher Self.

The great advantage in using psychodramatic methods in CPE supervision is that everything is brought into the here and now. You are not looking at a pastoral encounter a week ago, as represented by the verbatim. You are bringing the ‘verbatim’ onto the stage in the here and now. So you are dealing immediately with what is happening in the encounter.
This allows reflection-in-action to actually be practised in the moment by learning to ‘attend’ in the here and now. And being able to bring ‘God’ or whoever is part of the presenter’s internal spiritual resilience onto the stage in the here and now also, means that theological reflection-in-action can also be practised within the actual training group that is simulating the original pastoral conversation. Much learning can be taken away for the pastoral carer’s everyday practice.

**Bibliography**


Macmurray, J. (1957) *The Self as Agent: being the Gifford Lectures delivered in the University of Glasgow in 1953*. Faber and Faber, London.


