

Psychodrama in the Presence of Whales

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Abstract

This article describes the empirical results of an experience carried out during the last seven years with working parties in the context of psychodrama encounters. Part of the work included direct contact established with whales. The very experience itself, its psychodramatic methodology and theory was based on J. L. Moreno's role theory and developed as support of the process and upon this "inter-species" communication in nature. The objective is therapeutic and individual, encompassing relationships and insight.

Key Words *Psychodrama, whales, Southern Right whales, roles, interspecies communication, matrix of identity, child development*

Foreword by Zerka T. Moreno

"Philosophers make a distinction between an "a-priori" knowledge discovered without empirical investigation and an "a-posteriori" knowledge based upon empirical results"

William Bechtel

Every original approach to the relationship between humans and nature should be appreciated. Monica Zuretti has found such a path, using a basic formulation in J. L. Moreno's personality theory. It pains me to read over and over again that practitioners of psychodrama "have no theory of personality upon which to base their work," thereby completely overlooking the chapter in *Psychodrama, Volume I* entitled: "*The Spontaneity Theory of Child Development.*" Moreno was a philosopher as well as a working physician. While his report of how many ideas arose out of his playing with children in the gardens of Vienna before the First World War is well known, little is known about his work during that war in a children's hospital in a resettlement camp named Mitterndorf, in Austria. Between 1917-1918 during he had ample opportunity to observe children's behaviour in its many aspects. It was there that he conceived of sociometry as a method for improving the miserable living conditions of that camp's inmates. As a polymath, he was attacked because his thinking did not fit into a narrow, established psychological framework. That's true and it is exactly why he made such fundamental contributions, as does any pioneer who has to struggle against such a narrow view. Fortunately, not every psychologist takes this position. For example, Bischof (1964) included Moreno in his book *Interpreting*

Personality Theories, when the book's editor told him that Moreno did not belong there, Bischof informed him that if Moreno did not stay in, the publisher could not have the book.

In this article Monica Zuretti shows her fine grasp of Moreno's thinking, especially his notion of *The Matrix of Identity*: the child's original link with its environment and the basis for all later life experiences. The authors Monica Zuretti and Paula Echaniz interweave this with nature and find a correlation with whales, which live in water much in the way the child developed within its mother's womb. For it is whales who continue to have, among other aspects, this ancient primeval awareness. The lack of which we humans suffer. Bringing the protagonists back to that level of being, integrating themselves into their very own niche with nature and their lives, is the foundation of healing.

It is a profoundly spiritual route to that healing.

Introduction

This article introduces the empirical results of an experiment carried out during the last seven years with working parties in the context of psychodrama encounters. This work included direct contact with whales as part of the work; whether from the land or by boarding a boat for one or two hours weather permitting. These encounters have been taking place two or three times a year since 1998. Felicitas Mira, one of the team members, had carried out some earlier experiments in Hawaii this prompted her to expand and to contact the Southern Right Whales in Argentina, which was subsequently done. This species, the Southern Right Whale (*Eubalaena Franca Antarctica*), is found spread throughout the southern hemisphere and found off the coast of Argentina in Peninsula Valdés, Puerto Pirámides, Chubut Patagonia to meet, mate and give birth.

This psychodrama experiment working with groups exposed to contact with whales over time shows the psychological reaction the whales' presence produces and the consequent development occurring during the therapeutic process.

Initially the team attempted to carry out therapeutic work with captive dolphins in one of the marine centres in Argentina, similar to those carried out in Miami or Cuba. Due to bureaucratic difficulties this project could not develop further. Therefore, it was decided to carry out a similar project in contact with the Southern Right Whales.

Background

In universal literature the interest of humans in cetaceans (whales, dolphins and porpoises) was born in the dark night of olden times. They have been respected since the beginnings of spoken language and can be heard in texts and seen in symbols around the world. The Bible describes one of the prophets, Jonah, living for some time in the womb of a whale. The mitre, forever present as a religious ornament, represents the mouth of a whale. Delphi is the name of the most famous Greek oracle. Etruscans drew images of whales in their tombs. The Dogon people of Africa, as well as other native people in different parts of the world include whales in their mythological origins. In classic tales such as *Pinocchio*, the protagonist remains for a long time inside a whale, thus achieving his transformation from puppet into human. Melville's story of *Moby Dick* represents the clash between two forms of intelligence: the whale and man, Captain Ahab.

This information, accumulated at random more out of personal rather than scientific interest, led two members of the team to begin the search in action. The first trip took place to lay the groundwork for the preparatory phase. The hypothesis to be tested was that interaction with the whales has an impact on human psychic structure. The psychotherapeutic method used was psychodrama and based on role theory created by J. L. Moreno.

The belief is that as *Auxiliary Egos* the whales allow the approach to closed cores of the human ego structure. In role theory, the "ego" arises from the roles humans play and develop within those bonds, in contact with significant others in the reality around them. This development takes place in various successive matrices: space, time, continents, genetic and maternal, family, social and cosmic identity (Moreno, 1994).

In the course of this development, the human being is never alone; s/he is always related to something or someone. In the cosmic matrix, s/he relates to chemistry, a planet, a galaxy, which has made it possible for the *self* to make the fundamental leap to become a conscious being, of which the human psyche is a part. In its genetic matrix, there remain origins of a determined corporal structure, expressing itself in bonds between different molecules, containing the memory of determined physical characteristics and experiences and emotions, relations that have existed since the origin of mankind. This genetic matrix prepares a being, which is implanted in a maternal matrix.

The existence in the maternal womb, together with the cosmic and

genetic memory, develops in the foetus as a group, with its body and the capacity for "emotion" (Maturana 1992). After birth, the matrix of identity is created, in which psychosomatic roles will develop; starting with the role of the breather (Moreno 1994), changing from a symbiotic and dependent life to a life of autonomy, directly related to the atmosphere and the cosmos (Zuretti 1995). Although in the first breath the response to the lack of oxygen is automatic, it implies instant learning: an act of creation, a choice for life. Without that first spontaneous, creative contact there can only be death.

The matrix of identity, where psychosomatic roles are developed, is based on a law of complementary roles. The role of the mother requires the fulfilment of multiple functions and a response to each one of a baby's needs and equally as fast as the answer was given in the maternal matrix during pregnancy. From the matrix of identity arises the communication known as *tele*, the reality-based mutual linking of perception of the other in both directions. In this almost absolute union of the identity matrix's first undifferentiated phase, the only differentiated role is that of the breather, whose complementary role is the cosmos. All the other roles are as yet totally undifferentiated.

In the second phase of differentiation something moves away, appears and disappears, does not respond on the same level of immediacy. It differentiates itself. Total unity no longer exists. In the third phase the great leap is to find differences in the continuity of the experience. Separation of the twosome mother-baby begins and other strangers appear. In the fourth or mirror phase, all these roles have acquired a certain independence. There is recognition of self and of one's own image: the assumption of self. In the fifth phase of reversal of roles with others, the self clearly arises.

Within the identity matrix all psychosomatic roles will develop, from the sensory ones on up to physically functions ones, which will be learned by relating one to the other. The matrix of identity's complementary world is co-operative and sustains each achievement of creation as well as spontaneity. Nevertheless, in the present world the influence of the social matrix makes an early entrance. This social matrix is in itself competitive and devaluating of the individual. Very soon, the clash between the *matristic* culture, which Maturana described as the original human culture in which the value is based on affective complementarity, and the patriarchal or matriarchal culture based on competition and fighting for individual survival is established. The social matrix will either complement or collide with what was developed in the matrix of identity.

The family matrix will spin between a mystical culture, part of the identity matrix, and a patriarchal structure carved into all levels of the social matrix (Maturana 1992).

When the group members come into contact with whales they are immersed into a social matrilineal structure that survives in a planet where mammalian species, humans included, have chosen the patriarchal structure. The whales' social matrix society immediately questions human structures based on competition. The constant attitude of cooperation existing in the most primary aspects of cetacean life made the humans visualise their own predatory activity and therefore, they had to make a choice between an attitude based upon either their old matrix-agricultural culture or the pastoral patriarchal one (Maturana 1992). Groups involved in this project were bound to look into this world-wide-international-social and personal issue.

As described previously, the human's first contact with life outside the womb is in the role of the breather. The human being, forgetting the first choice in that life (to take its first breath) when s/he passes from symbiotic and dependent breathing in a water milieu to the independent breathing in an air milieu, has allowed this life-sustaining action to be transformed into a reflex-action that can become conscious only through hard training. In the presence of whales, humans find themselves before a vital and deep disjunction: a species that consciously handles its breath. A transfer accompanies each inspiration or expiration from water to air change, managing time and frequency. All of this implies a form of assisted learning, where the mother of the newborn must have an active presence.

This first contact with the basic psychosomatic breather role re-connects the members of the group with the instant of the beginning of thought the primary-creative decision to live. The encounter between whales and humans opens the door to individual memories, to the origin of present symptoms needing to be recognised, understood and corrected. It is utterly important to become aware of the breather role and also to recognise the contacting role, one that may or may not offer support and security.

The whale's attitude of surrender to and confidence in its immediate elemental environment conveyed to each human, observing this process, the existence or lack of this confidence in its matrix and environmental situation from its own evolution while the psychosomatic roles were developing. Such as in the relationship with the mother and

significant others that allowed the infant to enter the social matrix based upon family roles. The possibility of communicating is discovered (Maturana, 1992). Creating gestures and responding to them, the fact of transforming them into meaningful symbols, all these once more bring each individual in contact with their own history: the experience of being seen and ability to see, the matrix elements which have remained imprinted at the corporal level. These embody attitudes of self-esteem and co-operation, which the competitive structure of the social matrix has underestimated or even destroyed in its constant appraisal of competing with others, instead of focusing on developing oneself and on co-operation.

Thus when the whale raises its tail out of the water, against almost every physical law, by its own ability and will, confronts the members of the group with the oblivion towards their own capacities. These strengths have remained in the shadows with in the constant eagerness to satisfy the exterior world demands and are at risk of disappearing. The absolutely precise, voluntary and tender contact exercised by the whales between themselves or with humans opens up the way to corporal memory of tenderness, present or absent in each individual. Psychodrama with whales acts directly at the level of the structuring moment of the “ego,” in the matrix of identity. It is a bridge to achieve manifestation of emotions deeply hidden in those origins.

Finding an accepting milieu, a receiver into the existence of a matrix society, such as one of the cetaceans in a large continent and comprehensive group, allows the first scenes of emotional reconstruction. The person is enabled to become an *attractor* and keep the recovered emotion alive and rediscover its language. It sustains the support of an ego that can continue its creative expression without colliding with patriarchal competitive structures.

Specific Methodology

Workshops for psychodrama in contact with whales

As for any psychodrama group, the objectives for these workshops were therapeutic for the individual and the group members and / or aimed to link with self-knowledge. Two or three daily sessions were carried out determined by individuals' needs, the rhythm of the group and the time in contact with the whales. The setting varied according to circumstances. It often is a natural setting, be it a boat, a beach, a place in the cliffs or a workroom. The contact by the participants with the whales determined the individual's work. In each session of psychodrama, the classical

model of the three phases was used: warm-up, dramatisation / action and sharing and / or comments

Forming the group

For the experiment, the group was constructed as a workshop with a set time for beginning and end. Members were referred either by members of the team or by other professionals.

The encounter with the whales

The group met and went to the zones where the whales are present. The first contact is almost always from land, at a distance where we see a blow, a leap, a tail, a flipper, or a trace of movement. This first encounter never fails to be accompanied by deep emotions aroused in the watchers, each expressing themselves in a variety of different ways from other members of the group: jumping, shouting, crying, laughing, greeting or even the failing to see.

From that moment a special "language" is born (Maturana 1992), a communication between people and whales, a dialogue, an interaction arises where a gesture or even a thought obtains an answer, which immediately acquires meaning. The fact of putting together a thought with an emotion and giving it a meaning creates a symbol representing it. The second contact is carried out during whale watching from a boat or a raft, depending on availability, the time and weather conditions.

The first psychodrama session in the group has a very special function for its members concerning symbolic and significant links. Semantics are created, giving sense to forgotten non-verbal gestures and symbolic language. This is achieved by movement and transforming gestures into action and cognitive understanding. In these enacted scenes signs become symbols. They acquire representation and a special language is built. The key messages for carrying out the work appear. They facilitate the encounter of the original scene.

The different connections between whales and people are re-emphasised when the moment is focussed on in the scene. The enactment repeats these significant encounters as a specific warm-up to go to that original scene, the one which generated a difficulty, a sensation, a symptom, triggering a person of the group to experience that personal search. Two or three psychodrama sessions may take place during the day.

Protocols

Several protocols were selected, corresponding to:

- 1) Elaboration on mourning: related to the breather role.
- 2) Depression: phase of differentiation of the matrix of identity.
- 3) Self-esteem: third phase of the matrix of identity. Freeing of the complementary affects.
- 4) Self-recognition: fourth phase, focusing on oneself.
- 5) Assuming the complementary role: fifth phase of the matrix of identity, role reversal.

Case Example 1: The role of the breather

A woman in her forties presented with difficulties in her relationships, especially with her children. During the past few years she has been participating in a psychodrama group. Her mother died when she was a little girl. It had not yet been possible to treat this issue during her sessions.

After arriving in Buenos Aires (she lives abroad), the group gathered for the first time and, then and there, the need to focus on the contact with her mother became apparent as an objective for her trip. Before the trip from Buenos Aires to Patagonia, in a brief scene during this group encounter, the image of her mother came up, an image that up to then had been totally erased from her memory.

With this scene as a background, we have the first whale-watching outing. After the outing, she talks with one of the members of the team, she described it as having a great impact; this was manifested mainly through the sound of the deep breathing of an approaching whale. This breathing, a deep and low sound represented great exhaustion for her and enabled her to connect with the memory of the last moments of her mother's life, who had great difficulty in breathing. The long withheld emotions over her mother's death then came to the surface: the cognition, the recognition of a great absence, denied attention by various difficulties arising after this event when her own needs and emotions had remained hidden.

Following on from her psychodrama work and the conversation, during the next outing a mother whale was found tenderly holding her calf. Our attention focussed upon the attitude of availability and vulnerability shown by such a large mother, floating on her back, offering generous support to her calf. This new contact awoke in this woman the necessity to express her own needs more clearly and to make sure that they are

received and answered. This awareness allows her to work and expand on the relationships with her present family, her partner and the children. From then on, important healing with different ways of bonding takes place.

Comment: The impact of the sound of the whale's breathing in its effort to achieve a closer approach put the protagonist in contact with a much feared scene of her mother's death. Her experience of psychodrama with whales opened up the possibility for her to work through a long overdue mourning period.

Case Example 2: Phase of differentiation of the matrix of identity.

The patient is in her forties. She is undergoing therapy in her country of origin in Europe for a reactive depression that originated during the illness and subsequent death of her husband. During his illness she entered into a deep depression, which made it difficult for her to manage daily life situations, work and her involvement in groups. Her mental health situation made it impossible for her to mourn her husband after his death.

In the boat, during the first outing she kept herself to herself and was isolated from the rest of the group. Her behaviour remained unchanged during the first two days. Her attitude towards other members of the group shows that she is angry and resentful. She had insomnia and found it difficult to relate to the rest of the group members and does not participate in any of the activities. Coming back from the third outing she decided to engage with the group and is offered the opportunity to be the protagonist.

Up to that moment, the changes in the whales' use of space has caught her attention. They show up and disappear, in and out of our sensory perception when they are under the water until they reappear, always leaving a trace when they go down again. During the dramatisation in front of the sea, the water becomes important as it is visible from the window showing the presence of the whales and carrying their voices which can be heard when the sun sets. Dramatisation takes place at a slow rhythm.

She explores hard moments during his illness. The wedding day arrives; its anniversary is exactly on the same date as we are working. The wedding setting is by a lakeside in front of the water. While dramatising the ceremony, as she takes the role of the water, the fresh water of the lake greets the water of the sea and vice versa and they become one. In

the enactment the classic words of the wedding ceremony: "Until death do us part" have changed. In the role of water she announced "*Not even death can part us, because though we can walk in different spaces that are not always visible, the love does not disappear*". This reflected a similar image to the one she had registered earlier, as a message offered by the whales when entering and leaving the water, appearing and disappearing.

The entire group is puzzled before this - apparently small - change of words, totally changing the meaning, and the dramatisation takes a different rhythm. Her last words when in her husband's role as he says good-bye, are: "*Wherever there is water, there is life and you will find me through it. My desire is that you continue living happily, recalling the moments in which we were able to laugh together.*"

The following day, almost immediately after starting the whale watching outing, we found a large whale, alone. The captain said, "*Surely it is a male*". The whale approached and placed himself right before yesterday's protagonist and pulled an intense blow, giving her a total, free shower. For the first time in the group we heard her laughter. From that moment her recovery started with her new understanding and the work of mourning; she began to accept her solitude.

Comment: In this case, the ability of the whales to live inside and out of the water, in two different milieus, entering and leaving the area, perceivable to the senses, opened up the door to psychodramatic work. The loss related to the second phase of the matrix of identity was confronted. This second phase, where an aspect of that matrix up to then was part of a single being, became different, moved away, yet retained a link that must be discovered and returned to the social matrix.

Case Example 3: Third phase of the matrix of identity, freeing the limitation to its complement.

A successful professional, married young woman decided to undergo this experience merely as a means to gain insight. She only registered a slight history of depression and minimised its importance. During the first outing a whale approached the boat and moved all around it. Our protagonist watched this circular movement.

The whale always surfaced in front of her. She started to feel sick although she is used to sailing. The team member who was supporting encouraged her to, "*Let go of whatever it is you need to let go*". Later on she asked, "*Since when do you have all this inside you?*" The young

woman answers, "*Since a very long time.*" Just then the whale pulls out her head and stares at her directly. The eye can be clearly seen. Eye contact is maintained for a few moments like this, which is very unusual.

Back on land, during the psychodrama session as the protagonist she re-enacted this scene. As the whale, she says, "*I see you.*" Back in her own role she begins to cry hearing this message. Many scenes take place from that point. She shows that her present job takes a lot of energy out of her and she does not find any personal recognition in it and that her partner feels he is neglected and yet many things in the relationship seem to weigh more importantly than her own needs.

Finally, the moment of her nuclear conflicted scene arrived: her birth. Being a twin and arriving as the second child, her existence was ignored because she was not detected in her mother's womb. The objective of this group is to work on relationships. Her mother is present in the group. Then and there the mother and daughter can repair what had remained blocked in their relationship for thirty years. Upon their return home the important work continued. She changed her employment and works in an area where she can use her creativity.

Comment: The intervention of the whale in this case acts directly on the protagonist's defences. She discovered her hidden feelings, which did not enable her to manifest her needs and desires, due to the lack of response from the complementary roles, making it difficult for her to recognise them. When the whale's eye looked at her and recognised her, it gave her the necessary support to confront the difficult situations of her social matrix. Recognising, through that look, the absence (in her psychic memory) of a containing and loving look and the fact she was able to reconstruct it, gave the unconditional containment of the matrix of identity back to her ego. Now she feels she deserves affection and recognition, both at a professional and at an emotional level.

Case Example 4

Another young married woman with children quit her job not long ago and she has a significant depression. This member has enormous difficulty in valuing her own professional ability. The encounter with the whales takes place in a special way, at a distance. The connection was a whale's tail held up for a long time, in spite of the wind and the movement of the sea. During the psychodrama the message from the whale was: "*You can stand up.*" From then on, several scenes were presented during which she started to connect to her own resources, working on her self-esteem and multiple events of family mourning,

differentiating them from the mourning of losing her job.

Comment: *"You can stand up"* allowed her to find a back-up role and presented a mirror for her capacity to keep erect in spite of great difficulties. This message put her back in contact with the containing attitude functioning in her identity and family matrix through reconnecting with her father who died. She also recognised that she was vicariously living her own daughter's achievements. With this work, the turning point in the family matrix was achieved and allowed the insertion of the social matrix and healed it; this enabled a new attitude to her life possible.

Case Example 5

A fifty year old professional male is a high powered executive in a multinational business. During the outing, a whale made a clear approach towards him. Suddenly he began to feel sick and nauseated. Later, in amazement, he said, *"I have no recollection of having felt so sick since my childhood."* When asked about his experience of the outing, he said that he didn't have any conscious memory of it. The team thought that it was not possible to help him with the process he was undergoing at that time. However, after a few days he reported, *"I managed to correct my situation at work. I had a conflict with the firm for quite a long time, related to my own devaluation. It lasted for two years and I could not solve those difficulties. Now I have managed to do it without creating clashes. I corrected both professional and economic values."*

Comment: The dismissive answer related to the team and the whales, put in motion an attitude learned in the reversal of his family matrix roles, present in the fifth phase of the individual's identity matrix. This encounter with his own vulnerability and the reaction of devaluation due to that, which had had such a deep impact on him, allows him subsequently to react to the devaluation – nausea - from which he was suffering, recovering his self-esteem and resources and changing his work situation.

Conclusions

In this work, the structure of the inter-relational culture of the Southern Right Whale is fundamentally important. This culture enables humans to reconnect with their deeper memories of a matristic culture, present during the structuring period of their ego based on the psychosomatic roles developed in their matrix of identity. When participants came into contact with the gentle values of the matristic culture they were

confronted by a stark contrast to the over-valued ones of the dominant patriarchal or matriarchal culture of their own society. The dis-ease or the symptomatology demonstrated clear characteristics of an emotional confrontation, which was consistent with a competitive and war-based culture.

For all, the possibility of a culture based on trust and co-operation was discovered, one in which food is sought where there is plenty and no depredation is needed. Among the whales, instead of competing the males co-operate in order to achieve the survival of the species, the space for birthing is respected and cared for. The moment of copulation is celebrated like a ritual, within a circle of joy. The courting game, the voluntary breathing and within a bonding relationship, the special continuous and tender protection given to the calf, prepares the new beings for the continuity of emotion, conserving their characteristics.

For those of us who observe and absorb these lessons we gain a new perspective and a different understanding. Our subsequent action prepares us to achieve a change in our way of life and insertion into a culture which, seen through the eyes of new knowledge, admits to the possibility of the presence of different values based on harmony. The essence of psychodrama with whales is reflected and translated into respect for nature within a framework of collaboration, love, trust, playfulness and confidence.

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About the author

Mónica Zuretti M. D. gained her degree at the Universidad de Buenos Aires Argentina 1964. She was given a scholarship by the Moreno Institute Beacon, New York and finished her Certificate as Psychodrama Director on 1970 with J.L. Moreno and Zerka Moreno. Since then she has been teaching Psychodrama in her country or in different schools around the world. From 1992 she has directed the network of Centros de Psicodrama y Sociodrama Zerka Moreno in Argentina, Spain, Italy and Mexico. Worked at the IAGP for many years promoting Psychodrama within it. She is a mother of three sons and one daughter, two psychodramatists and grandmother of four. Her current interest is this project with whales. She leads a Post Graduate Clinical Psychodrama Seminar at the Psychology Faculty of The Buenos Aires University

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