

A Playful Approach to Group Therapy Training¹

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This article introduces the work of the Red Well Theater Group⁴. Our theater-based learning module features a dramatic reading of a stage play followed by a moderated audience discussion. This sequence of theater and discourse is intended to illuminate principles of dynamic group therapy and themes related to mutual recognition and communal wellbeing in and beyond the therapy group. We elaborate our approach through a production of the play *Off the Map* by Joan Ackermann, as presented at the Thirteenth Annual Northern Ireland Group Psychotherapy Conference.

Key words: Red Well Theater Group. Dynamic Group Therapy. *Off the Map*. Northern Ireland Group Psychotherapy Conference.

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I regard the theatre as the greatest of all art forms, the most immediate way in which a human being can share with another the sense of what it is to be...human...

- Oscar Wilde

This article introduces the work of the Red Well Theater Group (RWTG), of which we are founding members. The Group was formed in 2008 by Washington, D.C. group therapists who share a love of theater and an understanding of dynamic group processes. Red Well Theater Group contributes to the professional development of group therapists through presentations at conferences, professional meetings and training programs. Our experiential learning format features a dramatic reading of a stage play using Group members as the actors, followed by a debriefing of the acting ensemble and a facilitated discussion amongst the audience of practicing and training group therapists. This sequence of theater and discourse is intended to illuminate principles of dynamic group therapy and deepen the therapist's emotional and cognitive understanding of themes related to mutual recognition and communal wellbeing in and beyond the therapy group. Actor and audience member are recognized as co-learners in a shared experience. An article from the group therapy literature is also recommended for self study to further illustrate the clinical relevance of our theater-based learning module. We offer a workshop model wherein the participants themselves read the play together and then explore their experience associatively in a facilitated discussion. RWTG members maintain a play reading study group to further their professional development as well.

Philosophically, we approach theater and group therapy as healing arts, more similar than different (Moreno, 1973, p. 17). Both are intersubjective traditions seeking to illuminate the contextual complexity of human relatedness through the emergent interplay of past, present, and

imagined future. Each affords human beings a unique opportunity to collaborate as moral agents and “organizers of experience” (Orange, Atwood, & Stolorow, 1997, p. 5). Theater and group therapy operate as dynamic systems, using combinations of dramatic structure and dynamic interplay, language, spontaneity, improvisation, role exploration, bodily experience, empathy, interpersonal relatedness and an interpretative perspective to accomplish goals of cathartic relief, subjective truth-seeking, and mutual relatedness (Fortier, 2002; Hoffman, 1998; Lacan, 2006; Moreno, 1946-1969; Ogden, 2007; Rubinfeld, 2001; Rutan & Stone, 2001; Shakespeare, 2005; Stanislavski, 1936; Yalom, Leszcz, 2005). Our dialogical approach to learning combines the American community theater tradition whereby a performance is created by, with, and for a particular group of people with the ancient Athenian ideal of a public forum in which all are welcome to bear witness and openly share deeply felt experiences in a spirit of mutual regard (Arendt, 1958, p. 50). The psychodrama tradition is reflected in our use of a theater-in-the-round spatial arrangement, an approach to casting that emphasizes personal growth opportunities for the group therapist/actor and rehearsal methods adapted from traditional psychodrama and group therapy techniques. In *Self Experiences in Group*, Sigmund Katerud (1998) offers the metaphor of a healing community to capture the dynamic and dramatic nature of the group therapy enterprise:

The therapeutic group self is a project...It is the ambitions and ideals of a healing community set into action by a particular group analyst and a particular selected brand of patients...If the group analyst has learned his lesson well, he manages through his directorship, group analytic dramaturgy and interpretations to set in motion healing forces embedded in the western intellectual tradition of self-emancipation. He opens a healing text and lets the text play with himself and the group members. Imbedded are stories

about what is true and false, about lies and honesty, frankness and hypocrisy, about what is morally right and wrong, about oppression, seduction and evilness, about human rights, belonging and trust, and authentic encounters in contemporary societies... These stories, small narratives of life events in contemporary society, are told, yet all group analysts know that telling the story in a group is also an enactment which makes the story come alive in the here and now. (pp. 91-92)

Companion to this perspective of ‘group therapy as drama’ is our approach to the play rehearsal process as a quasi-group therapeutic experience. As with group therapy, the ethos of the theater affords us the freedom to become emotionally engaged, intellectually curious, personally disclosing and authentically concerned for self and other, but without the ethical burden of a formal therapeutic mandate. As a consequence the leadership team and acting ensemble work to develop a unique group culture that accommodates both artistic aims and personal growth opportunities through “a well-calibrated combination of talent, intelligence, training, courage, perseverance and collegiality. Reflective discourse conducted before, during and after each rehearsal is a vital part of the group process and may include dream sharing, associations and fantasies. The discussions often take on the flavor of group therapeutic discourse” (Schulte, 2010). Notably, an emergent small group process routinely develops within the acting ensemble that unconsciously parallels aspects of the group and relational dynamics associated with the characters and dramatic action of the play. Recognizing and exploring the various identifications and valences related to these dynamics emergent from within the creative team is fundamental to our preparation. Publicly debriefing the actors of their preparation and performance experience and the discussion with audience members after the reading allows all

the participants—actors and audience—an opportunity to identify what is personally meaningful and professionally relevant to their own group therapy practice.

A THEATRICAL CASE STUDY

We will now elaborate our model through a Red Well Theater presentation of the play *Off the Map* by Joan Ackermann (1998), as presented at the Thirteenth Annual Group Psychotherapy Conference in Belfast, Northern Ireland in 2010.⁵ Sponsored by the Boston-Threshold Group⁶, the two-day conference was titled “Recovery and Reparation through Groups: Courage to Dream Again.” Since 1997 this Conference has brought together

group therapists from Northern Ireland—from both sides of the political divide—the United States, the Republic of Ireland, and the United Kingdom for mutual learning and professional development. It is our belief that group therapy, support groups and community are key instruments in enabling individuals traumatized by war to find healing. The conference contributes to that healing (Rice, 2010).

Off the Map was presented at the opening plenary as an experiential introduction to the conference theme. The play was chosen for its affective and allegorical resonance with the Northern Ireland experience and its capacity to illustrate the clinically relevant concepts of enactment, emergence, and meaning making in the healing process of group therapy. Single-session, small process groups were conducted immediately following the reading to provide the conference participants a confidential setting to begin the process of relating to the play’s

⁵ Members of the Red Well Theater Group and guest artists serving as faculty members in Belfast included Maryetta Andrews-Sachs, Kavita Avula, Mary Dluhy, John Dluhy, Robert Schulte, Laurie Slade, Tom Teasley, and Rob Williams.

⁶ The Boston-Threshold Group was awarded the Group Foundation for Advancing Mental Health Social Responsibility Award for their establishment and long-standing delivery of group psychotherapy training conferences in Northern Ireland. The founders include Patricia Doherty, Raman Kapur, Cecil Rice and Kathleen Ulman.

thematic content. Workshops, multi-session process groups and large group meetings were offered in the afternoon and throughout the next day to continue that process.

The small group discussion sessions after the performance were co-facilitated by a RWTG actor and a Northern Ireland clinician. The members were encouraged to talk openly and share thoughts, feelings, associations and passions that may have been activated or aroused in them as a result of watching the play. While much has positively changed in Northern Ireland since the 1998 peace agreement, the violent history of the Troubles has long compelled its citizens—including clinicians—to strategically choose silence and anonymity as a way to stay safe, an unspoken group agreement that keeps their authentic selves “off the map” (Kapur, 2005, 2008). Appreciating the sensitivity of this cultural context was key to working effectively with our Belfast colleagues as we collaboratively sought to find our voices in a very public way during the conference.

The primary goal was to encourage participants to connect with their own associative responses and to welcome those personal discoveries into the collective discussion as a matter of choice. We selectively communicated our own associations over the course of our two days together with the same sensibility that a group therapist might practice disciplined self-disclosure (Leszcz, Malat, 2012). Utilizing both the formal settings of scheduled events and the informal opportunities afforded us through shared meals, breaks and chance encounters were instrumental in creating a wide range of safe-enough opportunities for sharing, reflection and meaning making.

We now offer a clinically informed analysis of the dramatic action of the play and its central themes as they relate to dynamic group therapy and the Northern Ireland experience. This is followed by a personal account of our group relational approach to preparing a play for

presentation. The journal article we recommend for self-study to amplify the clinical relevance of our theater-based learning module for *Off the Map* is Robert Grossmark's "The Edge of Chaos: Enactment, Disruption, and Emergence in Group Psychotherapy" (2007). Basic concepts from the article are used as headings for the following analysis section.

Enactment

As a memory play, *Off the Map* is uniquely suited to illustrate a therapy group's "constant movement into and through enactments that involve the group-as-a-whole, the group analyst and each group member" (Grossmark, 2007, p. 480). This movement becomes a creative and healing process when accompanied by reflective thought and working through. Recognizing that clinical perspectives vary on the nature of unconscious enactments, we approach the concept as a co-construction reflecting trauma-related, rigidly repetitive patterns of thinking, feeling, and relating, as expressed in the here-and-now immediacy of the group process. A theatrical enactment involves the portrayal of characters, interacting, on a stage. A political use of the term refers to the passage of a law by a governing authority. This multiplicity of meanings of enactment reverberates throughout the play and beyond, linking the concept to the broader context of Northern Ireland's cultural and political landscape. Correspondingly, the phrase "off the map" might be thought of as a metaphor, simultaneously signifying unformulated traumatic experience, life on the stage, and disputed territory (Lakoff, Johnson, 2003).

The play begins with protagonist Bo Groden speaking directly to the audience. She theatrically serves as a narrator, and for our purposes symbolically represents a member of a treatment group. In the theater, as in group therapy, the first words spoken have singular relevance to the unfolding drama that follows:

The summer my father was depressed, the face of our Lord Jesus Christ appeared on a tortilla at the Morning Glory Café (p. 7).

With this prophetic opening statement Bo signals to her audience/therapy group that she has a compelling and controversial story to tell, one that will test their capacity to divine fact from fiction. Passionately held beliefs—religious, familial, political—and the intensity they generate when in conflict are powerful engines of the dramatic action. Structurally the play moves back and forth between reenactments of young Bo’s formative childhood memories and adult Bo’s elaborations and reflections in search of clarity and new meaning. Each character is portrayed by a different age-appropriate actress. In the presence of her therapy group/audience, adult Bo recounts the circumstances of an unusual childhood spent in the desert of northern New Mexico where her enterprising parents forge a modest life off the land and the local dump. She reveals the intimate details of her sexual and political awakening in the summer when everything in her life changed all at once and forever. We learn that her prayers for a miracle—“to be delivered from a mother who gardens in the nude and her depressed father who cannot stop weeping” (p. 6)—are finally answered when young William Gibbs, a novice IRS tax collector, arrives with an audit, a fever and a long-held secret. Healing forces are mysteriously set in motion, and aspirations that once seemed impossible even to contemplate find exuberant and transformative expression. And yet something remains unfinished these many years later for adult Bo. She confides that an “anguish still lingers, hangs on a nail in my heart. I look to that summer for answers to great mysteries—of deep love. And loss” (p. 7).

In the first memory scene, matriarch Arlene Groden arrives home with an old accordion needing repair. Again the playwright signals a central theme with the character’s first words. “Look what I found in the dump. I heard it moaning way down deep. Buried alive, isn’t it a

beauty?” (p. 8). Jubilation in the recovery and restoration of the discarded and forgotten past resonates powerfully throughout the entirety of the play. Arlene’s reclaiming of a broken accordion, with the hope of bringing harmony—musical and otherwise—into her discordant family is apt. Her husband Charley, a Korean War veteran and likely vulnerable to a recurring posttraumatic depression, takes little notice of his wife’s enthusiasm. Eleven and a half year-old Bo is not impressed either. She is “mad at the world” (p. 11) and only desires to escape this desert “wasteland” (p. 28). She longs for a television, a telephone, and indoor plumbing. She schemes to coerce free samples of luxury items from corporate America, conjures make-believe super dogs as playmates, and even changes her name to Cecilia-Rose. She is done with living “off the map.” She wants a ticket to a new life so badly she fraudulently applies for a credit card to buy it. “As soon as my American Express Card comes...I’m out of here” (p. 10).

Arlene aims for optimal responsiveness to her family’s challenges with a stubborn determination to help her daughter and husband in both emotional and action-oriented ways, but success is not easy or assured. Improvised efforts to cure Charley’s depression directly with art therapy, psychotropic medication, hydration, offers of sex, rest and tough love all fall short. Yet her creativity is not entirely wasted as each strategy is revealed to have some cascading therapeutic effect, in often surprising ways. Although Arlene doesn’t fully understand her husband’s depression or her daughter’s frustration, she perseveres—partly out of a desperate fear Charley might take his own life and that Bo might give up hope. A group therapist might reasonably wonder at this point if an enactment might have everyone in its grip. Are their unformulated traumatic experiences interfering with the normal processes of problem solving and meaning making? What geopolitical facts may be influencing the situation? No one in this family seems to fully understand what is going on. We speculated that the libertarian/separatist

philosophy of this family—we can fend for ourselves, we do not need anyone else to make decisions for us, so let us just stay as we are and stay the course—falters in the face of Charley’s depression and Bo’s coming of age, triggering a crisis of faith. “The transformation of the self and creation of meaning is the very process that has broken down for the patients who come to group therapy,” according to Robert Grossmark (2007, p. 483), and so it may be for this desert dwelling family as well. Jessica Benjamin’s (1988) feminist perspective on authority offers further possible clarification as to what might underlie this family’s distress:

Domination and submission result from the breakdown of the necessary tension between self-assertion and mutual recognition that allows self and other to meet, as sovereign equals (p. 12).

Arlene and Charley had hoped to escape the oppressive influence of others’ dictates, choosing instead a mostly sequestered life that could reduce the risk of domination, particularly by their government and capitalist commerce. This desert life was meant to be an oasis but their daughter Bo is left feeling parched and isolated.

Misattunement

This desert(ed) life is a self-depleting, deadening “context of nonbeing” for young Bo (Orange, Atwood, & Stolorow, 1997, p. 48). Her struggle to differentiate and discover the world beyond her desert confines is frustrated by her parents failure to reconcile inescapable facts. She is first and foremost not a Bo(y)! She is a “Cecilia-Rose” (p. 12). And politically, she is neither libertarian nor a separatist. She is an (ad)venture capitalist in the making, already at work on a life/business plan that will take her to faraway places. She wants a new girl scout uniform, access to public school, and real friends. She wants to roll pennies and spend them to buy new things. She covets a brief case and a purpose in life beyond hoeing the garden. Her frustration

in being denied these pursuits of happiness generates a compelling mix of rage, determination and creativity. She becomes defiant, especially towards her mother. She fears herself becoming depressed like her father, a concern she confides in a letter to a national advice column, “Dear Beth.” Her withdrawn father, whom she loves dearly, eventually feels her wrath too. “My name isn’t Bo. It’s Cecilia-Rose!” (p. 24) she again insists in response to his clueless inquiry about why she is rolling pennies. She is actually frightened, but unwilling to admit this openly. She anonymously confides to Beth, “He has no desire to be with me” (p. 37). What she will not or cannot confide, even to herself, is the more unsettling, unformulated thought that her declaration of independence may be implicated in her father’s depressive suffering. In the meantime, Charley’s lifelong friend George, in his role as godfather to Bo, becomes a surrogate parental figure. She accepts his company, begrudgingly, even if he is “a little light in the loafers” (p. 8).

Disruption

And then William Gibbs arrives, “dazed and sore of foot” (p. 7). The young stranger suddenly appears in the Groden garden at a moment when Arlene is weeding in the nude, save army boots and a cap. He has been wandering for two days through the desert looking for this very destiny. His apparition-like appearance immediately takes on mystical qualities. Jesus may have shown his face on a tortilla in town, but the man himself seems to have walked into the lives of the Groden family. Bo intuits this immediately as she exclaims, “Oh my god. Saved!” (p. 17). This savior was indeed sent by a higher power—the IRS—to walk among them, pass actuarial judgment on their monastic life, and then provide a payment plan of salvation for their sins of not filing tax returns. In dynamic systems terms, this meaningful arrival is a disruption or manifest perturbation. Its purpose is to generate enough turbulence to challenge the “familiar

chaos” of an unconscious enactment (Grossmark, 2007, p. 485). In the theater this disturbance is known as the inciting incident to the dramatic action. Young Bo simply calls it a miracle.

Emergence

But William is as much “lost pilgrim” (p. 18) as savior. He carries the memory of having been the first to discover his mother’s suicide by hanging when he was six years old. More devastating is the trauma that his family never talked about her death or recognized the emotional devastation it caused William. These empathic ruptures have left William Gibbs in a chronic state of depersonalization, wandering through life “dazed and sore of foot” (p. 1)—a poetic turn for lost, aching soul. Bereft by his catastrophic maternal loss, he is also burdened by a vague sense of personal responsibility. Yet he casually informs the weeping Charley of his own lifelong depression with a simple statement: “I’ve never not been depressed” (p. 23). He is as unfazed in reporting the details of his mother’s death as he is unconcerned by his allergic reaction to a bee sting while in the Groden garden.

William soon develops a reactionary fever to the bee sting, and after two full days and nights of delirium, is finally restored to his former self with Arlene’s ministrations using Hopi Indian medicinal cures. But a new fever develops. This time it is the sting of an intense, erotic desire for Arlene that overheats him. William’s ardor becomes his new religion: “...the only thing I know to be true is my love for you” (p. 31). Arlene gently but firmly suggests it is the power of New Mexico with its wide-open spaces at play: “Often when people first get here it’s a little overwhelming. The boundaries disappear” (p. 31). The same might be said of a highly vulnerable group member’s initial reaction to the therapeutic expanse of ninety unstructured minutes, designed to go on and on, for years. Arlene ably maintains a responsible ‘therapeutic

stance' but it will not last. Frustrated and quietly estranged sexually from her depressed husband, Arlene will eventually find William's attentions more than tempting.

William is not the only one smitten. Charley develops his own subtle but passionate transference love for his compatriot depression sufferer. He begins conducting late night, secret talk therapy of a sort with William on the deck at the back of the house. As a wounded healer, Charley appears at his patient's makeshift bedside at the same early morning hour before dawn, even going so far as to bring the obligatory glass of water and box of tissues with him. He mostly listens, with only an occasional inquiry or validating comment. Without any formal analytic training, Charley seems to comprehend the basics of self-object functioning and disciplined self-disclosure, showing a natural inclination for empathic attunement with his patient. William eventually comes to reformulate the narrative of his mother's death and concludes she may not have died by suicide, as officially reported to him by his older brother. Whether William Gibbs was deluding himself with revisionist history or making a profound, fundamentally life-altering discovery remained an open question at play's end.

Young Bo meanwhile establishes her own deep attachment to William, and willfully competes with her mother and father for his attention and affection. The seemingly irresistible IRS agent is a potent godlike figure to Bo, bestowing a trinity of validating, idealizing, and twinship blessings onto her. She is aroused with near religious fervor to learn that William has actually seen the Atlantic Ocean. But could he also walk on the ocean's surface, like the man whose face was causing quite a stir at the Morning Glory Café? A disenchantment slowly sets in over time, as she begins to realize that her savior, "who I'd perceived as a link with the outside world had in fact been swallowed in the quicksand of mine" (p. 36-7). Bo's capitalist plan for a

new life nonetheless reaches an advanced stage when an American Express card arrives in the mail undetected by her mother.

Meaning Making

The deep bond that Charley develops with William Gibbs—essentially adopting him as the dutiful son Bo is no longer willing to impersonate—ultimately provides the two men relief from their mutual longing for attachment, attention, and recognition. In the last late night session conjured by Adult Bo and shared with her audience/group, Charley and William acknowledge the therapeutic gains made towards a peaceful resolution of the inner strife that has plagued them both for many years. This victory is ritually celebrated with testimonials of admiration and the re-gifting of a telescope, a phallic symbol of the power, knowledge and vision that Charlie has longed to intergenerationally transmit, father to son.

William: You didn't find this telescope in the dump, did you?

Charley: It was my father's.

William: It's a beauty.

Charley: I give it to you. It's yours.

William: I can't take it...

Charley: Yes. I'll get another one.

William: Where?

Charley: They're all over the place. Telescopes. They're everywhere. (p. 45)

Adult Bo tenderly reveals to the audience that her knowledge of this rite of passage comes from having eavesdropped from her open bedroom window above the deck—a balcony seat par excellence. If originally ambivalent towards the experience of witnessing her father with his newly acquired object of desire, the revisited memory now generates a more

mature understanding and genuine compassion. The interpersonalist truism that human relationships are implicated in both our psychic misery and our therapeutic recovery is dramatically reaffirmed. (Sullivan, 1953, 1997).

In comforting others do we comfort ourselves. The tears of William Gibbs flowed into the estuary of my father's despair like a tide that rolls in and gently prods the stranded boat up off the shoals to set it free (p. 46).

William Gibbs turned out to be more than "just... painting" (p. 45). The art supplies George had anonymously arranged for Charlie as a treatment for his depression, were re-gifted to William with good effect. Charley becomes William's first art patron, mixing paint for him and encouraging his self-expression as if it was his own. This self-psychologically attuned provision, along with the recognition and naming of William's talent, is both affirming and life altering. William never returns to his IRS job and instead moves into the old school bus on the Groden property, permanently. Just as a character's first lines have special import, the playwright makes William's first painting career defining. His thirty-one foot long masterpiece, improvised on the back of discarded rolls of wallpaper, is critically hailed as a crowning artistic achievement. Only the Grodens are aware that the painting was originally a series of sketches of Arlene, naked in the garden. William discreetly, "like a murderer burying the body" (p. 34), overlays a wash of azure blue to make the painting appear instead as an ocean's horizon. The latent and manifest content of the wallpaper mural represents a complex encoding of William's traumatic history, his transformative encounter with Arlene in the garden and the new life he undertakes in the desert wilds of northern New Mexico.

The sale of William's painting pays off the debts to the IRS for back taxes and to American Express for the yacht that Bo purchased as a birthday present for her father. Lifelong

family friend George, whose concern for Charley had compelled him to agree to see a female psychiatrist feigning hatred for his own mother in hopes of securing a prescription for anti-depressants, eventually falls in love with a Mexican immigrant woman. Reflective conversations with a caring woman in fifty-minute intervals inspired him to want more of the same. He marries and moves south with his new wife to her native Mexico. Bo is enraged by her godfather's departure and the loss of her dependable fishing buddy. She is soothed by, and ultimately comes to prefer, the more beau-like attention that William offers her.

Arlene and Bo manage to bridge their own intergenerational divide. These two alpha females reach a rapprochement after the climaxing discoveries of George's departure, the published letter in "Dear Beth" and the revenge killing of Arlene's object of desire, the garden-stalking coyote. Bo's underlying vulnerability and subjective experience of frustrated submission are more fully comprehended by Arlene, and she responds with greater attunement, still with her characteristic mix of practicality and universal wisdom. Motivated by her belief that "the better you are at letting go of things, the freer your hands will be to catch something new" (p. 49), Arlene extends an ancient olive branch to her thoroughly modern daughter:

Arlene: Let's have a picnic.

Bo: Where?

Arlene: Where would you like?

Bo: At Wal-mart? The parking lot?

Arlene: The Wal-mart parking lot it is. (p. 38)

With Charley restored to health and William installed as most favored son and budding artist, Bo is finally free to wear dresses, join girl scouts, go to public school, and move into the wider world of modern living that will be her future. She enrolls in public school for the fall.

Adult Bo is proof enough that young Bo eventually left her bartered existence in the desert to live her adult life in the city as a Salt Lake City banker. Having opted for a talking cure rather than psychotropic medication, Charley turns his revitalized amorous self in the direction of Arlene. He tenderly seduces her in their final scene together, playfully stalking her in the kitchen as if he was the coyote that had so fascinated his wife.

Like a therapy patient with a hand on the doorknob when the session time is nearly up, Adult Bo waits until the final moments to reveal that William Gibbs has died this very week, of a cause as mysterious as that of his mother's death. His memorial service is planned for the following day and he will be buried near the Groden garden. Bo neither anticipates nor requires a resurrection of her savior, but is mindful of his enduring impact on her life. The play runs almost exactly ninety minutes, a standard group therapy session length. On cue, Bo ends the group session/play by acknowledging the entwined relationship of the past, present and future that lives within, between and around each of us:

It has struck me to view the ocean as the past, the sky as the future, and the present as that thin precarious line where both meet, precarious because as we stand there it curves under foot. Ever changing (p. 49).

Ackermann's metaphor echoes Grossmark's (2007) intersubjective notion that the "focus is on what is happening in the group and what will emerge. The distinctions between past, present, and future dissolve when the focus shifts to the finding of meaning in the what-is-about-to-emerge" (p. 481). The group therapist and stage director are similarly tasked with "the facilitating of a creative and emergent interactive group process wherein what was unformulated can take shape and find meaning" (p. 482).

LINKS TO NORTHERN IRELAND

Grass roots community theatre in Northern Ireland played a unique role in the political discourse during the years known as the Troubles, 1969-1998. What could not be said openly on the street, at home or in a church was often boldly dramatized on the stage by community activists. (McDonnell, 2008). There was a kind of home-grown psychodramatic theater, staged in the service of truth telling and political action. Non-professional citizen actors, playwrights and directors would bring the drama of their everyday lives to the stage. Groups like the Belfast People's Theater, the Belfast Community Theatre, Derry Frontline and DubbelJoint Theatre reflected traditional Irish meitheal values of cooperation and community spirit, while operating at the "complex intersection of theatre and politics" (p. 6). Of particular interest to us was the common use of "reading plays to overcome the difficulty of mounting productions" (p. 218) and as a way to keep the primary focus on generating discussion and debate in the audience. This historical context gave us confidence that our own model of using theater to generate connection and thoughtful dialogue could be effective at the Boston-Threshold sponsored conference.

Red Well Theater Group has performed *Off the Map* many times, beginning with the American Group Psychotherapy Association Annual Meeting in 2008. Each presentation generates associative responses within us and our audiences that are significantly context sensitive. In Belfast we experienced a powerful resonance with the conference theme of "reparation, recovery and the courage to dream again".

Vision of Peace

More than four centuries of Irish struggle for independence from the English, and later the British as a colonial power, preceded the three decades known as the Troubles. When viewed through the lense of collective Irish and Northern Ireland history, the accordion Arlene

recovers from a dump and painstakingly restores to good working condition might be interpreted as the irrepressible Irish spirit and desire for peace and harmony, as symbolized in the 1998 Good Friday Peace Accord—a flexibly expandable peace agreement that was lost and retrieved many times before its ultimate enactment into law. The gift of a telescope, and Charley’s observation, “they’re everywhere” (p. 42), speaks to the multiplicity of political views held by ordinary citizens throughout Northern Ireland. Charley and William, as wounded men on either side of an Oedipal divide, conducting secret talks in the middle of the night in an effort to resolve an intractable depression, reminded us of the often secret peace negotiations between antagonists working towards a shared vision for Northern Ireland (Mitchell, 1999). William Gibb’s eventual leaving his job with the IRS in pursuit of his artistic aspirations is likened in our associative minds to a young conscript deciding the IRA (Irish Republican Army) or UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force) just is not his calling, envisioning instead an alternative, peaceful pathway for self discovery and expression. The eventual decommissioning of paramilitary organizations in Northern Ireland in 2005 is also called to mind as a collective change of heart about what constitutes an acceptable path to conflict resolution.

Young Bo’s preoccupation with materialist abundance might signify a desire to luxuriate in the richness of freely associated thoughts, feelings and dreams—precious self experiences that could not be acknowledged, shared or pursued in Northern Ireland without great risk and struggle. The intergenerational disagreement between Bo and her parents over the meaning and relative value of autonomy and self reliance versus relationship and collaborative engagement as a preferred way of life frames a central question in Northern Ireland today: How will the citizens ultimately determine their national identity, as democratically authorized by the Good Friday Peace Agreement?

Freedom to Choose

Young Bo grew increasingly ambivalent with the gun-toting, masculinized Bo(y) of her latency years. She eventually demanded that her emergent feminine identity be recognized, accepted and celebrated. Bo's disloyal acts of "resistance, refusal, and rebellion" (Billow, 2010, pg. 1)—especially her assassination of the stalking coyote, serving as both punishment and message to her mother—has a painful resonance with Northern Ireland's history of armed resistance in the face of oppression and political powerlessness. Bo's success in negotiating new political understandings with her parents leading to expanded freedoms and eventual self determination as an independent and successful adult, is suggestive of the process of political accommodation and reconciliation ongoing in Northern Ireland. While writing this paper, the fantasy emerged that Bo Groden might also be understood as a transgendered person, an identity dilemma with no easy explanation, expression or resolution. This metaphor gives us another angle from which to consider the complexity of trans-cultural/political/religious identities held by the citizens of Northern Ireland and the internal confusion, conflict and struggle that nonetheless continues beyond the formal signing of a peace agreement.

A recent study conducted by Michael Tomlinson (2012) at Queen's University in Belfast found a dramatic increase in the suicide rate in Northern Ireland since the Good Friday Peace Accord was signed in 1998, especially among men that had grown up during the most violent middle decade of the Troubles. Depression, alcohol and drug abuse are significant issues in many communities in Northern Ireland. Social isolation, unemployment and the redirecting of violence and aggression inward are implicated in this mental health crisis. Tomlinson concludes that the shift from open conflict to negotiated peace has created an identity crisis with social and psychological dimensions, particularly within the current demographic of young and middle aged

men. In *Off the Map* the ambiguity about the cause of death of William Gibbs and Arlene Groden's refusal to allow an autopsy suggests the possibility of his suicide. The dramatic narrative of early traumatic maternal loss and the unspeakableness of William's pain, leading to a lifelong struggle with depression and risk of self harm is familiar to many in Northern Ireland.

Young Bo's dreams for restoring her demoralized and fragmented desert family are symbolically expressed in her audacious purchase of a seafaring yacht—big enough to accommodate everyone and made possible with the help of a creatively acquired American Express Card. This reminded us of the strategic role that American diplomacy played in facilitating the peace process in Northern Ireland (Mitchell, 1999). Adult Bo of *Off the Map* becomes a successful banker, and chooses Albuquerque, New Mexico as her urban oasis home. What will be the dreams of the young people of Northern Ireland? Will Belfast or Dublin or some other destination be their most desired oasis? Will the dreams of the next generation mirror or diverge from those of their parents, who lived a different struggle in an earlier, troubled time?

Remembrance

We are cognizant that remembering—and telling—is a complicated process in Northern Ireland. The premise of *Off the Map*, based on remembering in the service of soothing personal grief, gaining new perspectives on a painful past and engendering a more hopeful future is both evocative and potentially provocative to an audience with a shared history of social trauma (Hopper, 1988). The protagonist, Bo Groden, looks back thirty years to an earlier, formative time, for answers to painful questions that have receded but not gone away. Adult Bo confides to the audience in her opening remarks that the journey of revisiting her childhood memories is tinged with “an anguish [that] still lingers, hangs on a nail in my heart. I look...for answers to great mysteries—of deep love. And loss (p.7)”. We learn by play's end that the death of a

famous man she once knew intimately has served as the catalyst for this revealing and cathartic exercise.

The play's premise has extra poignancy when we consider the Boston College Oral History Archive on the Troubles in Northern Ireland, otherwise known as the Belfast Project. The Project is an oral history chronicle of personal experiences and involvements of both IRA and UVF veterans of the Troubles (Moloney, 2010). Begun in 2001 by former IRA member and journalist, Edward Moloney, the project "sought frank and truthful testimonies from all parties involved—without judgment, and without fear of repercussions. In order to solicit truthful narratives... [the Project founders] promised their interview subjects that the testimonies they gave would be confidential until their death" (Silvergate, Schwartz, 2012). The revealed-only-in-death of hidden truths—with uncertain ramifications—continues to unfold in Northern Ireland today. Recent legal efforts to subpoena the oral history information of Dolours Price by the Public Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), as part of a forty-year criminal investigation into the disappearance of her mother, is a real life example of coping with an 'anguish that still lingers'.

The disputed official explanation of the suicide of William Gibb's mother that emerges late in the play resonates with an astonishing coincidence that occurred just weeks prior to our traveling to the Belfast conference. In July of 2010, the British Prime Minister David Cameron extended an official apology for the long-disputed 1972 killings of fourteen unarmed demonstrators by British soldiers in Londonderry. Cameron's announcement stated that the shootings were "both unjustified and unjustifiable" (Burns, 2010). This corresponded thematically with William Gibbs' transformed belief that his mother's death, for years characterized as self-inflicted, was a betrayal of the actual truth, perpetrated by his brother. The corrected version of the truth and apology offered by the British Prime Minister was met with

both relief and protest, depending on political allegiance. Traumatic memories are forever encoded in the national consciousness of Northern Ireland, making the resolution of complex grief an ongoing and intermittently disruptive process.

The thirty-one foot long mural painted by William Gibbs is evocative of the long history of struggle in all of Ireland and specifically of the communally created Peace Walls along Falls Road and Shankill Road in West Belfast. The traumatic memories encoded visually on those famous murals tell a story of heroic struggle and tragic loss. The Peace Walls give honor to those who died fighting for deeply held beliefs while signaling hope and desire for an enduring peace (Gerry, 2006).

GROUP THERAPIST/ACTOR JOURNEY

Helping the members of the acting ensemble assume their dual roles as actors and discussion co-facilitators was a responsibility shared by the Red Well Theater Group and our Boston-Threshold conference hosts. The acting ensemble included four individuals performing their assigned roles for the first time. Two members of our group had served the Belfast conference as faculty members in previous years. To help orient us the organizers arranged a pre-conference bus tour of Belfast. Tour guides from both sides of the political divide alternately accompanied us through their respective neighborhoods in an effort to provide historical context and perspective, to share with us Northern Ireland's current struggles and to deepen our appreciation of the process of reconciliation well underway in the country. An evening faculty dinner extended the process of making connections and developing a sense of shared purpose.

This group relational approach to establishing meaningful rapport between the acting ensemble, the conference faculty, and our Northern Ireland surround mirrored our own philosophy of using intersecting group processes to prepare for a public performance. Mary's

experience of taking up her role as Adult Bo provides an intimate vantage point from which to consider the value of play reading and public performance in the personal and professional development of a group therapist. Her story also conveys the spirit of the play and the healing aspirations of the Belfast conference.

Mary's Story

I grew up in a small, rural community where I attended the local Catholic grammar school. Each year around the holiday time, we held a recital and put on a play. Excitement grew as we learned who would have roles in the two presentations. I was thrilled beyond belief when Sister Estelle selected me to play the angel Gabriel in the Christmas pageant. It was both exciting and terrifying to be on the stage. With lines memorized, dressed in a white satin angel gown with silver trim and a silver halo, to boot, I found myself on the lit stage, ready to go. Suddenly, seeing all of the audience and their expectant faces, I froze with fear and my mind became blank—I could not remember any lines at all. Finally, with some prompting, I fumbled through. Nothing was as it had felt in rehearsal. After the play, horrified all on my own, I was met with the shaming eyes and voice of Sister Estelle. Scolding me, as she wondered aloud, “Why did I pick you?” This was traumatizing for a timid and too sensitive child. Because I could also sing, I was still asked to perform on other occasions and I did, but always with abject fear of a repetition and never with my original enthusiasm.

I have always loved plays and play reading but truly feared even the thought of going on the stage again. Red Well Theater Group has offered me an avenue to participate again, and as it has turned out, to do some truly reparative work on my early injurious experience. When I was given the role of Adult Bo for the Belfast performance, my reaction was one of joy and delight. It was similar to young Bo seeing William Gibbs for the first time and exclaiming, “Oh my god,

saved!” I was being invited to act in the less-demanding role of narrator, and without having to memorize lines. I could do this, I thought.

As mentioned before, we work relationally in an open system. My initial experience sitting in the cast circle at the first rehearsal was of intersubjective recognition—we are all in this together. Being in the group facilitated by Bob, listening to my colleagues as they prepared to assume their roles and seeing us all trust the group process, brought the old story of my early life acting experience back to my mind and heart. It became instantly clear to me that portraying the character of Adult Bo was not going to be as easy or straightforward as simply being a narrator in a play. Letting this into my own awareness, then speaking about it, even joking about it with Bob and my fellow actors allowed me to move into a deeper, more introspective place.

Adult Bo is indeed a memory role. Old feelings washed over me in the rehearsal group process. I was able to look back into my early life, picturing myself being seated in my father’s General Store front window platform—a good, safe space for me. From where I sat I could witness my father reading at his desk, a connection we shared. From there I could also eavesdrop on the conversations of folks telling their stories, often-painful ones, to my father, like William Gibbs talking to Charley. He was the town’s listening post, even as he attended to the business of their purchases. I rediscovered these parts of my earliest life through the preparation of my role as Adult Bo, which lent emotional authenticity to my eventual performance. I can recall the moment when I fully connected to Adult Bo. I was sitting in the cast circle at the Washington School of Psychiatry, by now a very familiar place for me. Our musician was with us for the rehearsal. The music rose up and flowed into the space. As I began reading my part, there was a moment of recognition. All the preparation began to have new meaning. It was as if time and space was altered and I really was in Northern New Mexico at the Morning Glory Café.

Feeling my way through my own childhood memories as a parallel process to assuming the role of Adult Bo enabled me to emotionally connect to the part more profoundly. Being able to explore these feelings with my fellow actors led me to rediscover the “thrilled beyond belief” part of myself that I had once felt about being on the stage.

It was indeed a moving experience to have the more affirming memory of my father in his general store “pop up,” as if on cue, to buoy me and carry me forward. Heightened affective moments and parallel process events persisted throughout the entire Belfast experience. Being with the Boston-Threshold conference group and seeing my family name, Doyle, in the program connected me to deeply embedded Irish roots and heritage. This all added greater depth to my experience. At the appointed hour, with my bar stool in place, the musician next to me, and with Bob as the director across the room making reassuring eye contact with me, I was able to speak my lines with authenticity and ease. With the conference participants as an audience bearing witness, a reparative experience of my early acting trauma was well underway. The courage to dream again, of being on the stage, has become a most treasured part of my experience in Belfast.

SUMMARY

The Red Well Theater Group combines the ancient traditions of theater and drama with the contemporary technologies of dynamic group therapy, psychodrama and large group processes to enliven the educational experience of training and practicing group therapists. Our public performance format of presenting a play reading followed by a facilitated discussion has brought us into contact with group therapists around the world for meaningful, shared experiences of discovery, healing and growth. Our experience in Belfast at the Thirteenth Annual Northern Ireland Group Psychotherapy Conference demonstrated the emotional depth and

potential for mutuality that experiential learning offers both the participant and presenter.

Workshop formats whereby the participants take up the challenge of reading a play and ongoing

play reading study groups are user-friendly opportunities available to all group therapists

wanting a creative outlet to understand more thoroughly the principles of dynamic group therapy.

Theater, appreciated as a healing art, is uniquely suited to deepening our emotional and cognitive

understanding of themes related to mutual recognition and communal wellbeing in and beyond

the therapy group.

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