

Becoming Jane:

Appreciating her being and becoming through explorations of role

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A tight family circle gathers in a late eighteenth century vicarage to celebrate a younger daughter's betrothal. In family ritual Jane, the older sister, has of course written an essay in honour of the occasion. She pierces hearts with her eloquence, minds with her irony. "Oos" and "Aahs" are given up at her choice of words and elegant punctuation accented by precise pause and release of comedic artistry.

The circle is intruded on by a city cousin of Jane's country cousins, arriving late. Proud and huffily recalcitrant at his uncle's sadistic command to leave the city, he interjects a disturbed pause for his seating. He is required to "experience" the suffocating isolation of green woods, field and country propriety by his High Court Judge uncle and mentor - a penny-pinching benefactor of him and his family in Ireland. City-loving profligate law apprentice, he is ready to assize and pronounce the deficiencies of his cousins' peculiar world. Jane, replete in her comfortable and adoring audience, is sacrificial lamb - but not silent. She flows while he with superior air inwardly picks and sifts her

performance, glad to find it "self satisfied and wanting."

His scathing critique scolds her father's curate's ears - but not his alone. Jane, close enough and inquisitive enough to overhear, gags on eavesdropper's pain. Blinded - gutted - ears ringing with confusion, her doubts rage as she flees to her bedroom retreat. Mind racing she is displaced even in her own writer's closet: it becomes her place of self-wounding. Hate for him, punishment for her, her accomplishment decimated. She rejects her pages in shame, with glares of condemnation. Despairing she shreds then burns the pages in her tiny fireplace.

Lid of her treasure chest store of writing is thrown back. Essays grabbed at. Fingers flick through journal pages, snatch up novel drafts, limp, diminished and disdained. Impulse to destroy all is narrowly beaten by exasperated bursts of rage at that ignorant arrogant man.

In this scene we see that Jane has adult experience and resources. She also has overflows of earlier life experience, many surplus realities are alive and

disturbing her. Her past may inform her present but her feelings are tormented with seething childhood rejections, disappointments and discounts. Adults, like giant rulers who had guarded and confined her infant and childhood universe, had from their great height begun to impose their powers again. Even in her circle of loving family she would have experienced hungering for nurture and recognition – sometimes given, sometimes withheld. She had constructed meaning of random variables with no obvious explanation other than her own failures: these cut and accuse again.

Adult conserves of decorum and propriety, thin and tightly stretched, barely contain her rising righteous wrath. Scornful superiority burgeons to match this invader's own: it is poor substitute for wrenching out his bowels with bare hands or stamping every breath from his torn-out lungs. The adult woman fumes and coldly constructs judgments and strategies to deal with her male attacker. Psychological realities of earlier life experiences are located and run in the background of central nervous system circuitry. A particular pattern of her history is drawn on. The earliest experiences are from pre-verbal infancy, early verbal interactions follow, some still mute, with adults whose towering powers are able to deflect, comfort, refuse, reassure, withdraw, approve, ignore, nurture, scold, validate or bully, each entwined with her own response.

Psychodramatists apply themselves to be aware of the multilayered behavioural and cultural factors influencing the drama that plays out before them. Each scene and moment has in it a complex history of family dynamics and

individual motivation. In order to make accessible Jane's dynamics and her ways of organizing herself it is helpful to maintain a view that is holistic and systemic, using a number of grids of intelligibility² such as three distinctive gestalts³ of organization identifying a central organising factor.

Central Organizing Factor

Let us imagine there are three organizational gestalts working in Jane to bring cohesion into her form of functioning. In order to appreciate this woman's nature and what is moving in her it is helpful for us to focus first on that organization in Jane that is progressive. This has us appreciate her strengths and health. We see the factors that assist her and free her to act. We can then steadily tighten our focus to discern the *central organizing factor* in the culture of her relating within a specific context. It is this factor that is at the heart of way of being and becoming. We will have its guidance to make sense of all else in her.

Using the word 'gestalt' I have in my mind a systemic and holistic view of reality with systems within systems and 'holons³' within wholes. The whole way of being that a person displays in a particular social context has organizing processes that may be thought of as gestalts. These processes are dynamic, with permeable, rather than influence-tight, boundaries. Each process is both intra- and inter-related. The system is open within its holons, open to its whole and interactive with the wider environment.

Strengths and Limitations of Depictors

It is possible to observe Jane's functioning and then construct depictors to name a range of factors using metaphor, simile or a descriptor welding together a name and qualifier. Depictors give vivid and evocative picturing but they can only offer the observer's perception – which is always a construction. What I perceive and then depict of her shows at least as much about me as it does about Jane. My construction is mine alone although it may have similarity and accordance with constructions made by independent observers. The selection of words is mine. My map is developed from a combination of Jane's projected dynamics and my ingesting these into my ways of thinking and meaning construction. I, like everyone, can only gain an incomplete impression of another's dynamics, being and relationship culture.

Two word depictors, such as 'furious destroyer' or slightly expanded depictors such as 'fire-eyed warrior woman' are effective and enlivening pictures of a person's *functioning form*. Unfortunately this approach has become conserved and led to a norm where there is looseness in claiming to name "a role" where there is no whole role. Rather there is an element or an aspect. In doing that the reality of Jane can only be reduced to a collection of fragments.

In producing my descriptors and letting them flow I am able to strengthen my ability to discern, take in and visualise the myriad particulars and large aspects of Jane's ways of interacting. To really appreciate Jane I will widen and deepen the attention I give her and open my

sensitivities and subjectivities to her. I will take in both the complexity and holism of this one female human being.

The concept of gestalt as a self-organizing system assists me to explore Jane's functioning forms of being. It reminds me that each holon includes and contributes to a generative system organizing itself towards health. It prods me to recall that my map and my words are a representation and not the actual territory⁴.

Three Gestalts

One gestalt might be thought of as *neurotic*⁵ in the sense that the organizing principle is found in attempts to gain control of her universe, overcome limiting forces and efforts to compensate for restrictions that are imposed on her. This gestalt is characterized by *fragmenting*⁶. Its responses involve interweaving body functioning and inner world psychological experience from struggles for control first worked with in infancy.

A second gestalt may be seen as *coping*⁷ in that it is organized for survival. Coping strategies and learned responses are resources to defend and sustain. Systemically we can view this gestalt as a holon having three holons within it. It makes sense to see the three inner holons as themselves gestalts. They are organizationally cohesive and internally consistent while open to inner and wider influences. Some coping strategies are organized for moving towards, others for moving against and a third group for moving away. Through these constructs we can notice that some of Jane's efforts are organized to engage the other, others for attack against the other and others for removing herself from encounter - by

physical withdrawal, psychological withdrawal or by dissociation.

A third gestalt can be conceived of as *progressive or individuated*⁸. In this gestalt where Jane's organization is to advance her health, relate positively and develop her freedom to function flexibly. It is with this gestalt I suggest we begin.

As we prepare to do that remember the nature of Jane's environment. She is in her familiar setting of comfortable home and family within her extended family. No one is there who is not a friend. All are eager to enjoy her essay, each eases forward to catch the first and every word. They are ready to be tickled by her irony and her wit. Inner family, proudly adoring admires every phrase: they sun in reflected glory. Jane constructs phrasing precise to needs of clarity, produces a punctuation of theatre with exact weight and rhythm to hold and astonish her listeners. She accepts them as they do her. Love and respect are in this place. Her nervousness is slight: she delights in being their writer and performer.

The alien city cousin, quite unready to be taken by her or any person here, is at the ready to confirm the insidious poverty of rural life. The only pleasure likely to be gained will be from judgment, condemnation and sadistic superiority.

Jane's overhearing evokes in her an organization of responsive functioning in what we can think of as a *progressive gestalt*. The responses are drawn together in a moment from a historic pattern built up in comparable circumstances experienced and responded to in the past. This gestalt is

an open sub-system of adequate and effective ways of being Jane. She has a flexible range of self-consistent responsiveness with a healthy conserve where she is still freely spontaneous to develop and create new ways of being herself.

Entering The Essence of Being

I want to develop an approach to role dynamics that has us constantly thinking systemically in terms of *spontaneity, creativity, role relationships* and that take account of whose perceptions and constructions are being used in *making meaning* and offering interpretation.

I take role as being seen from a number of viewpoints with a wide range of considerations and means of comprehension. Thinking outside of conserves I ask you to reflect on where ideas of role fit here. As psychodramatist ask yourself whether your concepts of role embrace a progressive orientation, holistic values, and comprehend complexities realistically. Do your constructs provide explanatory power to open up the essence of being, reveal organization of becoming and reveal her motivation?

Organizing for progress

Through the pragmatics of role dynamics we can identify factors of functioning that gather together in Jane's progressive gestalt. Factors stand out to be recognized as we attend to Jane in the scene.

I choose to write them down in prosaic description in this paper. I want to make it less familiar so as to prompt our thinking to go further than the elements

and see the whole and the holons and to think through the gestalts of organization.

A *progressive gestalt of functioning* might include:-

*independent thought
standing her ground
making her own choices
being a wise and encouraging self-critic
constructing and sustaining mutuality in
relationships
striving for justice and equity
applying diligently principles of morality and
kindliness
promoting good will
determination to be self-reliant in providing for
herself
commitment to protecting the weak or abused
indomitable and graceful patience and
persistence
purposeful maintenance of a chosen focus in face
of challenge
giving her self freedom to stretch beyond
conserves
supporting and sustaining relating when
competing events intrude
makes ethical challenges to the haughty and
oppressive*

In brief, she has learned to value being self-directed, autonomous, independently minded, of generous heart and a companionable contributor to her community's health.

You might say that some of the progressive characterizations I make are more fitting in the circumstances of Jane's "reading" prior to receiving stringent criticism and later when she returns from her retreat. True, but the purpose of attending to this gestalt of responses is to appreciate Jane's health in her whole being. There is no value in dissecting her to prove her segmented pathology. Our purpose is to discover how she ticks, valuing her particular

organization and vitality: from motivation to wish, from wish to action. There are other gestalts which will reveal other realities but here we can find the engine of her responsive system and reveal the *central organizing factor*.

Such a factor can be seen to be informed by her core values, her ethical imperatives, her personal goals, her working for mutuality in relationships and commitment to communal health. The organizing factor might be her ventures to build up networks of relationships where her autonomy and creative expression are supported. Or perhaps it is her desire for creative expression itself, which is then followed by her efforts to support her creative purposes. The central organizing factor might be focused to: *a woman with a mission to live free, make free and challenge rules wherever they might limit.*

Jane's social context elicits her specific experience, just as it is in its own reality, but many past experiences are also elicited in her – some with stronger influence than others. We finely tune ourselves to her psyche and body indications activated by her having re-entered preverbal infant struggles. In childhood the wide power-differentials between her and significant adults gave rise to affects and her coping responses. They are alive and reverberate within her. Her thinking, feeling and action "here and now" is laced with "there and then". Her cousin's challenging critique evokes old experiences which pull at every cell, nerve and sinew. Her tiniest bodily movements show that her mind and will are compromised. Eyes start and then search within, eye surface moistens, head flinches away, upper

body swings a little against opposing muscles and bounces to return, torso pulls back a little and almost returns, and then eyes appear to be searching beyond the immediate space.

She is challenged, not overcome. Her strengths and vital responses are available. She moves in encounter, engaging with flexible flow, creating and being her self. She works mindfully to strengthen her spontaneity. She is resourcefully robust and adequately progressive. Still the ancient echoing doubts can shake her to her core, even though she is quite clearly progressive and engages positively with those in her community.

Her reactivity and struggles for power and survival strategies fit in other gestalts and we do not need details of her earlier experiences to recognize her functioning form in the present. Approaching each gestalt we can conjure pictures and produce descriptions. I might see her read with an eye on her audience. Black Queensland swans enter my thoughts. I see a regal swan glide over the waters surface. Sturdy legs beneath the reflective ripples thrust purposefully. Wings gracefully cup up and out. Eyes are at once doe-like yet alert to any change or move. Regal and queen in mind as Jane is wounded and flees I muse of a queen mercurial in infant rage imploding and exploding blind impulse to destroy herself or her dearest treasures and still she wrestles to be queen, to have sway over herself and then her realm.

The factors we identify speculatively are clues no more, the words we produce are constructions no more, but neither are to be undervalued. We keep in mind what

matters to her, where she is headed and how she moves her life forward. We don't expect to be capable of capturing her essence or of knowing her truth. We move with her as companion imagining ourselves alongside and sharing an audience position with her to view her life with deep respect and without blinkers.

Struggles for control and power

The second gestalt is of her response functioning as she struggles for control in a reactive and fragmenting way. We see that her efforts, contorted by the forces in her surplus reality will, inevitably, not work for her. She cannot gain control of that universe. Her organization to compensate for and overcome the specific restrictive forces she faces in this new time is compromised by response-patterns likely to undercut herself. She strives to face out dominators with super-human effort.

Response factors in a gestalt of neurotic functioning might include:-

hitting out wildly against her own interests or purposes
punishing acts revenging the hurt received with added venom
self destructive acts towards her own body as if it is not herself
internal self destructive acts turning verbal abuse against her self
self destructive acts demeaning and rejecting her creativity
self destructive confinement of her self to imprisonment and shaming
reactive flight mind-blinded by imploding emotional turmoil
sarcastic power playing in no-win situations
challenging perceived threat with unrestrained insult
feverish busying in activity that is repetitive and confused
breaking relationships that are important to her or might become so

driving away people where encounter is actually attractive
dominating and dismissive acts where her own values are to listen and weigh fairly

It is not difficult to see the progressive activating her to work for her health with a challenge that has impossible odds. Her resources are totally inadequate to control her universe. The centrally organizing factor we discerned in the progressive gestalt makes sense of everything we witness in this gestalt of fragmenting controls.

Working with strategies for survival

Thirdly we turn to the gestalt of responses organized for Jane's survival and for her to sustain herself. As we approach Jane's *coping gestalt* with her measures to secure her survival we have already seen that her progressive functioning comes steadily to the fore, but her fragmenting undermines her. She can be left at times seething with frustrations or in deep despair. Does her coping response gestalt have the resources to keep her going? at least to stay alive in hiding? Restrictive solutions certainly are not enough for her. As we open this gestalt remember that we are able to think that it has three holons of distinctive modes – coping by *engagement*, *attack* or *withdrawal*.

The coping gestalt may be seen as including the following response factors:

Engagement

moving towards with decorum, respect, courtesy and propriety
giving in to obedience and collaboration
indomitably persisting in the face of interruption
maintaining purposeful focus by avoiding attending to significant stimuli
holding in bravely with relationships where she is scorned and derided

Attack

striking out at power players and abusers
challenging or refuting by counter attack
making sarcastic or derisive comment when cornered or blinded
defying legitimate authority and dramatically flouting conventions

Withdrawal

seeking safe secluded retreat to review events and actions
creating distance by shifting mood and focus
producing impressions of composure while emotionally disconcerted
running away to provide separation and distance
busying in activity whilst searching for solutions
creating deflections to take the heat off

See the Coping find the Progressive

Let us imagine that beneath each restricted coping response is in embryo a spontaneous creative act that is being withheld from its progressive activation. It may be dormant or be developing in hiding. Imagine that with each coping response factor noted above there are concomitant alternate responses in embryo where context is discriminated, constructive thoughts are forming and emotions are stirring. These are not ready for action to be produced. Freedom for spontaneous directed action is not sufficient. The responsive functioning form is perhaps only rudimentarily developed for action. Fear of consequences may carry greater weight than the organizational resources – or the balance is perceived that way. Self-belief may be crucially insufficient for courage to act.

The response factors in the three holons within the coping gestalt above are set

out again here to show possible motivational aspirations on one line, progressive embryonic alternates on the next, and then a highlighted third line has the factor already noted above. We can imagine these embryonic role elements being influenced in their development by the central organizing factor in the progressive gestalt and edging her functioning closer to her central organizing impetus:

Engagement

motivation to be respectful
choosing action balancing preferences
consequences and feelings of self and others
*moving towards with decorum, respect, courtesy
and propriety*
motivation to produce peaceful solutions
cooperating from autonomy for good purpose
without obligation to dominant power
giving in to obedience and collaboration
motivation to sustain self when disregarded
acknowledging interruption clearly with freedom
to choose action
indomitably persisting in the face of interruption
motivation to be robust
challenge and negotiate strongly with
independence and interdependence
*maintaining purposeful focus by avoiding
attending to significant stimuli*
motivation to be resilient in face of verbal abuse
sturdy clarity in defining the entry on encounter
or refusal to engage without respect
*holding in bravely with relationships where she
is scorned and derided*

Attack

motivation to be an influence for justice
siding with the oppressed & resourceful open
challenger of abuse and injustice
striking out at power players and abusers
motivation to protect her self
choosing times of engagement venues for
challenge & moments for withdrawal
challenging or refuting by counter attack
motivation to stand firm and have her voice

selecting her rhythms & pace speaking
purposefully in line with her own values
*making sarcastic or derisive comment when
cornered or blinded*
motivation to be her own person
taking responsibility for promoting her
autonomy & right to choose for herself
*defying legitimate authority and dramatically
flouting conventions*

Withdrawal

motivation to take care of her rhythms and health
balancing openness & privacy - creating time &
space for reflection
*seeking safe secluded retreat to review events
and actions*
motivation to set her own agendas and timing
choosing to express her readiness un-readiness to
decide
creating distance by shifting mood and focus
motivation to be congruent
valuing her feelings & thinking for herself
without pretence
*producing impressions of composure while
emotionally disconcerted*
motivation to live another day
declaring need of time and space for new
consideration & later negotiation
running away to provide separation and distance
or
busying in activity whilst searching for solutions
or
creating deflections to take the heat off

Towards a Pragmatics of Role Dynamics

I choose to think of pragmatics rather than theory because I have found it helpful to carry the question “How can I work to promote health and freedom with the clues Moreno and those who have followed him and from my own experience, are opening up for me?”.

I aim to promote an approach to role dynamics that is systemic, holistic,

multi-factorial and integrative. I am convinced that the core motivations in us all are aligned to an impulse towards health. Progressive functioning, I will back my life on, is at least embryonic. I believe it is essential for the psychodramatist to begin her and his work ready to see progressive functioning where it is and not be distracted from the whole person's organization towards health by problems and inadequacies that are also displayed. Working to discern a central organizing factor is crucial to making sense of and being alongside the person as they work to be and become who they are.

To discern Jane's fullness we give our whole being to take in all we can of who she is. Each viewpoint we take provides a unique opportunity to see more of her. The particular grid of intelligibility we select contributes a distinct vision, fantasy or imagining. We do well to accept that our nervous system and holistic humanness is our best instrument of recognition and discernment.

Role for me is the whole way of being a person has in a time and relationship specific context. The dynamics of role takes account of role always being interactive and perceptions and perspectives being crucial to attempts at interpretation. Role pragmatics is open to appreciating and exploring human functioning with the uniqueness and wholeness that each person and each community of persons have just as they are where they are.

Notes:

- 1 Morenian clues are those ways of viewing human experience and functioning noted by Dr Jacob L. Moreno and those who have followed him. His idea of spontaneity is the primary clue. Zerka Moreno (2000) states that "a spontaneous person is a disciplined person" with "the discipline coming from within and not imposed from without". There is freedom to be creative and a creator, to be in relationship with ethical mutuality and autonomy.
- 2 Grid of intelligibility These words echo the work of Michel Foucault that takes account of our views of life being formed and constrained by the grids of intelligibility. Our beliefs and conserves are formed with us largely unaware of the grid of intelligibility we view through at the time. Opening our eyes entails detecting the grid in use and finding a broad range of grids to gain other perspectives. The organization we notice depends on the grid we use. Foucault sees a space of knowledge within which competing concepts exist.
- 3 Gestalt This word echoes the approach of Carl Stumpf (Berlin School founded 1893), seeing a system as different from the sum of its parts and defined by its holistic form not by its contributing parts. The focus is on a complete configuration of elements in a person's functioning form with a unifying motivating force.

- 4 Holon This word appears in Arthur Koestler's book *The Ghost in the Machine* (1967) and asserts that systems both contain and are within interacting systems reciprocally influencing each other. Sub systems or holons are themselves simultaneously whole, autonomous and independent while being influenced from without and within.
- 4 Map and territory Gregory Bateson (1979) in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* quoted Korzybsky who wrote "the map is not the territory" in illuminating his understanding that our constructions easily become to us the reality we observe but there we fall into a fatal distortion every time "the word cat cannot scratch us".
- 5 Neurotic This word was used by Alfred Adler who saw a paradoxical striving for superiority with self esteem battling its negative compensations arising from a relative lack of power. Lynette Clayton (1982 Clayton L) investigating the dynamics of the self with a grid developed from Jacob Moreno's cultural atom drawing on Melanie Klein's concept of infants inner forces

splitting objects and parents into good and bad in response to their experiences of reality. A neurotic gestalt engages the infant's psychosomatic response elements as she or he struggles with parental realities.

- 6 Fragmenting organisation follows G Maxwell Clayton (1994 Clayton GM) and provides what can be seen as a dynamic formulation with fragmentations diminishing or unchanging.
- 7 Coping Strategies These words echo the work of Karen Horney and her recognition that basic anxiety in infancy is responded to by means of three distinctive coping strategies.
- 8 Individuated & Progressive These words echo the work of Carl Jung. His idea of humans progressing by differentiating and integrating the variety of competing factors of their being took account of "shadow" realities. The writing of Max Clayton (1994 Clayton GM) guides investigation of inner system and interactive behaviour in terms of role with the progressive leading.

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