

# The Ongoing Training of a Psychodramatist: There and Back Again

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## Abstract

This paper is structured as a narrative so that the reader may not just have an understanding of the content but also an experience of it. The value of naivety, alertness, and readiness is highlighted. I describe core experiences that have shaped my identity and functioning as a psychodramatist. The narrative is one expression of what it is to have the ancestral bounty of both Māori and European lineages. It is a unique expression. There is no claim that any other person has to be like this.

## Whakarāpopotonga

I tuhia paki waitarahia tēnei kia āta mau pai ai te ngako o te kaupapa i tua atu i te whai wheako whaiarohanga mai i te tuhinga. E whakatairangahia ana te matapoporo o te harakore te koi me te hikaka. Ka whakaahuatia atu ngā wheako whakatau nei i taku tuakiri me tēnei tūmomo mahi āku. Ko te pakiwaitara tētahi whakaatanga whiwhi whakapapa karangarua; Māori Pākehā. He whakapuakinga takitahi. Ehara tēnei i te whakapae me pēnei anō hoki ētahi atu tāngata.

**Key words:** psychodrama; pae; narrative; whakamā; Paroa; spontaneity

Within the scattered treasures of Ipipiri (Bay of Islands) there is a peninsula with such a broad and curving headland that there is created an inner harbour of extraordinary stillness and bounty. This place is called Paroa. At its northern headland, Kahuwera Pa, one can take in a wide view from out west past the Tapeka headland panning in a northward arc all the way around to Rakaumangamanga and out into the vast east of the Pacific. This is the place where my grandfather (mother's father) grew up. I go empty or full, with a heavy heart or light feet, a troubled mind or a burning intent. I am always met. The first visit was 30 years ago. I was on my way out of the country.

First, I needed to say goodbye to my dad in the war vets' home in Levin. I'm going to go

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sailing, I told him, in the Pacific. I want to live on a tropical island. Can you sail, he asked me. No, I said. He pulled a face. How else will I learn, I said. Light came into his eyes. Go then, he said, go while you still can. In a previous visit, he had asked me what the worst thing was. His eyes were sharp in a face that pain had etched in a long and lousy history. Ten years he had suffered from a head injury. Longer from the shock and horror of the war. People told him to stop feeling sorry for himself, he had to help himself first, if only he'd stop drinking... Yeah I hated the booze myself but what was he to do with the agony then? Where would he find relief? Not from anyone I could see. Did they think he was pretending? That he could just snap out of it? I was a boy. No one could sit with him. They asked him how he was and then they didn't want to know. Better they left me alone. I tried to please them and they smothered me with platitudes and encouragements to be brave. Or gave me pity. We waited. We waited for the lawyer, we waited for the court case, we waited for the doctors; we waited. We waited for pills and treatments and operations and specialists.

Do you know how long one day is, he said. They wouldn't give him the hip operation because it had to be replaced in 10 years. Ten years, he scoffed, do you know how long a day is? He took up his bung leg in both hands and had me come closer so that when he twisted it I could hear it crunch like broken ice. A thin slime of sweat came out on his face smelling of gin. And then he heard of a new expert in head injuries. We waited a long time to get a chance to see him. He became The Hope. Finally dad got to see him. When I got home, his mood was the colour of ash. It went something like this: Do you know what he said? Who? The Indian. He was an Indian, the specialist was an Indian. Eh? The Head Specialist. Oh. And what did he say? Nothing. Nothing? He told me I've got to live with it. There was nothing he could do. My dad's eyes were hollow, his head sank. Grey came in thick and hung about all through the house. There was nothing good left to give away. We were all done in.

Later he was more cheerful. He was in hospital from a drunken fall where he hit his head on the edge of the bedside table in exactly the place it had been split in the car accident. There was blood and a bandage. There's always someone worse off than yourself he told me. Something worse than you I thought. Is that some kind of curse of what's coming up for all of us wrapped up in skin? I don't go to church, he said, but the Bible's got it right: do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Do you want some smokes, I asked. I've given them up, he said. A priest came to see me, he said, a very nice man too. You should talk with him. I cringed away, a list of all the rotten things I was and had done was at hand. I did try to understand the thing from the Bible. I tried to get it laid out in my mind in one long line that I could travel from the start to the end with all of it still there: do, it says. So, let's say I did want some more doing. Let's say we had doing, I reasoned to myself. Have them do unto you. What would I have them do unto me? Leave me alone, slap me around, kill me? So, do that unto them? What fool would want that? They're not me. Who knows I am even here? What am I missing here?

What's the worst thing, he asked me. Pain, I said, pain that never ends. No, it's not that, he said and he looked at me with eyes that were very still. Loneliness, he said. We sat together. I can't remember saying anything. I like to think that I was with him in that. It was not so long after that I came to see him on my way to go sailing in the Pacific. I might be gone for a while I told him. I don't know, a couple of years. We sat across from each other in the empty dining room at the war vets' home. We sat in silence. I heard myself say I was sorry. I meant

everything. He was still, his eyes soft. He nodded. He said he was sorry. He meant everything. We wept. We might have said we loved each other. I can't remember clearly but I do know the space between us was clear and full of light. A fog lifted. I didn't even know it was there, it had been around so long. I thought this thing we now had would require something complex, something that I didn't have, something impossible I couldn't do, something like this thing they called love. I left Levin and hitchhiked up North to Paroa Bay. I had to try to make contact with the place my Granddad (mother's father) grew up in. No one told me to but I had to.

Granddad had never said he was Māori. He was just Granddad to us. I was 14 and working at the Feilding meatworks. On my first day on the kidneys, one of the Emery boys was staring at me from across the gut table. He latched in a look on me and said you're not Māori are you? Was that a question, I thought. How could that be a question? Granddad had ears big enough, a flat nose okay, skin you wouldn't know what shade of brown, it being deeply crevassed with work and sun. Tats too. He was a rigger. He treasured his tools. He had worked with government steamers servicing lighthouses and replenishing huts for shipwrecks from the Auckland Islands to the South Pacific and all around New Zealand. He couldn't read or write but he was the one they put in charge of the ship when things were difficult my Nana told me. Sorry, we hadn't thought about it — Māori? It hadn't been mentioned. Sure he was, of course he must be. But I hadn't been chosen to play on the Māori side in rugby at lunchtimes had I? I was only slightly on the olive side of pale. Was I anywhere cheeky or brave enough to be a Māori? Look at the nose; it's a beak of a thing. I pursed my fat lips.

He pushed up his chin and told me that Māori were boss here. He turned our looking to the dude next to us whose job it was to take the head off. It was a slice either side of the tongue, a thumb and forefinger hold of the tip of the tongue, an angle in at the neck with the knife, to be off with the head, now held by the tongue, swinging, with the knife put up against where they joined so when the head swung back, a flick liberated the head to be dropped down a chute and the tongue flipped a summersault into a smaller chute. He raised his eyebrows and Johnny passed this onto me with a smile and dead fish eyes. I would get it for being a wimp or for being cheeky; either way I was asking for it.

On that first trip to Paroa, I had no instructions. I found a sign that said Paroa Bay Road. When that road split into three gravel tracks, I took the middle one. A cousin and her family were living there in the old house. Welcome. They made me welcome. They knew my Granddad? Of course. Uncle Ted. Where have you people been all these years? I went walking. The experience on Kahuwera Pa was extraordinary. On the way back, I wanted to make the highest place in the inner reach of the peninsula. It was a difficult way with gorse. It seemed I was determined to push through. I was stubborn about it for no reason known to myself. On the top, a cross appeared above the scrub and there was gravestone and on it was Granddad's family name. It was true. Here it was.

My cousin told me she would never sell. There was pressure from the others in the family but they would never sell.

One night on the deck of the yacht, somewhere between New Zealand and Tahiti, I had an extraordinary experience. The starry way was not so high overhead like it had started but had dipped like a disc to the side, one end going down on a skew. I had watched it star by star, how it moved one gigantic piece and thud it took me: it's not the stars moving but this here

earth spinning. I got it by the curve of the horizon taken to the fullness of it; one great mass held by all the others in a web. I must be out there then, by the moon, looking back seeing it all so magnificent, a dazzling dance, but where was I really? A twinkling off a puddle down there, that's the ocean and the waka must be a tiny flake. So that's me there then. I was falling headlong to be back there but I was rushing from the inside out too. Like a thousand eels fled through inner ways to have me come out feeling into my skin as big as I was looking out into heaven again. Back and forth, or all at once, the centre is wherever I care, out there or inside, as close as anywhere, at the skin for the insides or the insides for skin, here this way looking out or there looking back. I am the centre everywhere I am where all things meet.

I lived on the island of Huahine. A white-sanded beach curved with a lagoon going wide out to ocean swells crashing the outer reef. High on the beach, a tree elbowed out fat limbs and tall buttress roots. Coconut trees were scattered about, spindling up their spiked crowns, and behind, a valley cut deep to the sides of a volcano. An overgrown garden offered up many treasures. At night, I watched the sun sink behind Raiatea, the heart-home from which the great Polynesian voyagers went out and seeded the faraway places. Yellows and oranges spread in the sky, changing to pink and peach, so utterly soft, yet vibrant, deepening to reds and violets and purple, and then to the deep dark blue of the universal ground the stars have for their play.

I hunted for a fish with a spear gun. It wasn't easy. I was hungry. My first fish. Finally, I got it. I didn't know I could be so happy to kill. I put the gutted and scaled fish down and walked a few feet away to wash my hands. A cat. I had never seen a cat. What's a cat? A cat was this thing here, a scrawny furball with my fish in its mouth. Don't be stupid. The fish is big. Look at it droop down and touch the ground on either side. That's just silly. He's mine, what I found, what I had to hunt, what I had to catch, what I had to almost die for. My beautiful fish and a dirty cat with a catfish face and cattery eyes. I dropped the knife. See? No need to get worried or do anything rash, you can have the bones and the tail; those are the best bits. The cat turned and padded off the other way. Okay you can have the head as well no problem. What a clever cat walking with such a big fat thing in your mouth just like that. Can't be easy, take a look at yourself, what a sight. I picked up the pace. The cat did too. No, no, no, cats are pets, they don't do this. I ran. The cat ran. I sprinted, bent down to grab it but the cat jinxed to the side. The bastard was heading for where the scrub was sharp needled and thick with stinging nettle. I went flat out, sprinting, and got my fingers on his grimy back. Its back legs buckled but the front ones were still going pulling him forward, head and neck straining forwards, and my stretched out fingers were slipping. I bent and clawed them in but they slid off that greasy fur. I flung out the other hand half a windmill. Nothing but air. The cat had its running again.

He turned and saw me spread out over the ground with my mouth open and he slowed to a slink with a light spring through a cat hole in the thicket. I climbed up and stood myself there. I opened my eyes wide and squeezed them tight but my feet were still bare and the thorns were thorns and the nettles were dense and My Fish was gone. I looked around. It couldn't be true, no, no, I remember him well. Nothing was done, just nothing. I was standing there looking around: the same green place, the same blue sky. I chuckled.

That night, in the hollow bite of hunger, the heavens were so bright and close, I bent up

full face to them, so alive and thick in a wide band of sparkle. I reached out through my eyes and was pulled all the long way up, my feet still on the ground. I went swinging star to star with my eyes of touch, feet still on the ground. I was stretched up there in the field, mouth open, eating stars and something very soft rubbed the skin of my calves? One then the other, in and out between them, purring.

It was. The very one, rubbing and scratching himself against my legs, a fat donkey belly of a fish-stinky cat. Padded its happy, wobbly way down from a secret place of gorging had it? The whole flipping fish done by the look of him. He flicked up his tail, going in and out between my legs, arching and rubbing, purring so hard it tickled my bones. I bent down and he arched his back and sprung up a tail. I stroked him. I was happy. I couldn't help it. I was very, very happy. I had to run down the beach and let it all go with a big shout of yes. The epiphany still ripples fresh blood in me 30 years on. Call it forgiveness or friendship or the double, the trickster even; all these profoundly liberating and potent things. If you are a mangy thief and you have stolen off someone, then you can still go and offer yourself as a friend; even me.

I walked to town and got a postcard of a beach and wrote on it something like this: "Dad. Hope you're doing okay. I love it here. It is so beautiful. I am farming and fishing. Had a real adventure sailing across. Love, Philip."

He must have got that postcard. That's my hope: that he knew I would be okay; the withdrawn and moody boy, so infiltrated by fright and self-doubt that he had dipped into psychosis. My dad walked into the sea. He couldn't swim. I returned to New Zealand. I didn't find the postcard. My dad came to me as a plastic box of ashes. We went for a walk through town, past our house. We didn't go to where he worked. We didn't go to the pub. We went to Johnston Park, to the grandstand and we sat in our spot, where we shouted ourselves hoarse for Feilding A. Where we sent out cries of indignation to the ref for missing a punch on one of our guys and the ref looks up just in time to see our guy punch the bastard back and he's the one that gets pinged. The injustice. We loved yelling at that one.

The wooden seats were weathered and worn shiny, the cracks ingrained with ash. At halftime, I would go and get him a fresh pack of Matinee Flats, going flat out on my pushbike so I wouldn't miss anything. I offered them up. How much pleasure he took in that first drag. Who would take the offering I now had? What could take my dad? The wind battered the long grass and the goalposts. That bloody wind, the Westerly that had to come in across the Manawatu plains slapping about macrocarpas and fence posts and making farmers ruddy in the cheeks. It came from the West Coast, where he went. That place. He chose.

Heavy clouds packed the sky, low and grey, driven in a bitter sulk by a wind coming diagonally across, blasting flurries of sand along the beach. I took the box, leaned in and pushed my way down to the edge, to where the sea finally gave up to the land. I faced out over the froth coming in dirty and thick. I turned around and there he was, getting ready. I'm doing this, he said. He is standing tall, no cane. I hear him across 30 years — I am doing this. Thirty years and that small sentence has been a treasure; the meaning of the ages come riding in on it.

I turned and went to where the waves flattened out and sunk in the sand. I took off the lid and pinched some ash, reached out and let go. Blown away. I took up another lot and let

it go. It was blown away. I took up a handful and chucked it at the water and some flakes did make it, the rest were blown away. I turned away from the wind into a huddle with the box. I put my fingers to the sides and had it open, facing up. I tightened my jaw and thrust the box up and wrenched it down and there it was all out hanging in the air. The wind got it taken and hurled as a mass along the beach one way snaking to the other. And then I ran. I ran after my dad disappearing.

So you might see from these events, the source of my motivation to work with people: that I am committed to being with them exactly as they are; that I do not need to understand or even know anything. I work with urgency. I like to make mountains out of molehills. Everything is significant. There is no time to waste. And if the person needs to take seven years, then so be it. There is nothing to fix or change. No disapproval or inadequacy is directed at them from me. I do not need to go digging. That they have made it this far and are breathing could be a miracle. I am attracted to Bion's (1970) invitation to inculcate the instinct of "O" where one is not bound to memory, desire or understanding.

One could identify many other principles from these events that would be useful in enthusing and informing the psychotherapist. An area that is immediately alive to me is the relationship between life and death; a rather big area I know. When death is close by, I wake up. When I am working with someone I want to be alert and ready.

After my dad's passing, I was ready to leave New Zealand. Forever. I did not intend to come back. I ended up in Taipei, Taiwan. It presented as a frenetic maze of concrete on a fecund swamp of human waste and industrial smelter. But there were children and they played and laughed and the people were friendly and profoundly curious. The vibrancy and wackiness drew me in. I immersed myself in the place and the people, took on the mannerisms, combed my hair, and got a flash new set of false teeth. I travelled about China, particularly the fringe areas. I studied and practiced the arts and language. I lingered in Tibet and pilgrimaged to the places sages had lived and wrote poetry. Seven years later, I returned to New Zealand.

I went to Paroa. It had been sold! The urupa had been made into a reserve and Kahuwera Pa an historic place. I began to read about the place, to research what had been said about it. Quite a lot. Many different sources. Paroa was the centre for the Ngare Raumati people who had been invaded by other Māori and driven off. So, I thought, even when I'm Māori, I'm an imposter and an invader. That figures. Then in a later trip, I find I am actually Ngare Raumati. That my great, great grandfather had successfully won Paroa back in a court case in the 1890s.

What I know about Paroa is only a fragment. However, I do like to entertain things, to engage the imagination, to think into things. Sometimes these things are counter to prevailing views. I ponder the different accounts and read between the lines. I imagine the locals looking upon the early European and seeing them as physically weak, indulgent, prone to fantasy and superstition, arrogant and lacking in emotional intelligence, seemingly unaware of *utu*, *tapu* or sovereignty. So, I come to consider that cultural arrogance and superiority went both ways.

You might now appreciate why I immediately fell in love with the psychodramatic method and find it so deeply satisfying. I am not content with one truth, as though all things gravitate there. I am awakened when I see the counter to that truth. I am highly invigorated

by the dynamic movement in the pae, the horizon space between things. The drama.

I approach colonisation in a similar spirit. I can appreciate that colonisation has happened to Māori in painful and ongoing ways and that this is experienced consciously and unconsciously. While there must be ways I have been colonised that I barely perceive, I also want to claim that my particular line weren't colonised. I see that as being respectful of my ancestors' resilience, foresight, and intelligence. I stand here successful in the modern world and that is because of what they set up. I could also amass evidence to demonstrate our experiences as victims of superior forces, and that is not just European. In my personal definition of colonisation, I enlarge it to include all human beings as victims and perpetrators, all groups and their cultural conserves and habits that are thick in the air, both law and lore, that cling to the body and barely give space for the spirit to breathe.

If there is shame in me, then let it be called whakamā; a process I am beginning to appreciate as a quality of humility that makes one noa, normal or safe, free of tapu. It is humane and not a condemnation. It is not shame as is known in a culture where there is eternal damnation. Perhaps the use of "whakamā" can be considered as an invitation to reframe shame and give it a dignity and purpose. Perhaps we can befriend shame and stare it in the face and find out what gift it has to offer.

I am delighted to find that the vibrant core of psychodramatic theory and practice is spontaneity. Spontaneity is considered the primeval force that predates things. It is unable to be stored, mastered or controlled but it is never exhausted. Spontaneity is essential to enthuse the feelings and the intellect. Psychodrama's central concern is evoking spontaneity through experiential dramatic means. One hundred years ago, J. L. Moreno (1924/1983, 1946/1985, 1953) formulated psychodrama based on the age-old tradition of using unscripted enactment in groups. Since then, a rich body of knowledge and theory has been built up and applied across different domains (see [www.pdbib.org](http://www.pdbib.org) for more on psychodrama). Moreno chose the dramatic stage and methods for this spiritual practice because they offered powerful means for producing the conditions in which spontaneity can be trained in and practiced. The empty stage is also very useful for displaying an individual's psyche which Moreno considered to extend beyond the individual body out into the interpersonal field.

It was a relief to find the new field of interpersonal neurobiology (Badenoch & Cox, 2010; Siegel, 1999) and the central role the social field plays in personality formation and functioning. It appears that as well as an inherited neurosignature (Giummarra et al., 2007), the infant also forms a schema of its first experiences of the social world. This "social self" is not formed from language and reasoning but predates them:

It appears that mutual recognition and identification are the progenitors of reason, self-consciousness, and culture rather than vice-versa. This understanding overturns the cherished assumption that social behavior results mainly from a learning process mediated by a formal language. (Schermer, 2010, p. 492)

Psychodramatists are well placed to continue investigations of this new discovery. The production methods of psychodrama are well situated to inquire into how to reflect to an

individual their social self and how frozen traumatic memories can be tapped into such that the person is readied for updating and liberation. I have described how these mechanisms may be similar to those in which phantom limb pain is eliminated through the use of mirrors (Carter, 2014).

Like two sets of ripples on a pond, things interpenetrate each other: individual and group, imagination and reality, light and dark, mind and brain, creator and created. Perhaps this is part of the concept of *pae*: the reflection of the moon on water, the leaves of a tree in the breeze, the bird's wing with the wind. These gifts come free without being earned. Let's call it grace. Appreciation uplifts the spirits and gladdens the heart. This is not an indulgence; enjoying the sun does not make one lazy. When we are accompanied, there is a calming effect. We need not react to every bit of bad news as though it is some catastrophic error requiring an additional measure of bureaucratic control. Participation and appreciation is a rolling force spreading goodwill. The imagination prospers under such conditions of friendliness. There is a spaciousness for the generation of fresh ideas to face new challenges. We are much better placed to be in touch with things as they are. Resilience and robustness flourish. Ideologies need not inflate out of control and bureaucracies need not stiffen into being bullies. Integrating the freedom of the individual with the wellbeing of the group becomes a thing we can work to co-create. Psychotherapy is part of this work of creating community from the inside out (Carter, 2015). How psychodramatists have learnt to integrate these various things into their practice is well illustrated in the writings of Dr Max Clayton (Clayton, 1991, 1992, 1993; Clayton & Carter, 2004).

Many of these things flourished in Māori society and have been strengthened through the crucible of recent trials. The New Zealand national character, if we would want to describe one, has been sculpted by Māori probably more than we can realise at this time. Consider your experience of coming to meet Māori in their home. Consider the state of grace in being with loss, the self-deprecation. Consider the songs and ways of speech, the playfulness. These things have been hard won and are freely offered. Here is a prayer I constructed from a meditation on *Paroa*:

From the shadows of war and sorrow, by the home fires burning to the harvesting of dreams, we have lived this land, breath to breath, bone to bone. Bless it with laughter and dancing, grow children, spill joy and dig in your treasure. Welcome all who turn up, your breath and your blood, welcome your life welcome.

In other words, we will not just be colonised by this land and the people of this land, we will be consumed. The entrance price is the blood, the children and their joy, all the dreams and then our old bones. We will not only dwell in the living heart of the land, we will become it. Whether that be a promise, a threat or a vision, it is inclusive.

When a Māori man is directed by the courts or his lawyer to attend the Man Alive Living Without Violence programme in West Auckland, he can choose to join a *kaupapa* Māori group or a mixed group. Some choose the mixed group. I noticed a couple of mixed groups go flat. I didn't know why and then I realised: there were no Māori participants. The heart and humour had dried up. Māori men, even when full of grief and various addictive habits, still have the capacity to be interested in another man's code, his *whakapapa*, whatever it is.

There is an emotional intelligence and resilience, a heart that dares to be; and, close by a humour, not avoidant or raucous, but an ability to be with very painful and shameful things, to link with others through a shared self-deprecation, a humbleness in humiliation and pain. These are extraordinary faculties and a precious gift to others. This is a good news story. These are some of our most isolated and damaged men, considered to be society's toughest problems and a drain on resources, yet these men are making a substantive contribution. They are my teachers. My job is to do whatever I can so they are awake to their mana, so that they get to know who they are kaitiaki for, so that they connect in with the light of their wairua.

I stand on the urupā and weep. Not the grief that takes the heart and wrings it out, shaking the bones and burning the flesh. Not this time. Be free, they say, spread your wings. Here is the wind we have sent. I weep. It is a homecoming.

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