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Death in transformation: the importance of impasse in drama therapy

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I am the rest between two notes,
which are somehow always in discord
because Death's note wants to climb over—
but in the dark interval, reconciled,
they stay there trembling,

And the song goes on, beautiful (in Whyte, 2001,
p. 175).

—Rainer Maria Rilke

Translated by Robert Bly

Introduction

As an action-oriented form of psychotherapy, drama therapy places great emphasis on experiential and interpersonal aspects of the modality. We ask our clients to stand, move, make sounds, engage with others and play roles, and in doing so, witness the incredible power of physical action to access feelings and mobilize change in people. However, I feel there is a vital part of clinical work that is sometimes negated in drama therapy for the sake of action and this is the place of stillness, withdrawal and/or resistance in our clients. This paper will address the importance of impasse in drama therapy—the place where clients can't play or refuse to play and the place inside where it feels as if something is dying. I have used the term *death* in the title of this paper because I feel that whenever a significant impasse occurs in treatment, a metaphoric death is taking

place within the client, in the service of transformation. For this reason, the terms, impasse and death will be defined and discussed in-depth, as they apply to drama therapy theory and practice.

The impulse to write this paper came from my own struggles to play and my resulting sensitivity to clients who find play challenging and/or terrifying. While the ability to play reflects a degree of emotional health and vitality, I feel play should not upstage the individual needs of our clients, nor should it negate the more subtle aspects of the therapeutic process. I do not mean to imply that drama therapists ignore these aspects of the therapeutic process, but I do invite the reader to consider stillness and withdrawal as critical components of drama therapy that reflect vital and active aspects of transformation.

The notion of impasse and death in transformation

In this paper, the term *impasse* will be defined as any time in treatment when clients struggle to move to another level of development and/or are on the brink of that transition. I have chosen to use the word broadly, so it can be adapted for all drama therapy approaches. However, drama therapist David Read Johnson (1982) has used the term *impasse* to describe specific phenomenon in Developmental Transformations that reflect the same fundamental problem. Because I use Developmental Transformations almost exclusively in my work, I will at times refer to *impasse* in relation to Developmental Transformations practice and theory, which I'll be illuminating in this article. However, the concepts apply to all drama therapy methods and should be applied accordingly.

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Before discussing impasse and death in drama therapy, it is important to reflect on these concepts in a more global context. On a metaphoric level, one might refer to impasse as a *bardo* state. *Bardo* is a Tibetan word that means a transition or gap between one situation and the beginning of another. Tibetans use the word to describe the intermediate stage between death and rebirth but it has a broader, more complex meaning. By definition, the word crystallizes the process of transition itself and its resulting chaos. “*Bar* means ‘in between,’ and *do* means ‘suspended’ or ‘thrown’” (Rinpoche, 1993, p. 102). The author of *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* describes this when he claims that the *bardo* is “a continuous, unnerving oscillation between clarity and confusion, bewilderment and insight, certainty and uncertainty, sanity and insanity” (Rinpoche, 1993, p. 105). While terrifying, this period of suspension between one form and another describes the process of transformation itself, in which the old must give way for the new.

In drama therapy, our clients experience the *bardo* state not only in the external events of their lives, but also in the creative process, for creation itself can bring the artist into unknown territory. This is particularly true in the case of drama, where actions unfold in the moment and in a relational context. Whether the work is improvisational, as in Developmental Transformations or rehearsed, there is always an element of suspense because the action is unfolding as if for the first time. Each moment is new and a process of *becoming* (Johnson, 1982). In this way, a sense of impasse or death is evoked because in order for change to occur, old patterns must disintegrate or transmute.

It is in this process of becoming that clients often feel as if something is dying. Kathleen Singh, who writes extensively about death and dying states that death causes a “head-on collision” with the physical body and consciousness of the person dying (1998, p. 19). This creates an incredible amount of psychic chaos for the dying person, whose sense of reality, time and space becomes completely scrambled, as life in this form slips away. Singh coins this experience as Disillusionment. She writes:

The faculties the mental ego had developed and had always counted on to maintain its own illusion of identity—namely intellectualization and emotion control—can no longer be counted on. The disillusionment here is literal. It is also painful. There is nothing but dis-illusion: a ripping away of the props that had underpinned the fiction, a tearing of the veils that had kept us from seeing all that we did not want to see. (p. 69)

In physical death, the “tearing of the veils” can mean many things. It can signify the walls coming down between the physical and spiritual worlds, ego boundaries dissolving as the physical body disinte-

grates, or an integration of previously compartmentalized levels of consciousness. Regardless, there is a correlation between the process of physically dying and deep psychological transformation because in the latter, similar phenomenon occurs. Previously held notions about the self disintegrate and rigid ego boundaries dissolve. While this ultimately creates a sense of spaciousness, it can feel like a psychic death and be utterly terrifying.

Impasse and death in Developmental Transformations

Impasse and death represent key themes in Developmental Transformations (Johnson, 1982, 1992, 1999), an improvisational form of drama therapy based on Viola Spolin’s theatre game transformations. In individual transformations, therapist and client improvise with one another in a series of shifting scenarios. If one person changes the scene, the other person automatically goes along with the change in play. Images and free associations are evoked in a stream of conscious flow through the continually transforming improvisations between therapist and client. As the various scenes are defined, played with and then let go, the client’s inner world is reflected in the choice of roles, movements and responses in play. The therapist attunes herself with the client’s bodily sensations and images and makes interventions in role based on the client’s responses in play. “The purpose of drama therapy work of this type is to increase the client’s access to and tolerance of internal states that have for various reasons been cast aside, labeled as unacceptable, or are seen as threatening” (Johnson, 1992, p. 128). With time, as intimacy and spontaneity increase in the playspace, they extend into the client’s outside life, resulting in enhanced relationships and life choices. Unlike more distanced forms of drama therapy where the therapist serves as a coach or director from the sidelines, the therapist in Developmental Transformations is fully immersed in the play (Johnson, 1992).

Because the therapist is immersed in the play, the boundaries in Developmental Transformations are far more fluid than in more distanced forms of drama therapy and verbal psychotherapy. For this reason, Developmental Transformations is not recommended for clients who are violent, out-of-control or floridly psychotic (Johnson, 1999) because the fluid boundaries complicate one’s abilities to differentiate fantasy from reality. The aspect of “playing together” increases the intimacy between therapist and client and is apt to create a different experience in therapy, although there is little known about how this difference impacts on the client’s immersion in the imaginative

world (Johnson, 1992), as compared to other modes of drama therapy.

Concepts of impasse and death are critical components of Developmental Transformations because they are reflected in the transitions between improvisations. In Johnson's work, impasses occur when the transitions between improvisational scenes become awkward and difficult for the therapist and client(s). Johnson writes that although impasses vary, they are easy to recognize. "Typical signs are sudden loss of energy, people dropping out, resistance, laughter, overt anxiety, distractibility" (1982, p. 188). For Johnson, these transitional periods are fundamental to in-depth psychotherapy and should not be avoided by the therapist simply because they feel uncomfortable (1982) or do not look pretty. Like the *bardo* state described earlier, Johnson feels these periods of uncertainty are paramount in the psyche's evolutionary process. Without them, deep change is less likely to occur.

In Developmental Transformations, a sense of death is evoked in the ever-shifting dramatic scenarios. Like life itself, the method is a practice in beginnings and endings. The therapist and client are in a state of continual flux as the improvisations transform moment to moment. As they move from one improvisation to another, participants become plunged into the *bardo* state and are challenged to tolerate this sense of transition and the unknown. As a result, Developmental Transformations is highly non-linear and requires participants to relinquish attachments to plots or feeling states evoked in dramatic play. Similar to the spiritual perspective of Buddhism (Johnson, 1999), this practice of non-attachment helps clients learn to witness their feeling states without grasping or becoming over-identified with them. This helps decrease personal suffering because as one learns to release rigid thoughts, feelings and behaviors, new possibilities (including joy) can emerge.

These constant transformations encourage psychological growth because the nature of improvisation challenges rigidity and encourages spontaneity. Free association improvisation helps break down familiar personality roles that although helpful for functioning, often create separation from our authentic selves or prevent us from developing new aspects of ourselves. In Developmental Transformations, and in any in-depth drama therapy work, the structures or masks that define one's persona are loosened so that one can experience a deeper sense of connection in life.

The dying process

One of the reasons I feel strongly about allowing space for withdrawal and stillness in the thera-

peutic process is because of the terror that can surface during change. The evocative nature of our work can strip long held defense structures and create this sense of disillusionment Singh refers to in the dying process. As a result, clients might feel like they are dying and might not relish dramatic play as much as we do. At this point, clients don't always find it fun to laugh, shout and play characters because they are on the brink of change, which can be terrifying and painful simultaneously. Even when a person has a well-developed ego, it can be scary to feel one's foundation shake beneath. Therefore, resistance is normal, to be expected and should be respected. If the play needs to stop, it needs to stop. If clients need to talk, they need to talk. Who are we to tell them how to die?

A key reason drama therapy can trigger the sensation of dying is that theatre transcends the normal bounds of time, space and identity in the same way that death does. In the imaginary realm of theatre, everyday reality can be transcended. Like in death and the afterlife, there is an alternative reality, which is both exciting and scary because it signifies uncharted territory. This is particularly true in Developmental Transformations where the boundaries between fantasy and reality are extremely fluid.

When one's orientation to time, place and identity is temporarily altered, a non-ordinary state of consciousness emerges. This state can also be conjured through authentic movement, trauma re-enactments, vocalization and holotropic breathwork (Taylor, 1995). As these represent aspects of drama therapy treatment, clients can experience this non-ordinary state. When plunged into this realm, clients encounter a more fluid, free flowing reality than every day life. While this provides an optimum opportunity for transformation, the resulting disorientation can create a sense of temporary chaos, fear and confusion. When these feelings are evoked, impasse is likely to occur.

We can think of impasse as a type of mini death and reflect on death in both literal and metaphoric terms. In doing so, we can track the unique rhythms of life, death and transformation with sensitivity. Nothing illuminates the necessity of this more than when we work with people who are actually physically dying or who want desperately to die. For instance, I used to work with the geriatric population. Because many of my clients were in their late nineties, they were literally dying. Being with them, I came to recognize their need and desire for withdrawal and inactivity. I had to respect when my clients were preparing for the "ultimate transformation" and no longer wanted to "play."

While the majority of clinical populations do not have terminal illnesses, we can use the death metaphor to draw parallels about our clients' needs during times

of significant psychic transformation and/or suicidal ideation. Many clients need periods of stillness and withdrawal during these intense periods and highly resent being asked to play. Consequently, we have a clinical responsibility to hold or contain clients during these phases versus pushing for action. What to us might seem like innocuous play, may in fact appear traumatic and life threatening, if clients are in profound transition or depression.

Another way to conceptualize cycles of life and death in drama therapy is to meditate on the balance between contact and withdrawal in the therapeutic encounter. Because drama therapy is highly interpersonal, we help clients foster self-other relationships through active techniques that stress interaction. However, sometimes in order to work relationally, clients need to experience themselves first before they can connect with others. The stillness of impasse can help clients take a breather and reconnect with themselves. This allows for a period of integration to occur before moving into new phases of growth. Like the caterpillar in its cocoon, we sometimes have to go within before we can transform. After this retreat, we can then express ourselves to the world in a new, dynamic state.

Clinical implications: tracking transformation cycles

In *Developmental Transformations*, impasse is incredibly significant because it is an indication that the client is sitting on a psychological edge. It is a barometer of where a client's growth is either arrested and/or is trying to evolve. Therefore, in theory, *Developmental Transformations* welcomes impasse, viewing it as an invitation for exploration, discovery and change. However, one therapeutic objective in *Developmental Transformations* is to move through impasses in improvisational drama instead of getting stuck in them or letting the play die entirely. The therapist is encouraged to find ways to make challenging material playable. This then raises the theoretical or philosophical question of how long to allow an impasse to occur in dramatic play and whether traumatic issues can even be played with in the first place.

I take the position that moving through impasses signifies a high degree of healing and that it is unrealistic to assume all clients will be able to weather these difficult pockets in therapy. Instead, I suggest viewing impasse in a wider context than the playspace and welcoming it as part of the larger drama, even if it means the play comes to a grinding halt and that the therapist and client must resort to verbal processing. While this is in opposition to *Developmental Transformations* theory, I feel that letting the play die may

have value and paradoxically, may eventually restore the flow of free play.

Having been a client in *Developmental Transformations* for many years and a practitioner of it, I have found value in not forcing material to be played with. Instead, I find it helpful to ask the psyche what it wants to protect itself from by stopping free play. While the ultimate goal is to return to free play, forcing the issue or moving too quickly for a client's innate pace, may interfere with the process of life, death and transformation.

And sometimes, dying is a longer process than we realize. The primary reason for this is because people can have a tremendous reservoir of pain that needs time to release before it can be transformed. For instance, if one is sobbing, it is hard to think about playing, nor does one necessarily want to play. Instead, there may be more value in catharsis. By allowing the body's natural, affective responses to release, one's energy becomes attuned and healing can take place, regardless of whether or not play continues.

In *Developmental Transformations*, there is a circular shape of carpet placed in the room, called the Witnessing Circle. When the therapist enters this space, it signifies a time when improvisations can pause. At this time, the therapist simply observes or witnesses the client. The author feels the Witnessing Circle can provide a critical resting stop, particularly when the play stumbles into difficult terrain. It can symbolize the ultimate healing act—that of witnessing another person in his or her deepest moment of suffering.

Suffering: the crucible of transformation

I feel that impasse and a sense of dying in psychological transformation germinates from profound suffering. Whether a client fears emotional pain or actually experiences it, the intensity of suffering can create the sensation of psychic disintegration. This place of suffering can elicit profound growth and transformation but in order for this to occur, the therapist and client must allow space for it and be able to tolerate it.

Suffering creates a crucible in which old aspects of the self deconstruct so that new dimensions and possibilities can arise. Without an understanding of this or comfort with it, we lose tremendous opportunities for change. Therefore, it is critical to acknowledge this phase in treatment, even if it means clients refuse to engage in action-oriented methods at this time.

In nature, the process of transformation is one in which living things die and then re-emerge. A flower blooms, its petals wither and fall to the ground and then its seeds give birth once again. However, this

process of constant change, so natural and organic to the way of life, is something that humans resist accepting because it doesn't always feel good. We resist change, trying to hold onto the old, not realizing that our suffering increases with our clinging and fear. This resistance can create a huge impasse in treatment but needs to be respected.

Underlying this resistance is an enormous fear of suffering. Clients know that our action-oriented methods can strip psychological defenses, bringing them face to face with long repressed, painful emotions. Intuiting this, clients sometimes put the breaks on in sessions, fearing they will go flying down the hill otherwise. They are scared of being potentially out-of-control and/or crashing. Ultimately though, we can not protect our clients from feeling their pain and to do so, prevents them from healing. While we strive for aesthetic distance (Landy, 1986) by modulating exercises or slowing down the play, once the floodgates of emotions open, clients can experience a free fall similar to the feeling of dying. Sometimes, there is no such thing as affective regulation. When this happens, clients walk into the heart of their pain, whether or not they are ready and willing to go (as if anyone ever really wants to go into the heart of pain). At this point, the concept of aesthetic distance can still be held as a goal (or perhaps will be the result of good therapy) but in the meantime, it is our job to hold a sacred container while clients are in this crucible of chaos, pain and fear.

Working with clients in intense distress can be terrifying for us too because we are companions on the journey. As we walk into this existential pit of pain, it is important to remember that "what is to give light must endure burning" (Viktor Frankel in Singh, p. 103). In other words, sometimes the only way out of suffering is through it. However, this process can create alchemy and separate the dross from the gold.

While suffering creates a sense of dying, it also brings new life. Like the Phoenix, the mythic bird who continually rises from its own ashes, we too can rejuvenate from the depths of our despair. In good treatment, our pain becomes transmuted and integrated, creating spaciousness within our psyche for something else to emerge like blossoms after a harsh winter. Ken Wilbur describes this process beautifully when he writes:

Suffering smashes to pieces the complacency of our normal fictions about reality and forces us to become alive in a special sense—to see carefully, to feel deeply, to touch ourselves and our worlds in ways which we have heretofore avoided. It has been said, and I truly think, that suffering is the first grace. (In Singh, 1998, p. 101)

David Whyte (1992) also eloquently describes the grace in suffering in the following poem:

No one told me it would lead to this
No one said there would be secrets
I would not want to know.

No one told me about seeing,
seeing brought me
loss and a darkness I could not
hold.

No one told me about writing
or speaking.
Speaking and writing poetry
I unsheathed the sharp edge
of experience that led me here.

No one told me
it could not be put away.
I was told once, only,
in a whisper,
"The blade is so sharp—
It cuts things together
—not apart."

This is no comfort,
My future is full of blood
from being blindfold
hands outstretched,
Feeling a way along its firm edge (1992, p. 51)

If suffering does indeed bring us into a state of grace, we must be careful not to by-pass our clients' opportunities for this experience because we are uncomfortable with the impasse in treatment or fear that our clients' depth of suffering is too much. For these reasons, it is important to honor when treatment becomes blocked and when clients do not want to play or even inter-relate. Deep change may be at work and we can facilitate this by creating a place where it is okay for the client to be still and to "die" or transform.

Clinical application

Now that we've explored the notion of death and impasse theoretically, let's look at how it emerges in our clinical work. Below is a case example from my work with the elderly. In it, themes and imagery of death surfaced during impasses, mirroring the intra-psychic processes that were occurring.

Case example

This case example comes from a group I led with the elderly on a weekly basis. One of the group members, who I'll call Jane, had experienced many tragedies in her life. Consequently, she suffered from low self-esteem, a sense of despair and the feeling that no one loved her. Whenever Jane came to my

drama therapy groups, she struggled to engage in dramatic play. She was not familiar with having fun or being connected to others. Instead she would often burst out crying, exclaiming that she was miserable. This would irritate group members and bring the play to a halt. Then the group would be at an impasse, as a result of Jane's own internal block.

However, in one session, Jane actually made a breakthrough and engaged in a fair amount of improvisational play before her tearfulness started. I believe the experience was an opening for new aspects of Jane's personality to emerge but scared by the resulting vulnerability, Jane hit an impasse. Her rigid behavior stance was breaking down and she resisted. I'm sure on a subconscious level, she sensed an intra-psychic death was beginning to occur that she wasn't ready to experience.

At this point in the dramatic play, we were all in a boat, fishing. Jane had mentioned that she had never fished before because she feared water, so the group decided to take her fishing. They felt that in imaginary play, there was no need to fear drowning because there was no real water. So we cast out our lines and waited for a bite, but it wasn't long before Jane suddenly burst out crying. I was shocked. The play had been going along so "swimmingly." Now I felt like I was going to drown because I didn't know what to do. I feared the play was going to "die" and when the play dies, the facilitator feels like she is too. However, on an impulse, I pretended that we had a sick woman on board and that the crew was going to have to quickly row her to shore. "What do you do when there is a sick woman on board?" I asked. "Any doctors here?"

"No," Jane responded. "You throw her overboard."

The group went silent and then we did have an impasse because Jane's comment was very telling, and we all knew it. She was revealing to us that she was so unhappy, she wanted to die and that she perceived others wanted her to die too, even though in the play, everyone was ready and willing to rescue her. Nobody, including myself, had said, "let's throw her overboard."

As a group, we hit an impasse. I couldn't sustain dramatic play and we ended up talking instead. In retrospect, I wish I had taken Jane's comment and played with it, polling the group if we should throw her overboard. I could have also given her the opportunity to throw herself overboard, if she wanted. She probably needed the experience of drowning, within the context of play, to realize that she meant something to the group and that her life was valued, for had she been thrown overboard and/or jumped overboard, inevitably somebody would have tried to save her. Or, if she would have drowned in dramatic play, we could

have explored the consequences of her death, again signifying that her life mattered. However, it's possible that no matter what clever interventions I could have made in role, she would ultimately have shut down.

I have used this example because Jane's personality was so rigid, dramatic play threatened her intra-psychic existence. To engage in dramatic play, meant an old pattern was going to have to deconstruct which made dramatic play highly threatening for her. When she finally had an experience of free play, it was too overwhelming for her, and she broke down crying. Her suggestion to "throw her overboard" clearly mirrored the "inner death" she was experiencing. However, the fact that she could somewhat play with the idea of us doing away with her was a sign that her imagination was quite alive. In her "dying," she was transforming. Despite herself, her personality was beginning to reincarnate.

A person might view this as a type of internal deconstruction, in which things one does not want to accept or acknowledge become aspects of experience that challenge one's perception of existence. This phenomenon is often referred to in Buddhist theory as a point in which notions of the self at the personality level are suddenly realized as illusions or distortions of reality. Psychiatrist and Buddhist practitioner Mark Epstein observes, "There is no attainment of a higher self in Buddhist theory; instead only an exposure of what has always been true but unacknowledged; that self is a fiction" (in Bennett-Goleman, 2001, p. 271). In this process "the self breaks up; in its place there are seen to be only 'thoughts without a thinker'" (Bennett-Goleman, 2001).

Conclusion

Returning to Viktor Frankel's quote, "what is to give light must endure burning" (in Singh, p. 103). I believe in this burning process and think it signifies a point of deep change. Whether the burning is metaphoric or literal, it can make us feel like we are dying, but in reality, it is a sign that we are resurrecting. When we feel a burning at our hearts, like the flame we see in religious paintings or the illumination of E.T.'s heart light, we are burning into being. The old layers of our personalities are transmuting so that our essence can emerge from hiding and radiate out into the world, for we are the lights at the end of our tunnels.

All schools of spirituality believe in an after life and that nothing really dies. Instead, all things transform. And at the heart of all spiritual traditions, there is no boundary between the spiritual and physical; no boundary between self and other; and no boundary

between self and not self. Instead love permeates every aspect of the Universe and courses through our beings. I believe we enter into therapy to remember this truth. I believe healing is simply remembering our deepest essence, which is Love. The following poem by Hafiz (1999) beautifully illustrates this truth.

Love is the funeral pyre
Where I have laid my living body.

All the false notions of myself
That once caused fear, pain,

Have turned to ash
As I neared God.

What has risen
From the tangled web of thought and sinew

Now shines with jubilation
Through the eyes of angels

And screams from the guts of
Infinite existence
Itself.

Love is the funeral pyre
Where the heart must lay
Its body (in Ladinsky, 1999, p. 69).

This paper has served to highlight some of the complexities and benefits of impasses in drama therapy and to recognize the importance of suffering, surrender and dying in psycho-spiritual transformation. Drama therapist and theorist David Read Johnson once said to me that in treatment "there are many deaths." By this he meant that in the continual flux of dramatic improvisation and psychological change, limiting structures break down so that one's essence can be revealed. And this can feel like a series of mini deaths. Our job as drama therapists is to guide clients through this process, despite all the fear and pain surrounding it. I close with the following by Derek Mahon:

How should I not be glad to contemplate
The clouds clearing beyond the dormer window

And a high tide reflected on the ceiling.
There will be dying, there will be dying,
But there is no need to go into that.
The poems flow from the hand unbidden
And the hidden source is the watchful heart.
The sun rises in spite of everything
And the far cities are beautiful and bright.
I lie here in a riot of sunlight
Watching the day break and the clouds flying
Everything is going to be all right (in Whyte, 2001, p. 196).

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