



# Gathering Voices Essays on Playback Theatre

## *The Red Thread: Storytelling as a Healing Process* *Folma Hoesch*

Edited by  
Jonathan Fox, M.A. and Heinrich Dauber, Ph.D.

This material is made publicly available by the Centre for Playback Theatre and remains the intellectual property of its author.

## The Red Thread

### Storytelling as a Healing Process

Folma Hoesch <sup>1</sup>

Playback theatre has a deep effect on people who tell their stories and on groups in which stories are told and played back. Although it is not psychotherapy, I would like to say that it is healing.<sup>2</sup>

Playback theatre is a new approach to theatre, built on the tradition of oral culture. There is no written text, nobody knows beforehand what is going to be told and enacted.

Playback theatre has a certain form. It is a vessel in which something can come into existence. Although the content is unknown beforehand, a sense of order rather than chaos prevails. Each time something unique evolves, there is a process. One can see the meaning of it clearly, at least by looking back on it. In a short time, a group is created whether people knew each other before or not—a group with its own theme, with a red thread.<sup>3</sup> There is a clear path rather than a labyrinth; there is a definite way in, a center and a way out.

At the beginning of a playback event we face the unknown. We feel both openness and anxiety. We trust that once again something will come into being that has a gestalt and a meaning, through which community will be created.

Usually the people who discuss and write about playback theatre actually do it, as actors, conductors, musicians. In this essay my perspective is that of the spectators and the tellers of stories.

From this point of view a series of questions arise: why does a person tell a story? How does someone come to be a teller? To whom am I telling my story? Am I telling it to the conductor, who invited me and others to tell? Am I talking to the other spectators or seminar participants? Do I want to hear myself telling? Do I want to see what I tell? Which story am I going to present? And how much is this related to my

personal history, how much does it have to do with the group in which the story is told? When in the group's process do which stories get told? These are many questions. I cannot answer them all, but I feel challenged to ask them and think about them and express my thoughts in writing. I am interested especially in one aspect: how is a story connected with the stories that were told beforehand?

During playback performances or among groups who do playback we find again and again that the stories respond to each other and furthermore, that they offer patterns for solution and transformation. To me this means that something is happening that is doing good and can be healing both for the individual member and for the group as a whole.

To get to know more about this phenomenon I chose a very pragmatic approach: I will retell stories that were told in a two-week seminar which I attended, and think about the connections between them. My main interest will be in the motifs of the stories. Which elements, motifs, figures from a story come up in a later one? How do they connect? From these observations, I will build a hypothesis about how stories come into being, how they are generated from each other, and further, how we can look at the life of a group and understand the relation between the individual and the whole.

### Two Women Tell a Story

On the morning of her 55th birthday, Anna was sitting in a seminar with Jonathan Fox near Bern in Switzerland. She had decided not to tell anybody about her birthday because she still felt a little unconnected to this group. Erna, a young person sitting next to her, seemed to be in a depressed mood. When Anna asked her how she was doing she said that her father had died the day before. She had found out only early that morning, since her contact with her family was not very good. She did not want to go see her mother now, but rather to take part in the seminar as circumspectly as possible, without saying anything about it. This coincidence of birth(day) and death touched both women deeply. In the following go-round, Erna decided to speak about

the death of her father, and Anna mentioned her birthday. Both got a lot of sympathy, congratulations, and little signs of thoughtfulness during the day.

In the evening of this day Jonathan offered Erna the chance to have the group play something back for her. She told the following story: *Yesterday I brought my sandwich for lunch as usual because I did not want to go with the others to the restaurant, which was loud and expensive. So I walked by myself on a sunny path, which led me unexpectedly to a cemetery. After having lunch there I walked between the graves and read the inscriptions on the tombstones. I was amazed how many times they said something about thankful children and loving parents. Late that night I came home. My answering machine was blinking, one of my sisters wanted to talk to me urgently. Although it was very late, I called, but when she didn't pick up the phone right away I gave up. The next morning I called my sister again, but her phone was busy. So I called my mother. She was crying, unable to talk. Now I knew what had happened: my father had died. But I didn't want to go home and I decided to come to the seminar even if this was very egoistic.*

The three scenes were played back to Erna. After this Jonathan asked her whether she wanted to see something else. And now she wondered about how her father died because she did not know. And she generated a fantasy about her father's last moments: She assumed that amidst the turmoil of her mother's loud emotional outbursts, her father had died alone and unobserved, almost happy to leave all the trouble behind.

This scene was also enacted. Erna was thankful and sat down again. The group and especially Anna were deeply touched by Erna's story and her father's lonely death. Still immersed in these images and feelings, Anna was very surprised when Jonathan invited her to tell a story, too, as a birthday present and as closure for the day. Without any idea what to tell she sat in the teller's chair. In order to help her, Jonathan asked about her at progressively younger ages, to help her find a story. In Anna's head was the notion of birthdays, and she thought about the different birthday parties that her mother had created for her during her childhood. She recalled photographs of these parties, which she kept in an album. But all this somehow didn't feel important enough, it seemed empty and didn't touch her. She even felt a slight

aversion to bringing her mother into the picture. All of a sudden it became clear what she wanted to tell. A feeling of warmth went through her whole body, the stream of images stopped, and she felt an opening in her heart.

*Anna recounted: For the past few years I've kept a photo by my bedside of me at six months old with my father. It is the only existing photo of my father and me, because a few weeks later he was called in as a soldier, was later taken as prisoner of war, and went missing in Russia. I would like to see the scene when the photo was taken: my father is sitting on the grass in our garden with his baby on his lap. Both are smiling. A few meters in front of them my mother is kneeling down with the camera. We are a happy family, at least in this moment. Far away, in the background, the war is already present.*

Until this evening Anna had never realized that the photo of her and her father must have been taken by her mother, that her mother is present though invisible. For Anna, the enactment of her story was the most beautiful birthday present she could think of.

Looking at the two stories I realized only later that there is a close connection between Anna's story and Erna's story. Erna's story is about being alone and being together, belonging and not belonging, pulling back because there is no peaceful security in her family. She talks about it in several variations: her lunch by herself, apart from the group, the difficulties in getting in touch with her sister, the impossibility of talking to her mother, the fantasy about her father's lonely death in the midst of the family. At the edge of the story, the motif of love between parents and children appears in the tombstone inscriptions—which are surprising and even strange to Erna.

In Anna's life, love between parents and child and an intact family could not exist because the war destroyed everything. In her experience of family there was no father, so she wouldn't consciously have sought out a father-daughter scene. Nevertheless, the photo came to her mind, and she chose precisely the only scene in which father, mother and daughter were present and deeply connected.

I have told this story, of which I know the interior perspective and the preceding history, in order to use it as an example. This background knowledge is rare in playback theatre, because the stories are not commented on, analyzed, or worked out therapeutically.

In summary of this sequence I want to underline the following aspects. The second story responds to the first. Nobody is consciously looking for such a connection; the tellers themselves are totally unaware of it. Some motifs appear on several levels. The feeling of not belonging comes up already at the beginning of the day, when both women plan not to say anything about the special experiences they are going through. It leads like a red thread through Erna's story and finds a counterpoint in the story of Anna. This element, the feeling of belonging together, already arose in the tombstone inscriptions, holding surprise and a slight shock for the teller.

There is a level of feeling, thinking and telling with which the tellers identify. They think, "I had better not say anything because I don't really belong to these people around me." And there is another level with which they both do not identify—safety, love and togetherness.

Here I am drawing on Arnold Mindell's model of process-oriented psychology to describe these two sides of the story telling process.<sup>4</sup> Mindell describes stream of consciousness as a process of signals being sent and perceived. Instead of dividing the soul into the conscious and the unconscious as other approaches do, he distinguishes between the part with which a person is identifying, i.e. what he accepts as all right for himself and others, and the other side with which he does not identify—i.e., what he does not accept, what he sees as outside of himself, what he thinks he cannot do or must not do, what is disturbing for him or what he is even fighting against in himself or in others. "People identify with their intentions or 'primary' process. 'Secondary' processes are experienced as being foreign and distant."<sup>5</sup> The secondary happens unwillingly to them. Mindell uses the terms primary and secondary very differently from what we are used to in other sciences.

Between both sides of the process there is an edge.<sup>6</sup> A person says for example: "I cannot do this." Probably she does not want to get into a discussion or a fight with somebody, or she feels unable to do it. However, this matter is troublesome for her;

again and again it shows up in her life; it is somehow knocking at her door. The edge holds a lot of energy. There are strong prohibitions around it, bad experiences, negative images. To step over the edge consciously is not easy. The signals from the edge are strong hints about a person's frontier of growth.

I use this psychological model for the process of telling stories as well. The different motifs are looked at like the different parts or figures within the individual or the different members or roles in groups. The edge appears in the feelings and values of the tellers. In our stories we find Erna having trouble believing that the inscriptions on the tombstones are to be taken seriously, and Anna not even thinking of the possibility that her family had been complete at the beginning. Erna expresses the edge clearly, by showing her estranged feelings about the inscriptions. She cannot totally trust these expressions of love because her experiences in this field were negative. The secondary motif is connected with other people. Looking at Anna we see the edge in the fact that it never came into her awareness that the photo was taken by her mother. The experience of a whole family is secondary for her. Being invited to tell a story without having a plan, an aspect could come up which was new and surprising for her.

The edge can also arise in a more blatant way, such as somebody saying, "I cannot do this or that," or "I don't like this, I hate this..." We will see this in the stories I will discuss later. Primary for both tellers is the feeling of not belonging to the group, either the family or the seminar. Secondary—i.e., outside their definition of themselves in this moment, is community, togetherness, and love. The secondary motifs seem to wait until they can show up in a different way. In them we find the power of change.

The terms conscious and unconscious don't seem to fit here because the whole process is happening more or less consciously. The tellers actively decide how to shape their stories. But it seems to me that there are forces of the soul working which are not planned and cannot be planned. In playback theatre we use the word spontaneity for this.<sup>7</sup> And in the end this is what I am discussing. But how it happens in detail, how the forces interact, how they complete each other and make a whole

with the potential of healing: that is my question, and I want to collect more examples to explore it.

## Connecting Stories

In the beginning of a playback event there is quite often a feeling of discomfort. Nobody knows what is about to happen, neither actors nor visitors. The stomach is a little uneasy, feels empty, the brain seems to be somewhat dizzy. We sit on a spectator's seat and ask ourselves: "Do I want to get involved here? Do I feel like telling a story? And if I wanted to, will a story come to my mind? Do I have anything to talk about? Or is my life totally uninteresting for others? I could easily feel embarrassed if I say anything." Nobody seems to know the rules here.

A group, like an individual, has a primary process, issues and ideologies with which they identify, and a secondary process, consisting of the things that happen to them with which they do not want to identify. Most primary processes are connected with issues. The secondary ones are usually emotional and are concerned with hurt, happiness, power struggles and spiritual needs, all of which the group has an edge against. "The primary process is the sense of 'we' which the members refer to, the thing which makes the family or group different from others... A city's local environment or a nation's myth may be primary." <sup>8</sup>

The primary process of a playback group is very open. There is a connecting idea, especially if it is not our first playback evening. It could be something like, Stories will be told and acted out here, and it is new and fascinating. But this idea works more like a "blank access," an open approach with low structure, without content, and with only a few rules of behavior for the visitors. <sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, the tellers do choose what to tell and there are connections between stories that are conscious, or at least very close to how a person is identifying at the given moment. That is what I want to talk about now, before I get to the secondary elements.

Like many other seminars and evenings, our week in Bern began with stories about leaving home, travelling, arrival, etc. The actual situation of the participants is the

connecting element. Somebody plucks up courage and tells something. But to whom? To the conductor? Of course, he invited them and that is important. They feel welcomed. Or is it to the other group members? Maybe I am curious and a little restless; I like to show myself, to be seen, to take space. Or do I tell the story to myself? Do I need to make myself feel that I am here, not just present, watching, participating, but actively here in this place in this moment? The teller takes a role in an open field. The role can be: I am active, I am not a quiet one without courage. It can also be: I am helpful, I'm helping this event get started. Or it can come from other motivations. The group begins to generate a structure. A community creates itself by taking roles.

Like the different roles, the stories being told in this beginning phase don't look alike. A few examples:

Fritz comes up as the first teller in our seminar. *I was early at the station this morning. Usually I am late and in a hurry. But today I had time to go to a bookshop and buy a postcard. It shows a man flying over the city, while standing on a book. With pleasure I watched people running around. A little later I got on the bus where a friendly Spanish woman explained to me where to get off.*

After this we hear and see the story about Erica's chaos: *I was in the middle of moving. I was staying at my friend's place. Her husband was opposed to my being there because nobody had told him beforehand. There was a lot to organize with boxes and things, and I didn't know how to cope anymore. My husband had already left totally exhausted for the new city and was not available to help. But then my friend's husband became very caring and helpful. Unfortunately, I missed my chance to say goodbye to him, because everything was so rushed and chaotic.*

The two stories stand in deliberate contrast to each other. Surprisingly they show the tellers from a very unusual side, a side even somewhat unknown to the tellers themselves. Normally things are more the other way around. Fritz is always in a hurry. Erica is well organized and does not live in chaos. And the opposite motif comes up in both stories: in Fritz's scene there are other people at the station running around, and in Erica's story the caring friends maintain overview and organization. The mentally conscious identity and the secondary parts seem to be

mixed. Their roles seem to be exchanged. Is there a special reason for this? Do we pay attention to what is unusual about ourselves because it is different from everyday life? I would like to leave this question for later.

I especially want to highlight the friendly Spanish woman helping Fritz in the bus. The question of who is Swiss and who is a foreigner, or who feels at home and who is far away from his origins, is another variation of the theme of belonging and feeling estranged and will be a very important theme in this seminar.

In the process of beginning, roles are created for the different members of the group, as well as a beginning structure and a first feeling of “we are a group.” A special state of consciousness is evolving. As people from a Western culture we are used to thinking, analyzing, explaining, and understanding what happens. These explanations are not necessarily expressed. They are clear for everybody. But we love to give speeches, write essays, make up paradigms to explain things. Playback theatre does not explain. The stories will not be commented on. After a scene is acted out the conductor will ask the teller whether what the actors played is like what she told. Only if she feels that something really was different, does not fit or was even hurtful, will she say: “No, it was different.” In this case, the conductor can decide to let the actors play it again. Or, and this can be just as appropriate, the initial enactment is accepted as a variation of what happened. Quite often the actors have picked up on a secondary element, which the teller had not seen so far or did not have access to. But most of the time the tellers say: “Yes, this is how it was.” We all know that it cannot have been like this. The story in itself has fictional aspects and the play even more. The players do not use costumes or make-up. A few boxes and colored pieces of fabric define the stage, words are improvised and music underlines the scene. This is not what the teller experienced in the first place. Something like a miracle is happening here.

It seems to me that two very simple facts are important: It is very unusual for us to tell our own stories to an audience and it is even more unusual that we can watch them. We hardly ever see our own life from outside, we do not look at it on a stage, we do not think of it as fiction. Playback theatre does not comment or judge, there is no explanation or understanding with words and terms. We just watch. That puts us

in a different state of consciousness very quickly. A slight trance is created. We begin to "think" in stories and pictures, we watch and add stories to other stories, fit pictures to pictures without our rational primary process getting started. In his book *Acts of Service*, Jonathan Fox shows us that trance induction is part of preliterate acting.<sup>10</sup> It is surprising to me how quickly a slight trance is created only by the means of telling and watching.

A moment of irritation, disorientation, slight chaos is a necessary element of this process. Only when I give up wanting to understand what I experience in rational terms will this trance work for me and evolve as a source of creativity.

### The Connections Between Several Stories

At the beginning of the process, tellers often reveal stories that show themselves in a positive light. Here I want to talk about a very different aspect, that part of the evening or seminar when stories are told which are especially difficult for the protagonists, where somebody broke down or failed or didn't act at all like a hero. One can imagine that a certain trust is necessary. People need to feel safe and it is important that they have had the opportunity before to show that they were not always in a bad position or in the role of the victim. Sometimes the way in can come from a conscious articulation of one of the red threads already part of the group theme.

During the second week of our seminar, there was an afternoon when the tellers, adult men and women, many of them teachers, talked about childhood experiences where they felt abandoned.

Fritz started: *I am 12 years old, home alone; my mother is at work and pays little attention to me. I go to visit her in the shoe shop where she sells shoes, to be closer to her. But I feel that I am tiresome, she doesn't have time for me. In the evening she comes home. She talks about what happened during the day, but she tells only my father, not me. I feel excluded and alone.*

The next one to talk was Richard: *In my story I am 12 years, too. I am on my way home from school. The other kids tease me, they bully and bother me. I am afraid*

*and sick of it at the same time, I want to be left alone. I take my book bag and swing it around me on one of its straps. They have to give up and leave me in peace. In school I was a lot better than they were, especially in French. My book bag was my weapon.*

Both tellers are the same age in their stories; both are alone. But their experience is totally different. Fritz does not get enough attention, he feels put off, and he misses love. Yet he cannot do anything about it. Richard gets too much attention, but he is able to fight.

This motif becomes the trigger for a third story. Ingrid says: *I was 13. It was just before we were given our report cards in school. The teacher told me to come up to him after class. As soon as I could I ran up to him in the hallway. He turned to me and told me in front of all the other students that my grades were very bad. I felt very embarrassed because everybody was watching.*

After the scene had been enacted, the conductor, this time a member of the group, offered Ingrid a transformation of her story. This time she creates a scene in which the teacher talks to her in a place where she feels protected, and he is more understanding. The group members who played teasing pupils before are now in the role of the protecting wall around the encounter.

The main motifs in this story are the same: age, feeling left alone, feeling put down. The missing part of the first story, the protective loving atmosphere, is replaced in the second story by the fight, the self-protection, and pushing away the schoolmates. In the transformation of the third story it is possible to find a situation and a figure incorporating protection and love: the understanding teacher.

These connections are easy to recognize. This phase of the group process is characterized by a good feeling of trust. On the other hand, we have to consider that group members are now conducting. They are taking risks; the task is new and exciting for them. That may well be a reason why there are stories about schooldays and feelings of fear and loneliness. The tellers know what they are going to tell before they come up to the stage. They have primary reasons and we can expect that primary motifs are the connecting elements between the stories.

The second story seems to give the teller of the first story a clue that he could have helped himself and fought for his needs. But I am quite sure that Richard did not do this on purpose. It seems to me that the second teller offers an alternative, a solution in which the active and passive roles are exchanged. Fritz is a victim of desolation, Richard wants to be left alone. The third story ends with a transformation. It brings a kind of peace. The stories do not finish in an open-ended or unsettled fashion, and the process of telling comes into balance. The atmosphere in the group is relaxed now. The next story can address another theme.

In this story, the central motif is carried on. A person is alone and needs care because of this. Urs talks about his old mother: *She is living in her own apartment, and I worry about her. I need to check on her, but she doesn't pick up the telephone. My fourteen year-old son has the clue: this is the time when grandmother takes a bath, and so she cannot answer the phone. But the whole family is fed up because there is so much trouble.* The motif of being alone and needing help is seen from a very different perspective here. For the teller it is not in the realm of his normal routine, and it eats at him.

The motifs make a chain, but they are not put together like pearls. They connect in a very special way. In the first story the main motif is brought up, but there is no solution. In a secondary way—i.e., in connection with other people, the solution is present: Fritz's parents are connected—they talk to each other and listen. But this doesn't help the protagonist. He feels excluded.

The next story shows a very different solution, and it shifts the perspective. The teller is not the victim anymore, but he is an active hero, who fights for his goals. But he stays alone at the end. In this nothing has changed. In the third story the motif is different yet again. The teller feels alone and unprotected as in the first story. She, too, does not come up with a solution right away. But in the transformation she can point the way to finding protection and support.

Missing elements of one story are told in the next one. But the whole solution is not found in one step, but rather is built up in several steps. The fourth story brings in a new perspective and places a different role at the center. It is the son who can express that he feels oppressed by his mother's needs and his ex-wife's pressure. I

think it is remarkable that the motif of age, which connected the first three stories, appears again at the edge. The teller's son who knows that grandmother is taking her bath at this time of day is the same age as Fritz, Richard, and Ingrid in their stories.

### Finding the Theme

There was a unique composition of people in our seminar. The vast majority were teachers, mainly from primary schools but also high school, college and university level. A minority were psychologists. Some people were trained as both teachers and psychologists. Men and women were there in more or less equal numbers. Ages were balanced pretty much between thirties and mid-fifties. The most striking characteristic was the distribution of nationalities. The majority of members were Swiss. Only two members were foreigners, a Greek woman and a German one. The only full-time psychologist was a man formerly from the Alsace, a part of France belonging to Germany and France at different historical times and occupied by the Nazis in World War II. Everybody had been living in Switzerland for a long time. In this area one could find a clear majority and minority as well. In addition, the leader of the seminar, Jonathan Fox, was American. This very fact gave a special importance to the minority of "foreigners." The relatively strong borders of the Swiss group were opened up in an important aspect.

I mention this constellation in detail because it was very significant in the process of finding the group's theme during this two-week seminar. My being German made me a member of a minority that faces quite a few prejudices in Switzerland because of history. This certainly influenced my awareness. I think it was sharpened.

I had already had a long talk with André, the man from Alsace, during our first lunch. He is my age, which means we both experienced World War II as the overwhelming element of our childhood, but from very different perspectives. Our encounter was very open-minded and brought us in good contact instead of separating us, as it could have. At the time, in 1995, the theme of World War II was relatively far away for Swiss people. (This has changed a lot in the meantime.) None of the other people

present in the group had experienced it. It had not played an important role in the history of their families. World War II used to be a part of the national myth—the myth of the heroic soldier defending the Swiss border against the evil surrounding the country.

On the second day of the seminar André came forward as a teller after Jonathan had asked me to be the conductor. André told: *When I was three years old my father had to hide from the Nazis. My mother used to bring him food and provide him with information every night. So my 13 year-old brother and I were alone at home very often. One night my brother was so terribly afraid that he trembled with his whole body, and I walked him around our apartment in order to help him relax. This memory came back to my mind this morning when I had to leave my 15 year-old son alone at home because he needs to stay in bed with a fever. I could hardly do it. But I promised to talk to our neighbor and to his older sister and to call him to find out how he is doing.*

The two scenes were played, the second as a transformation of the first. I must say I was touched very deeply by the fact that André told this story in this setting with me, a German woman, as the conductor, and I mentioned this to him. In response André gave me a chestnut he had picked up in front of the building, saying that chestnuts surely must have been one of the main childhood toys for me, too. The experience of war gave us a strong connection in front of the Swiss group members, who, as we assumed in that moment, had played with “real” toys, not chestnuts. A minority is uniting here, bringing up a theme they usually have to hold back, because it does not have a great resonance in everyday Swiss life. What is not part of the identity of the majority comes up as a theme of the minority. The secondary is made “primary.”

I make the hypothesis that the later stories about loneliness, fear, feeling excluded and excluding oneself, i.e. wanting to be independent, are variations of this motif which was raised in the very beginning. In connection with majority and minority, the historical and political elements come into play—in Jung’s terms, the collective aspect.<sup>11</sup>

And now, to underline my hypothesis, a second story: The seminar included a whole lot of experiments of how to use playback in school. In this phase Eugen, who works

in the field of ongoing teacher training, projected a photo on a screen both as a trigger of stories and as a background for the stage. It showed an old Mediterranean house with flowerpots in the windows. In the middle, a door, on either side two old people on chairs, and in front a big dog. Eugen asked the group to “find” stories to go with this picture.

*Jakob recounts the following: Several years after the war the old parents sit in front of their house in the sun. They have waited for many years for their son to come back from being prisoner of war. But so much time has passed, and they are about to give up hope. From far away a tired young man approaches. He is walking very slowly, because he is sick and weak. The two old people don't notice him. But the dog jumps up and runs toward the man, wagging his tail. Everybody is very happy about the return.*

By telling this story a fundamental rule of playback theatre was broken. The conductor did not ask for a self-experienced story. When Jakob is questioned, he remembers that his grandmother told him this story, her own experience, when he was an adolescent. And it touched him a lot. The group, too, was deeply touched by the story and the enactment as well. We needed a long feedback round to contain all the feelings. We can see here that a collective theme was brought up—the return of the prodigal son, and with it the return to feeling at home, belonging to the community, the broken wholeness, and the healing of it.

By the way, the photo was an advertisement for an absolutely banal product. Some of the group members knew it from television. Jakob did not. We had a discussion at this point about why it is so important to tell stories from one's own experience in playback settings. The spreading out of the feelings into the group is unavoidable if stories have a collective aspect and are not connected with a personal history. This can break the frame in which playback is working.

On the other hand, we can see the power playback theatre contains. Our seminar took place in 1995. The Swiss identity of being a neutral country which had not participated in World War II was intact. Half a year later the complaints about Swiss banks holding back information about Jewish bank accounts started a new process of reflecting Switzerland's role during the Nazi era. Today, in 1998, the public

discussion is still going on and step by step the country is finding a new primary identity. Looking back on our seminar I think that the theme was already in the field, and a mixed group like ours was picking it up and working on it.

### A Contribution to Understanding Groups

I want to use this story to address the question of how groups work and become creative, or to be more exact, to explore which paradigm about groups can help us understand the relationship between the individual and the group.

As a first step I go back to that single spectator, the teller of a story. Playback theatre works with scenes, series of scenes, living pictures. Nothing is commented on or analyzed. The images remain. For most of us living in western countries, this works as a trance induction, as mentioned above.

We can best compare this state of mind to a dream. In dreams, too, nothing is explained, commented on or analyzed, the pictures speak for themselves. And they have their own logic. Jung called the logic of dreams compensatory.<sup>12</sup> The dream shows me something about myself which I don't see. It is closely connected with the present situation in my life, but the central point is outside my own awareness. It shows me my own experience from a totally different viewpoint and makes more visible what I am not observing clearly. Often the dream leads to a solution in difficult situations, which would not otherwise come to mind. It seems to me that the altered state of consciousness of the spectators in playback theatre opens this kind of dreamlike logic, and that the connections between stories can be understood according to the way we look at dreams.

In this dreamlike state the secondary elements of personal processes become more accessible. The edge, holding us back from the secondary stuff in our everyday controlled state of being awake, has much less energy and can be overcome as easily as in dreams. This happens particularly if somebody is invited to tell unexpectedly and has no time to think about it, plan or become fearful. This is why the stories of Erna and Anna demonstrate especially clearly how the surprising parts,

the strange elements come into play, and how the healing power of life starts working.

In psychodrama we describe the soul as some kind of stage where inner figures play a huge drama.<sup>13</sup> They fight against each other, they help each other, they block and complement each other perfectly. In the best case they build a beautiful whole in which many different creative powers work together and create a rich life. But the intrapsychic figures have a grave difficulty: they all have more or less the same history. They had the same parents, fought against the same outer conditions, and they usually have the same blocks and edges. The roles are pretty fixed through the life they all have in common. Changes are always changes of the whole system bringing everything out of balance, and that is why they release a lot of fear for other inner and of course outer figures.

When we think about a group in this way, it is basically the same. The individual group members correspond to the inner figures. They act together. The loud ones overwhelm the silent, some have a central role, others stay on the margin. There are majorities dominating the process and minorities being overpowered or silenced and sometimes disruptive.

In recent years, groups are often looked at under the model of the field, and different elements from field theory are applied in the description of groups.<sup>14</sup> Groups have certain roles. One member or a small subgroup takes the leadership role, sometimes explicitly, more often from the background. Others are the opponents, the critics. Some do not say much, but they feel a lot and are often very sensitive. Each group has its own majority. It is defined according to the goals of the group and the ideas the group is following. The more clearly the goal is defined, the more clearly the majority can be defined. From this, a minority always emerges. But it does not always become evident in the same way. The goal of the majority corresponds to the primary process of the group, the minority represents the secondary process.

It is not clear at the beginning who is going to be the minority. If, for example, everybody is tired, the eager ones who want to go on are the minority. If most of the people in the group are Swiss and two non-Swiss members feel connected by the theme of the war it can easily happen that their experiences during World War II

become a secondary theme. This can be on two different levels at the same time: for the minority it is a real experience and for the majority it is unknown and it becomes an archetype, a basic pattern of fear. The minority is channeling an important theme of the majority, which is repressed in everyday life.

Between the two parts there is an edge. As long as the majority insists on its primary goal and wants to keep its balance (homeostasis), the secondary part is looked at as irritation, disturbance, even as a hostile element. The more the goal is emotion-laden, the more a group will become polarized.

Mindell works with the concept that each group is able to find new solutions if it is possible to give each of the parts enough space to express themselves and maintain fairness for all sides. "Filling the role of the leader, the follower, the silent one, the wise one or the disturber is essential for the life of the community. Only when all the roles are filled and interact, can the entire field discover its own human and self-governing capacity." <sup>15</sup> Groups naturally own the power to find a way to balance and harmony and experience themselves anew as whole. "If there is a tendency to create and express itself, it dreams itself to conclusion ... creating a new and unpredictable collective center, a numinous community experience." <sup>16</sup>

In playback theatre groups don't have a theme at the beginning. People want to be together, experience something new; they hope to find nice entertainment and to feel good. This is a very open attitude. Nevertheless a structure is created and a sequence of stories with a red thread appears in a short period.

One aspect seems especially important to me. The people getting together for a playback performance usually have only loose connections. Some are friends beforehand, most of them just came to watch. The visitors do not look at themselves as a group. They are somewhat distant. Their personal stories, the histories of their families, the inner and outer living conditions are not the same. They do not yet have a process as a group.

If a group stays together for longer, as in a seminar, a stronger dynamic develops. The participants create a shared experience, become part of a common story, adopt roles, experience tension. Here playback offers a possibility to work quickly with the

developing conflicts, helping the group gain distance from them and incorporating them into overall group life. The stories will not be judged or evaluated. Each carries equal weight. Everyone has a right to the teller's chair. A good conductor will invite the silent people. The stories create a process, they find their theme, and they offer solutions. This creates a community in a short time.

The group dynamics are not ignored but rather are brought to a different level. They work now in the process of the stories, the pictures, and the motifs. The stories talk to each other. Primary and secondary elements communicate as if they were the figures on the stage of the group's soul. The visitors, spectators, even the tellers just watch without interfering too much. If two people have different viewpoints or feelings, both stories can be told and played and coexist.

Very important for this process to happen is the trance I was talking about earlier, the images and story trance. This slight change in the state of consciousness allows a dreamlike connection and logic. Stories answer each other and communicate like parts of a dream or like the dream and the actual life of the dreamer. There is an opportunity for the inherent tendency for wholeness.

This makes playback very helpful in the process of creating community even when there is conflict. Institutions and companies have learned this and use playback for their purposes.

One point is important to mention. We see this in "normal" playback evenings as well as in institutional settings. When people who have been quiet so far are invited to tell their story, when for example after the quick and outspoken men, the more reserved women are invited to come to the stage (or vice versa); or when in an institution the ones in not very powerful positions, like the nurses in a hospital or secretaries in an office, tell their stories, playback's power to acknowledge all sides and to fill in the missing parts will become very strong, and the spontaneity has a good chance of working. If somebody is invited to talk who is in a special situation, like Erna and Anna in our seminar, the unexpected and creative can come up.

In his book about playback theatre, Jonathan Fox tells the story of Gary who was loud and disruptive in nursery school.<sup>17</sup> In drama he was allowed to do exactly what

was normally forbidden: he could act like an animal. This gave him and the others access to his secondary parts, his aggression and his loud voice, which were usually a disruption. So the adults could develop a new attitude, as could Gary himself.

The training allows the playback actors to be very flexible in changing roles. The spectators experience this high flexibility by just watching. The open setting also demonstrates flexibility. The visitor can see how the same person is acting as a mother, a wall, a dog, a child. This creates a playful distance and openness, facilitating the changing and taking up of new roles and attitudes, which is so difficult to do in every day life.

The very place where change happens is often the individual. The creativity of the soul lives there. The group lives through these impulses and the group can block or support them. For me this shines light on the rule that in playback the stories have to be personal stories. It sets a frame inside of which spontaneity and creativity of the soul, the dreamlike qualities in us human beings, can unfold and be held together at the same time. The teller's attitude is always his or her own involvement, it is the personal attachment: this is my story. This way the stories stay apart from each other, they don't spread into the whole group. The next teller is not caught in the story told before, but is free to find his or her own version and the possibility of a new solution.

On the other hand, "there is no such thing as independent change. The world changes, and calls us or dreams us up to fill its roles, and changes us. Or we change and touch everything in the environment. ... When a group has tried its best to work on a problem, the momentous change of one individual will change everything." But without earlier group work the individual cannot do anything. "Individual, couple and group changes happen interdependently." <sup>18</sup>

The many-headed group has a special chance in this process: it is not necessary that the solution is found at once. Many stories, many motifs work together and build on each other. Fritz, Richard and Ingrid are each working alone and together on answers of how to deal with loneliness and how to overcome the feeling of being a victim. And there is not only one solution, many ways can be shown. Wholeness arises only in the end, at the very end, maybe only after the end.

The same is true for an essay like this one. How playback works cannot and does not need to be explained in one article, but rather the answer will come together through the chorus of many voices, by discussing the many aspects, and by playing together.

## References

Jung, C.G. *Die Dynamik des Unbewussten*, Gesammelte Werke, Bd. 8. Olten und Freiburg im Breisgau: Walter-Verlag, 1982.

Moreno, J.L. *The Essential Moreno: Writings on Spontaneity, Psychodrama and Group Method*. J. Fox, ed. New York: Springer, 1987. [*Psychodrama und Soziometrie*, herausgegeben von Jonathan Fox. Köln: Edition Humanistische Psychologie, 1989.]

Mindell, A. *River's Way—The Process Science of the Dreambody*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985.

Mindell, A. *The Year I: Global Process Work*. London: Penguin, 1989.

Pitzele, P. "Adolescents Inside Out: Intrapsychic Psychodrama." In *Psychodrama: Inspiration and Technique*. P. Holmes and M. Karp, eds. London: Tavistock / Routledge, 1991.

Salas, J. *Improvising Real Life: Personal Story in Playback Theatre*. New Paltz, NY: Tusitala Publishing, 1993.

Fox, J. *Acts of Service: Spontaneity, Commitment, Tradition in the Nonscripted Theatre*. New Paltz, NY: Tusitala Publishing, 1994.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Translated from German by the author.

<sup>2</sup> For more on this point, see Jo Salas, *Improvising Real Life*, 111ff.

<sup>3</sup> The “red thread” is a metaphor from weaving, in which a red thread allows the weaver to follow the pattern, and is a common phrase in German for ‘the connecting element.’ –Ed.

<sup>4</sup> For more on this point, see Mindell, *River’s Way*, 11–29.

<sup>5</sup> *River’s Way*, 13.

<sup>6</sup> *River’s Way*, 25f.

<sup>7</sup> Fox, *Acts of Service*, 79ff.

<sup>8</sup> Mindell, *The Year I*, 110.

<sup>9</sup> *The Year I*, 97.

<sup>10</sup> Fox, *Acts of Service*, 32f.

<sup>11</sup> C.G. Jung, *Die Struktur der Seele*, Ges. Werke, Bd. 8, S. 161ff.

<sup>12</sup> C.G. Jung, *Allgemeine Gesichtspunkte zur Psychologie des Traumes*, Ges. Werke, Bd. 8, S. 280.

<sup>13</sup> Pitzele, *Adolescents*, 15ff.

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of playback in terms of fields, see James R. Lucal, “Emergent Drama: Renewal in Human Systems,” unpublished dissertation, The Union Institute, 1995. In *The Year I*, Arnold Mindell talks about the structures that are built in groups amazingly quickly (p. 87).

<sup>15</sup> Mindell, *The Year I*, 89.

<sup>16</sup> *The Year I*, 101.

<sup>17</sup> Fox, *Acts of Service*, 82ff.

<sup>18</sup> Mindell, *The Year I*, 81.