
A NOTE ON HAKOMI THERAPY AND PSYCHODRAMA

GREG JOHANSON

Greg Johanson is one of the trainers of the Hakomi Institute and the editor of the Forum. He is a United Methodist minister currently serving two churches on the old Klamath Indian Reservation in Central Oregon. A lot of his interests and other publications are in the area of religion and psychology, spirituality and therapy, and he is currently working on articles dealing with spiritual perspectives on Hakomi. He also is a contract therapist with Lutheran Family Services of Oregon and a doctoral student in clinical psychology. The following two articles outline some of the connections and integrations Greg sees between Hakomi therapy and psychodrama and biofeedback.

Psychodrama is a natural cohort for Hakomi therapists in many ways. It deals with character from the same perspective of creative act, drama, the ability to access and switch roles, and add to repertoires, etc. It has a nice body of techniques for deepening one's experience. It builds into the process the ability to try a scene over and over again from different modes of being, attempting new options, or to step back and simply watch it being done by others, allowing oneself the luxury of reflection outside the busyness of the action. Doubling for another person, saying for them what they might not be able to verbalize for themselves, can have the effect of a probe. Having other people in the psychodrama report their feelings from participant perspectives can also provide new rich information that can rattle consciousness in the manner of a probe. The whole process is particularly good for kinesthetic people who need something concrete to work with, something they can see, touch, etc. Psychodrama can be fun and provide a setting of safety to experiment with possibilities for growth. Finally, a person involves more of their being in the process when they are moving, relating, talking, etc. and not simply sitting and reporting as with certain other therapies.

The possibilities for accessing and deepening a person's experience was the central thing

that struck me in the first psychodrama group I attended. The group began with an invitation for everyone to get in a meditative space and allow to come to memory some incident in which they felt lonely. A woman then started her psychodrama by beginning to describe the scene she had in mind. "Let's see, I'm in my room, and there is a desk here and window over there and ..." The leader, a skillful woman therapist, immediately jumped in in an engaging, organic and non-offensive way and started a conversation with a number of questions that directed the woman back into her experience, slowed her down, and deepened her state of meditation. "Oh, you have a desk here? What kind is it? One of those with ..." "Does the desk have drawers? Show me where they are." "Do you remember what was in the drawers? I bet you had pens and pencils and paper in the middle one, right?" "What was the picture you kept in the second drawer? Can you describe the people and the background?" Before long the woman was deeper and deeper into her experience, the memory which had started out somewhat vague was quite vivid in her mind, and a good creative space was developed to work in.

This kind of structure for a group is a nice option for Hakomi therapists to have in their hip pocket for ongoing groups or topical workshops. Simply choose a subject such as anxiety, loneliness, guilt, power, whatever, allow the word to be a probe, and ask for mindfulness in relation to memories. A wealth of material is generated to work with.

It does not take a lot of people to incorporate psychodrama either. One time a woman along with a friend dropped by the office I was working in out of curiosity for what Hakomi might be. In our making contact kind of chit chat it came out that the woman had a background in drama kind of things and that probably predisposed me to think in psychodrama terms. We stood up in the office group room and began with a little body reading. The woman gave me the impression of a sturdy pioneer woman capable of and used to a lot of work. She acknowledged that she had done a lot of work but didn't feel equal to the

task, (an aware compensated oral, right?) I was also drawn to her shoulders, the left one in particular. It seemed to have some kind of invisible weight on it. I came up with a technique out of the blue I had never used before and asked the friend to use her hand to press down on the woman's left shoulder, and asked the woman to guide the process and "get the force exactly right" in terms of pressure, direction, etc. After hanging out and mindfully accessing the right physical sensation, the woman put both her hands up over her left shoulder and said it was like she was carrying a heavy bag, a burden that was slowing her down from moving where she wanted.

In psychodrama fashion, I then invited her to act that out. I had her grab her friend's hand over her left shoulder with both her hands, the friend simulating the weight of a heavy bag. I then had her slowly and mindfully walk about the room dragging this burden. One trip around the room and she said, "I've got it. It's my children. They have felt like a burden I've always had to carry that has interfered with me going on with other things I have wanted to do with my life."

We all stopped walking. Not sure what to do next, I used one of my stock fillers. "What are you aware of now?" (Ye olde gestalt standby.) She reported a pain or ache of some kind around her heart and lower back. I then asked her friend to put one hand on the heart and one on the lower back and had the woman adjust them to feel most right. She acknowledged that that felt good and nourishing to her, and after a short period we went for meaning. "What do those hands mean to you right now? What would they be saying if they were using words?" The woman had never done Hakomi work but she was a good aware person and she got it quickly. "They are saying, 'You can rest now. You have worked enough today. I'll be on the job for awhile.'" When I had the friend repeat the words verbally, she had to allow the strangeness of being the one supported to blow by, but then let down into the experience and visibly relaxed and straightened at the same time.

She felt much better about taking care of her kids at that point, realizing that she didn't have to be on the job all the time. She

could get support and rest once in awhile and that made a tremendous difference in her overall outlook on life. The whole session took about 10 minutes starting from the body reading. It was a kind of Hakomi-psychodrama combination; the type of thing that can happen when one is grounded in the work and open to whatever techniques might be helpful.

Psychodrama, like any other form of therapy, has the potential for getting off track and not being helpful. As any Hakomi trainee might guess, this happens when the Principles that undergird Hakomi are violated. The Principles have wide application beyond Hakomi work and beyond psychotherapy. It is my bias that psychodrama practitioners who are not already consciously or unconsciously grounded in the Principles, (and many of them are,) could sharpen and enhance the effectiveness of what they are already doing by getting enough Hakomi exposure to be grasped by the new paradigm Ron is talking about.

Mindfulness for instance. We all know that you have to slow down to be mindful. The pace of a psychodrama can be quite fast and much valuable material that is evoked by participating in a scene can be lost when the psychodrama director-therapist does not slow someone down and ask them to check in with what just got stirred up.

It is especially distressful for me to witness a not-quite-informed psychodramatist try to override a character problem rather than explore the barrier the person has to certain issues. For instance, in one scene a woman played out being ineffectual at getting her husband to put down the evening paper and pay attention to what she was trying to say, (Oral predicament.) The therapist-director then had her witness a stronger, self-possessed woman do the scene over and effectively get the husband's attention. The woman was then encouraged to do it the same way. "Now make sure you stand right in front of him, ask him to put the paper down, make direct eye contact, use a strong determined 'I will not be ignored' tone of voice, and get him to acknowledge what you are saying." The woman complied and tried this new approach on for size, was congratulated for her success, felt good, and was encouraged to go home and actually do it.

Here is where my distress happened. If the woman had found a new freedom, option, and encouragement to be different, it would have been fine. Tracking her experience closely as she attempted the 'stronger woman' approach, there were many bodily and voice intonation signs that suggested she was scaring herself. I have no doubt that she went home and screwed up the new undertaking, adding to her 'I don't have the power' mentality.

The whole thing could have been a wonderful therapeutic happening if the therapist had also been tracking the woman's responses and asked her what she was aware of after doing the strong attempt. Then the woman's fear could have come out, been deepened, explored, and the oral issues of being afraid to be strong because strong people are not supported and given to, accessed. Then the woman could have explored the issue of what she needed in order for it to be ok to be strong, and finally redone the scene without characterological interference with her strength. The therapist in question here could benefit from knowing how to explore various barriers. Psychodramatists in general often seem to major in working at the response barrier, and often use group encouragement and strong direction to get people to overcome their inhibitions. That only works well, realistically, in a small percentage of cases.

This brings me to the overall issue of doing psychodrama under the old authoritarian paradigm. Coming from a Hakomi perspective, I was shocked and scandalized to witness the following work done by a nationally acclaimed, certified psychodrama trainer: A woman was sufficiently motivated to work that she was given third place in the line up that night. However, after witnessing the first two people do their scenes, she got cold feet and said she had changed her mind and did not want to do her scene after all.

The leader responded by saying, "Come on. Yes, you can do it. You'll be glad you did afterward. Come on group, let's give her a little encouragement." The group cheers her on and clap their hands along with the leader. The woman repeats her desire not to go through with the psychodrama. The leader

keeps up his insistence. Finally, he goes over to her, extends his hand to help her up from her seat on the floor. She can't resist this direct appeal, accepts his arm, and is led by the hand to the middle of the stage. He starts her into the scene and struggles through it with her. Four times during the work she repeats, "I don't want to be doing this." Four times she is ignored and the work goes on, finally to completion.

And what was the scene she did? Being a little girl who was lost, couldn't find her way home. So she ends up in a police station unable to get the attention of the sargent behind the desk to listen to her problem. Her issue? Nobody listens to me! The session had been a characterological, therapeutic disaster. Whatever else was going on, the main thing that stuck out was that the sargent running the show and 30 other people in the room were not listening to her, not taking seriously what she was saying, i.e., "I don't want to be doing this." So her world view was impressively confirmed.

To add to the confusion even more, after she was finished and sat down, the leader checked in with her and asked, "Do you feel better now? Are you glad you went ahead and did it?" Her answer? "Yes, I do. I'm glad I did it." Others in the group murmur congratulations and support. I am dumbfounded. It is incredible that she said that. Am I completely off base in my perceptions? But then during the feedback at the end of the group, I say among other things that I didn't like what happened with this particular woman (though things went nicely enough with others) for the above mentioned reasons. I tell her I'm glad she kept up her protest as much as she did. When the feedback opportunity gets around the circle to her, she does confirm my perceptions and thanks me for being able to articulate them. Her fooling herself had to do with the group-think phenomenon that goes on when one is in the midst of a like thinking group without an atmosphere conducive to dissent.

It was not that the leader was a malicious, power hungry person without good skills. He was simply grounded in the old authoritarian "I'm the doctor with all the training and I know what is best for you" model. The group

was too on the whole. They thought they were being compassionate by saying "It may be painful, but it is for your own good." The model led to this gross violation of the principle of non-violence and accompanying therapeutic calamity.

Had the leader been schooled in notions of unity and organicity that lead us to believe that the wisdom is within (the other, the one being worked with), the whole thing would have gone another direction. The resistance of the woman would have been valued as good spontaneous experience, live stuff. She would have been invited to tune into it and learn from it. "A little fearful, huh?" "Why don't you hang out with your hesitance and fear for awhile and see if it will tell you more about itself. Take your time." Just these questions alone would be helpful in the sense that she was being listened to, taken serious. Certainly she and her experience would be given priority over some artificial agenda that says we have to do a psychodrama scene now. It would have demonstrated non-doing, no preferences on the part of the leader as well as acceptance of the woman as she was. Then she might have accessed some important material or perhaps have felt the freedom to go on and do her scene and learn that way.

So, the overall point of this little note: Psychodrama can be a wonderful therapy to employ or it can be catastrophic. What makes the difference according to the Hakomi perspective is the person of the therapist. Is he or she living and breathing the principles of unity, organicity, mind-body holism, mindfulness, and non-violence? Or as I sometimes put it, in agreement with Peter Koestenbaum, is there a spiritual consistent value structure that underlies the work and transcends the application of a collection of techniques?

A final observation in connection with character theory. Massochists don't do so well in psychodrama unless carefully worked with. They like the closeness of the group, but easily feel under the spotlight and pushed to perform. Result: stuckness. Psychopaths, if present, need to be given a lot of free reign and encouragement to set up and direct the drama just the way they want to -- going with the flow of their character to start with or losing them. They can also put on a good act of course, literally, and miss themselves in the process. Schizoids can sometimes also get caught up in their 'as if' behaviors and be putting on a good show that does not access their reality. Orals, compensated orals, and especially rigids gravitate toward, and enjoy psychodrama the most.

NEVERTHELESS . . . I BELIEVE!

HOWEVER DARK THE IMMEDIATE FUTURE, ALL IS NOT LOST. HUMANITY WILL LIVE BY THE FAITH AND THE HOPE, THE LOVE AND THE SUFFERING, OF A SMALL NUMBER OF MEN AND WOMEN, WHO ARE TO BE FOUND IN ALL CAMPS, DISPERSED THROUGH ALL PARTIES AND THROUGH ALL NATIONS, THE MEN AND THE WOMEN WHO SAY: "NEVERTHELESS AND IN SPITE OF EVERYTHING, AND WHATEVER MAY COME, I BELIEVE." THEY ARE THE "SACRED ROOT," THE SAVING REMNANT. IN THEIR HEARTS LIES THE FORCE OF THE RESURRECTION WHICH WILL COME AFTER THE NIGHT.

*PIERRE VAN PAASSEN
"DAYS OF OUR YEARS" 1940*