

Spontaneity and Creativity in the Time of COVID-19, or How I Connected both to Myself and Others through the Creative Process While Sheltering in Place

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It isn't easy converting a counseling and training practice highly dependent on group interaction and arts-based interventions to a screen sized version of a world once so rich in resources. But it would be hypocritical as a social worker and expressive arts trainer not to:

- 1) get over my view of Telehealth as an inadequate form of communication;
- 2) mourn the loss of one-on-one connection and all the other grieving that was fostering in its wake and finally;
- 3) look for creative responses to connect to clients and training colleagues, not to mention friends and family, I so desperately missed.

JL Moreno, the creator of Psychodrama, defines Spontaneity as an adequate response to a new situation or a novel response to an old situation. It is the spark that ignites creativity. Creativity is the ability to make something or otherwise bring into existence something new.

Every one of us is inherently creative. For some of us, this may be the way we combine the various disciplines and methods we are trained in to form – through the alchemy that is creation – a practice that is rich in your own brand of individuality. We often miss our own creative process or deny or question our ability to be creative. It may take a bit of mining the day-to-day to discover or remind us that the meal we prepared, the garden we tilled or the photo we so thoughtfully snapped on an afternoon walk are all acts of creation. My belief is any gesture in which we connect – to ourselves or others – is a creative act.

So back to my quest to harness my creativity in at minimum an adequate response to this new situation we were all facing: COVID-19 and Shelter in Place. Days 1 through 5 were ones of resentment, denial and a bit of feeling sorry for myself. I had just started my first Psychodrama client group, and I suspended it after only the opening session. It had taken me three years of marketing and an agonizingly slow build-up of a private practice, and I felt cheated by the universe. Although many of my colleagues were taking the leap from in-person to cyber groups, without exception the group members had been meeting regularly and were psychodrama savvy and had coalesced as therapeutic agents of one another. Other trainers were almost immediately offering Zoom classes and Zoom groups and embracing rather than resisting technology.

On day 6, after taking whatever webinar I could find on Telehealth and checking in with whoever would listen about the injustice I was experiencing, I had my first Zoom individual session. It was successful, but still lacked the feeling of connection I was so used to. I had sent out an email to all my clients stating my availability by phone or Telehealth platforms, but felt I needed to reach out in more interesting ways to manage both their and my feelings of uncertainty with where the world was going.

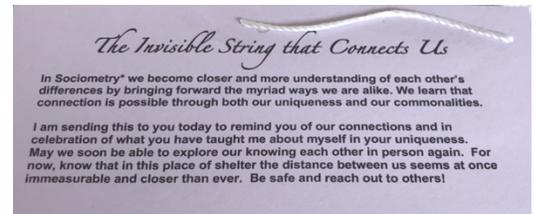
On day 7 I woke up after a dream of exotic locals and a spark of spontaneity was the catalyst for me to gather together the unused postcards I had accumulated over years of travel. I developed a message for clients and a separate one for friends and family and starting sending out the cards (in envelopes for confidentiality to clients) and when I ran out of unused cards, I went to the basket of postcards received from others



over 40 years and pasted over the original message and sent those out. Within a week or so, I started getting postcards and invitations to events postponed by COVID's arrival and homemade cards back from others – an unexpected bonus.

Zoom sessions continued, now enhanced by the snail mail connection we shared. I started working with my sister, a website developer, on re-creating my site to more reflect who I am and what I do. I found myself on Facebook for the first time, writing poetry and essays on COVID-19 and its resurgence of feelings from the AIDS pandemic of so many years ago. I created Sandtray vignettes about COVID's intrusion in our lives and posted them on social media and emailed them to clients and colleagues, captioning them with encouraging messages.

After the success of my first snail mail campaign (and I must confess I love getting cards and letters in the mail – nothing like it) I came up with campaign number two: The Invisible String that Connects Us. I sent out over two hundred of these messages to psychodrama, social work and mental health colleagues, friends, family members and clients.



In the interim, I started receiving colleagues and friend's creative ways of coping with COVID shutdown. My friend and fellow therapist Gail Gerbie sent me a letter with lovingly created affirmation cards and writing prompts she had sent out to her clients and colleagues. All over social media people were posting their artistic efforts exploring living in shelter and uncertainty. Amidst the drawings, collages and paintings there was also bread-making, Zoom Seders and Easter dinners and sidewalk chalk universes. There were essays and poetry coupling COVID-19 to unexpressed grief and unresolved pain, all such beautiful acknowledgement that we were not alone in trying to sort out some meaning and to hold onto connection to one another. On-line support venues from the social work and expressive arts communities started to blossom as well.



Moreno also stated, "All creators are alone until their love of creating forms a world around them." Now, on day 30, I have a new view of Telehealth. I will take creativity and connection however I can get it. Some say COVID-19 will alter the way we do business in the mental health field forever. Some clients will prefer the distance provided by their computer screen, and others just manage to feel connected no matter what the medium. Although I will always be in the latter category, I take solace in the world that has opened up to me through technology and I look forward to finding creative, connecting ways to make it more a part of who I am. But I'm not surrendering my art supplies anytime soon.

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He has presented nationally on many topics, most recently on Exploring Gender Identity as an Aspect of Spirituality, Scene Setting in Psychodrama, and Exploring Identity Development through the Arts. He can be reached at paul.lesnik@gmail.com 619-780-7670, digdeepertherapy.com