



## RECONNECTING WITH ANCESTRAL ROOTS: TRANSGENERATIONAL PSYCHODRAMA IN BRAZIL

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“My ancestors’ souls are sustained by the atmosphere of the house, since I answer for them the questions that their lives once left behind. I carve out rough answers as best I can. I have even drawn them on the walls. It is as if a silent, greater family, stretching down the centuries, were peopling the house”.

C. G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*<sup>1</sup>.

### Introduction

Following J. L. Moreno’s tradition of public psychodrama in the United States, it has become a long established custom to hold open sessions of psychodrama in Torino, Italy. On the first Thursday of every month, the Mediterranean Association of Psychodrama hosts a public psychodrama session on dreams or transgenerational transmission at Casa Jung<sup>2</sup> which ten to fifty people usually attend.

In August 2013, I was invited to direct a public session of Transgenerational Psychodrama in Sao Paulo, Brazil. The prospective of working in a country which had experienced a persistent influx of Italian immigrants from the late nineteenth century onwards was very exciting. The peak of the diaspora, the large-scale Italian immigration which took place between 1870 and 1920, had occurred at a time when Italy was suffering a strong economic crisis due to its recent unification. Rural workers were facing extreme poverty. The migratory wave had enabled Brazil to diversify agriculture and boost urbanization, enhancing economic growth and industrialization.

Current demographics report an estimate of roughly twenty-five million Oriundi - people with Italian ancestry - living in Brazil. Approximately ten million Oriundi live in Sao Paulo, making this city the largest Italian community outside Italy<sup>3</sup>.

The idea of working with transgenerational psychodrama in a land whose history was so strongly interconnected with my own country’s, resonated within me and touched me deeply.

### Transgenerational Psychodrama

In her pioneer work on transgenerational transmission, Anne Ancelin Schützenberger posits that “as mere links in a chain of generations, we may have no choice in having the events and traumas experienced by our ancestors visited upon us in our own lifetime”<sup>4</sup>.

The ritualistic framework of Transgenerational Psychodrama is protective and creates a safe space to gather and focus on the memories, dreams or relations with ancestors that emerge from the co-unconscious<sup>5</sup> of the group. Protagonists are part of a mythical reality with universal meaning and attention is drawn to the images that constitute a group emergence, seen as containing prospectively visionary meanings for the whole group (Perrotta 2009).

Rituals have the power to sacralise not only time and space but the bonds between people as well. Transformative rituals of reparation, gratitude, restitution, forgiveness, revealing secrets, honouring ancestors and *Dream Incubation* - derived from Jungian Psychodrama (Gasseau, Perrotta 2012) - are an integral part of the psychodramatic experience.

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<sup>1</sup> Jung C. G. (1961). *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. Princeton: Princeton University press. p. 237.

<sup>2</sup> Clinical centre of applied research and psychodrama in Torino, Italy.

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. <http://www.italplanet.it/>, Italian website for commercial and media relations between Italy and other countries.

<sup>4</sup> Ancelin Schützenberger A., (1998). *The Ancestor Syndrome: Transgenerational Psychotherapy and the Hidden Links in the Family Tree*. London: Routledge. Pg. 202.

<sup>5</sup> Moreno, J. L. (1961). “Interpersonal therapy and co-unconscious states: a progress report in psychodramatic theory” in *Group Psychotherapy*, 14 (3-4), 234-241, (September-December).

Transgenerational psychodrama is a powerful means of clarifying the dynamic patterns of invisible loyalty and hidden scripts and of shedding light on the reiteration of dysfunctional behaviour. The re-enactment of ancestors' secrets, unresolved traumas and unfinished business, condensed into visual images on stage, creates awareness which enables the protagonist to interrupt unconscious identification with the ancestors in order to break the cycles of painful repetition, deal with unresolved legacies and heal emotional wounds.

Transgenerational psychodrama is a setting for creative reparation and renewal. It is a privileged way of working through new meanings and creating a safe space for meta-cognitive and reflective thinking. The experience of emotional and cognitive reframing redefines the transpersonal matrix of the inner family and facilitates differentiation from transgenerational mandates.

### **The Public Psychodrama Session**

On a warm Winter morning in the city of Sao Paulo, roughly seventy people gathered to attend the public session on transgenerational psychodrama. Rituals are a protective framework of the experience so I initiated the warm-up with a solemn ritual to honour the ancestors. I became a storyteller and told the story of the Dogon in West Africa, an ancient people who claim to be the conduit between heaven and earth. In the evening, as the sun slowly disappears over the horizon, the Dogon perform a divination ceremony. The seer draws mysterious symbols and patterns onto the ochre sands of the village and chants to invoke the fox Yurugo, an ancestral spirit who has the gift of divination and prophecy. With its passing, the fox traces a sibylline path across the sacred markings which enables the Dogon to reinforce the harmony amongst their people and spiritually connect to their ancestors.

We re-enacted this powerful ritual with a meaningful choreography of gestures as the raw, primitive vocals "Kumbale" punctuated the rhythms of our bodies. The group moved together in a trancelike atmosphere and we became diviners, inscribing our questions onto the sands and invoking the Ancestors to enlighten us with their wisdom. As the movements and chanting came to a close with our hands dramatically rising towards the sky, the sun set and the group fell into a deep, psychodramatic sleep, waiting for the fox to appear. Yurugo, played by a group member, performed its dance amidst the queries traced on the earth by the people. As the sun rose, the sleepers awoke and were invited to read the responses traced by the footprints of the fox. The people eagerly proffered their words of wisdom as they solemnly consulted the oracle's markings: "I am here, I am the great mother"; "We are all together, we are one"; "The Ancestors are happy if you are happy"; "Give yourself joy"; "Nurture your roots"; "Be free, spontaneous and creative"; "Have trust, we are here"; "Do not forget". A frisson of excitement was felt through the group. The objective of this ritual was to enable the creativity to flow, to build the group matrix by communicating deep messages and to create a sacred space in which the ancestors could be encountered.

When working in large groups, it is essential to create a safe space, especially when dealing with transgenerational issues. Rituals of confidentiality regulate and protect self-disclosure and ensure respect for the privileged matter entrusted to the participants. I encouraged the group to huddle close in order to create a psychodramatic well, fingers interlacing to form a container for the waters of the co-unconscious of the group. The ritual was reinforced by introducing each member of the tribe, names echoing into the well before a mantra verbally pledging confidentiality was ceremoniously repeated by all the initiates.

To further facilitate the establishment of trust and connection and activate a specific warm-up, we performed an Archetypal ritual. The participants went in search of their Anima, source of creative ability, bridge toward the world of dreams and medium of ancestral energy (Jung 1969)<sup>6</sup>. The Anima helps facilitate a transgenerational encounter by channelling archetypal energy and enabling the person to connect to the positive legacy of the ancestors.

The group members formed pairs of their choosing, an effective way to experience a privileged relationship with a safe person in a large group. The nostalgic music I chose to accompany the dance evoked emotions as the participants moved with their Anima, eyes gently closed in a spiritual journey and introspective quest for a soulful searching of their ancestor's values and resources.

The encounter with their Anima galvanized the group members and warmed them up to perform the suggestive ritual of Asclepius, God of Ancient Medicine, called Dream Incubation. The group metamorphosed into pilgrims, their feet connecting to the earth and their hearts to the heavens. They walked, looking through the eyes of their unconscious for the healing wisdom of a transgenerational dream. The dream seekers moved along the labyrinthine paths of the oneiric world, the mystical sounds of the Tibetan bowl accompanying their search. My voice guided them in an active imagination to decline the images of the dream. They were encouraged to remember the plot, the landscape, the personae and the emotions of their dream. The dreamers then reconnected with their Anima and shared their dream. To give thanks to their Anima, I suggested they express a non-verbal gesture of gratitude to each other.

We were preparing to enter the enactment phase of transgenerational psychodrama. In order to make the setting more intimate in such a large group, I decided to use the fishbowl technique. Twelve chairs were set out in an inner circle surrounded by the rest of the group seated in a larger outer circle. This arrangement was designed to create a circle of energy, a safe and protective setting where a large group could more easily explore delicate and personal issues.

I called upon twelve pilgrims who wished to explore their dreams and investigate their relationship with the ancestors to take a place in the inner circle of chairs. The onlookers formed an outer circle which held and contained the experience

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<sup>6</sup> C. G. Jung (1969). "The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious" in *Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, Volume 9 (Part 1), Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

of the pilgrims. The specific task of guarding and protecting the inner circle was perceived as being very supportive by the dreamers of the inner circle.

When the chairs had been filled, I encouraged someone to come forward and share the dream which had emerged during the dream incubation ritual. My objective was to facilitate a psychodramatic encounter with an ancestor, to deal with unfinished business or to work on unresolved issues. After only a moment of hesitation, Gabriela timidly raised her hand.

### **Gabriela's dream**

"I am on the beach at the Port of Santos in Sao Paulo and I see an old ship arriving. It is crammed with Italian immigrants but many different languages are being spoken. My great-grandparents are on this ship. They have fled their home in Italy due to the extreme poverty of their country. I can sense the pained look of desperation on their faces as they clutch their cardboard suitcases containing the only belongings they have left in the world.

I observe the protective hand of my great-grandfather Fernando lying across his wife's shoulders and I see the tender gaze of my great-grandmother Maria looking towards her young daughter – my grandmother Amanda - whose hand she is holding. Together, they stand tall on the bow of the ship, looking towards the country on whose soil they will soon set foot, but their hearts are still in their mother land. My body trembles as I feel their fear, their sadness and their nostalgia".

Gabriela<sup>7</sup>'s narrative was imbued with transgenerational echoes (Perrotta, 2011) and burdened with painful scripts of fear, nostalgia and loss. Gabriela grew up in Sao Paulo, in a typical, racially mixed family with multi-national legacies. Her identity formation was intricately connected to her search for an integrated sense of self amidst competing allegiances and loyalties. The etymology of *nostalgia* is indeed an explicit reference to the painful effort of reconciling conflicting cultural dimensions in the dynamics of identity-construction: *nostos* meaning return and *algia* meaning pain.

As a consequence of the loss experienced by her ancestors, Gabriela felt deprived of the holding functions (Winnicott 1953) of a mother country which provide a feeling of safety, connectedness and belonging. As Ancelin Schützenberger so eloquently writes, "People of the second and particularly the third generation no longer know where their family loyalty lies, nor what to do, nor where they belong"<sup>8</sup>.

In setting the stage for the dream, Gabriela stood on the shores of Sao Paulo and looked out towards the Atlantic Ocean. The women representing the deep waters separating the ancestors' native land from Brazil conveyed a sense of turbulence with their undulating bodies. The pain was palpable as the auxiliary egos each connected to their own personal narratives of immigration and sense of loss. The word *saudade* took on the emotional currency of a mantra and the women playing the ocean freed their voices and expressed their melancholic nostalgia by singing for those forever lost.

I invited Gabriela to role reverse with her ancestors. Great-grandfather Fernando manifested a sense of alienation and fear for his family's life as he set foot on Brazilian land. His voice, filled with tones of apprehension, revealed his anguish in a soliloquy: "Where are we? How can we survive in this foreign land? How can we take care of our child? Will there be enough food?". Fernando bowed his head, a devastating sense of impotence disrupting his composure.

Great-grandmother Maria hugged her daughter Amanda tightly and whispered to her fervently: "We will always take care of you. We had a difficult situation back home but we have many dreams. We brought you to this new land so that your life could be better. You can go to school and become a teacher". Gabriela seemed affected by Maria's words and tears came to her eyes.

As Gabriela stepped aside to watch the re-enactment of the scene as a mirror, she voiced that she felt a lot of tenderness for her great-grandparents. They had appeared to be so brave when crossing the ocean but had actually felt disempowered and helpless in the new land. I asked her if she wanted to meet her great-grandparents and dialogue with them and her face brightened. The scene was very touching as Gabriela commended Fernando's courage and his desire to start anew in a foreign land. They held hands and she reassured her ancestor that she was doing well and that her father, son of Amanda, had become a successful doctor.

Role reversal with a significant other is an empowering experience that can help gain a richer perspective and insight on the other and facilitate the awareness of new values and resources. Gabriela asked Fernando what he was carrying in his luggage and Fernando opened the cardboard suitcase to show his great-granddaughter his only belongings. He took out his beloved objects, mementos of a past he did not wish to forget. There were black and white photos, lovingly bound together with a silk ribbon, a lucky charm made of red coral mounted in gold, a handkerchief filled to the brim with lavender and a table cloth, beautifully embroidered by his old mother who had stayed behind in Italy. Gabriella was deeply moved as she fondly handled these testimonials of the past, the only connection with the loved ones who had stayed back home.

Gabriela then asked her great-grandmother about her dreams and Maria answered that she had hoped to send her

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<sup>7</sup> Symbolically equivalent substitutions and other minor changes have been made in the presentation of this psychodrama in order to protect the identity of the protagonist.

<sup>8</sup> Ancelin Schützenberger A., (1998). *The Ancestor Syndrome: Transgenerational Psychotherapy and the Hidden Links in the Family Tree*. London: Routledge. Pg. 34.

daughter to school but the hardships faced upon arrival in the new country had not allowed Amanda to finish her studies. Maria asked her great-granddaughter if she had gone to school and Gabriela shyly admitted that she was completing her doctoral thesis. Gabriela had always taken her education for granted but she now realized what an important legacy she had received, that of conquering and exploring new territories, be they intrapsychic, geographical or intellectual. Her invisible loyalty to her great-grandmother Maria had spurred her academic accomplishments and had creatively repaired her grandmother Amanda's unfulfilled wish to study.

The young Amanda took the lucky coral and gold charm from her father's suitcase and pressed it into the hands of her granddaughter. "We want you to keep this. It will bring you luck and help you to find the land of your dreams, just like we did".

The group spontaneously raised their hands into the air and started to chant the primitive and suggestive vocals of the divination ceremony which had been performed at the beginning of the session as an echo of thanks to the ancestors. Gabriela threw her arms around her great-grandparents and her grandmother Amanda and we closed with the powerful chanting of "Kumbale".

The deep and intense sharing brought many fond memories of ancestors who had migrated to Brazil from Germany, Italy, Japan and Portugal and recognition of the unconscious acts of reparation accomplished to deal with unfinished business or unresolved legacies.

As closure, we performed a last ritual involving the whole group. The participants became a forest of ancestral spirits, their feet well grounded and rooted to the earth whilst a few people chose to become Travellers, wandering amongst the spirits and listening to the voices of their ancestors whisper new meanings or ancient answers.

## Conclusion

Public Psychodrama is a long-standing tradition originated by J. L. Moreno in the United States. The perspective of working with Transgenerational Psychodrama in Brazil, a country whose history was so strongly interconnected with my own due to the persistent influx of Italian immigrants from the late nineteenth century onwards, excited and touched me deeply.

By enacting her dream on the public stage, Gabriela was able to bring awareness to patterns of invisible loyalty and to the unconscious acts of reparation accomplished to deal with her ancestors' unfinished business.

Transformative rituals, a meaningful element of transgenerational psychodrama, have the power to sacralise time and space and facilitate the integration of ancestral legacies by providing the group with a deep, emotional common language.

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