

**In a stunning role-reversal
the Empowered Princess walls up the Oppressive Anxiety-Ogre
(A Beginning Trauma Role Exploration)**

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The process description by the director of a single-client session, in which several of the most significant roles related to a recent experience of singularly high anxiety are explored. Roles especially prominent in manifesting the anxiety are pacified through the actions of an encompassing compassionate role. The description includes both external events and the inner process of the director.

A Beginning Trauma Role Exploration

[Disclaimer: this is not a documentary. It is a Surplus-Reality recreation. It is based on my best memory of events plus imaginative creation of the dialogue and comments as they might have occurred, in order to give readers a vivid sense of the action. the session was not recorded.]

The session was held in a very comfortable room in an upscale home. The client was very familiar with this space, which made it easier for her to feel comfortable and grounded. The main furniture was a couch and three matching chairs. There were six small colorful cushions available, which proved to be quite helpful in concretizing roles.

Our separate warmups developed over a period of nearly two weeks. In a previous meeting she mentioned having recently experienced a very intense bout of anxiety, which was unique in degree of intensity and somatic symptoms. Through a combination of various self-care methods and work with 2 therapists, she was able to recover to a reasonable degree.

However, it was clear that the experience was still unsettling for her. When I suggested an extended role exploration might offer deeper insights and healing, she readily agreed, and we scheduled the session.

Warmup & Creating the Action Space:

To begin, I invite her to sit wherever she feels most comfortable. She chooses one end of the couch, with one chair opposite and another off to her right side.

“To start with, what roles do you think are important to look at?”

“pretty obviously the part that got really super-anxious....”

“sure. Just remember, from the role theory perspective, when we’re feeling anxious that is a role that’s experiencing anxiety. But the anxiety is the product of some action by another role which, for whatever reasons, is making the first role anxious. So at some point to calm down the anxiety or make sure it doesn’t flash up

again, you're going to have to deal with that role, whatever it is. ... but not right now; confronting those kind of roles takes some preparation, because when you confront that role it's absolutely crucial to have enough strong, supported roles to make sure that role is going to back off."

So, for today, if it's OK with you, how about if we bring that role, so you can see it, sort of keep one eye on it until you're ready to deal with it. OK? Where would you like that role that caused the panic to be?"

She chooses to put the role in the chair opposite.

"And how far away? How much distance do you want between that role and the rest of you for now?"

She tries out several placements, then decides to place the chair at a moderate distance, about four or five feet.

"Good, so now tell the role how you want her to be while you're working with other roles. You're in charge, this is your psychodrama exploration; make sure that role knows how you want things to be."

She has now established a clear boundary relationship with that provocative role, a first step in shifting the power away from it to more desirable and healthy roles.

First Action Scene:

"So now, do you have any idea at this point which of your roles, or more than one, were actually feeling the anxiety?"

She takes a few moments to look into her mind, then replies:

".....i think probably it's several roles, my four-year-old child who suffered a lot of trauma, and then older ones into adolescence. And then there's the young adult (four-or-five years ago) who got abused by her boy friend ... but then it feels to me that they're all connected, so maybe they're just different-aged versions of the same role ... maybe?"

[I agree inwardly, this is consistent with a number of other cases of woman abused or otherwise traumatized. If this were a group-supported psychodrama it might be useful to produce each of those roles, let her role-reverse with each to produce an essential message, hear those messages, and then let her select the one that in the present moment feels the most affected by anxiety.]

I nod to support her perception and then simply ask: “Which one is most important for you to work with today?” She chooses the 4-year-old...

(going to the heart of the first trauma)

....so I invite her to bring that role, in the form of a couch pillow, and talk to her.

She talks in a calm, soothing voice, telling the young role how sorry she is that the role was made to feel so frightened, and also helpless:

“that was so bad, no one should feel that way.... it’s not right....you didn’t do anything wrong....you didn’t deserve that....and I’m here with you....you’re not alone....I’ll take care of you....I’ll protect you....it’s gonna be all right now....i’m here and I won’t let that other role near you.....s//he won’t be able to do that again! Just relax, it’s OK, you’re OK...I’m with you now and I’m gonna stay with you....i will protect you....i love you....”

During this long monologue I do some echo doubling, repeating phrases gently to emphasize and strengthen the calm affection she is providing the traumatized child role.

I also encourage her to concretize the action by asking from time to time “what do you want to do to this child?....how do you want her to feel?.... show her, use your hands as well as your voice....”

It is very obvious that she has taken on some version of her inner caring empathic mother role. However, rather than interrupt the action to name that role

explicitly I feel it is more important just to allow her time & space to strengthen the presence of that inner mother by staying continuously with the action.

After this side of the role relationship has been well-established, I invite her to reverse roles, and as the traumatized child to receive the caring love and affection from the mother role. I help to ground her in that role with repeated directions to feel what the mother role is giving her, repeating gently some of the key phrases she used as mother.

As before, I let her spend a good deal of time in this role reversal, to balance the experience of both giving and receiving the love and support.

Back in her protagonist role [*which we can now tentatively identify as her Protective Compassionate Healing Mother role PCHM*] I ask her how she's feeling now.

“Do you feel ready to take on that role over there, that caused the child so much painful anxiety?”

“[empathically] Yes!! I am **definitely** ready!”

.....

So at this point we have accomplished the first stage of trauma repair, establishing firmly the presence of a psychodramatic role category i usually call “roles of positive strength & compassion” or simply “roles of positive strength.” These are the complementary roles, or counterweight to the class of roles I usually call “negative protectors.” In a given individual this can manifest as one role, or a “team” of mutually supporting roles that try to protect the traumatized child role by defending against the painful feelings of helplessness, rage, violation, injury [physical and psychic] that stem from the traumatic violation(s). Their ‘protective’ emotional tactics include making the child role feel numbness, shame, guilt or other similar emotions as a way of avoiding the actual pain resulting from the trauma.

This approach to trauma repair involves confronting the “negative protector(s)” by the role(s) of positive strength to separate the former from the child through concrete literal action. ... somewhat like dislodging a symbiotic parasite in order to free the child to connect with the positive strength roles and receive from them the healing love and affection necessary to heal the traumatic wound.

In different individuals the specific forms of “negative protection” and the character qualities of the opposing roles or role clusters will take on different forms. The overall process is similar, however, while the amount of time and energy required by the process can vary considerably.

In this client all of the previous therapeutic experiences have formed a strong warmup that allows her to generate the Protective Compassionate Healing Mother role that has spontaneously appeared.

In order to clear the action space for this PCH Mother to confront and remove the “panic-generating negative protector” we also have to find a safe space for the traumatized child, where she can witness the upcoming action but feel completely protected and insulated from any of the panic that previously occurred. To create this, we first need a name for the PCHM.

[Naming a role is essential to the action process and subsequent healing integration, as an evocative “tag” that allows the protagonist quick and full access to the role. So, while the director may sometimes suggest a name, it is the protagonist’s choice to come up with a name that has unique strong, concrete and evocative imagery power for him/herself.]

Transition: Preparation to Warmup for Climactic Scene:

.....“Great. But before you start that action we need to have a really clear idea what role you’re using to confront him/her, the one you’ve spontaneous

brought to comfort and protect the Child. So what kind of role is this? How would you describe her?”

The protagonist replies that this is pretty obviously some type of mother, giving comfort and emotional nourishment to a needy child.

“Sure. and what would you say are the most prominent qualities, and what is the role trying to do to or for the child?”

“OK,” the protagonist replies “the role is very caring, compassionate....”

“...anything else?...”

“...yeah, the role is protective, too....not in a negative way...but just keeping the Child safe from harm, emotional harm especially.”

“and does it seem to you the role acts alone, all by herself, or do you think the role might have other related roles, like companion roles, or some sort of team?”

“oh I think there’s a team, because there’s more than one role that’s been subjected to trauma. I mean, maybe they are versions of the same role at different ages, but they also seem to need their own special care and protection.”

“so if she’s the head of the team, what’s her title? you know, like in a typical organization or company there’s a CEO, or a CFO, or a COO, or whatever? She’s the head of this very special emotional support team. Whadda you think?”

She pauses a bit to turn over this image in the eye of her imagination.

Protagonist: “well, she is the Chief Something-or-other...”

“so what exactly does the team **do**? What is the **most essential** thing this role does?”

Protagonist: “The role....**gives Love**. that’s it! that’s exactly the essence of what she does, and she’s the head of it all, so she’s the Chief. That’s it! She’s the**Chief Love-Giver!** yes, she’s the **CLG!**”

“Great! Now we’re going to need her team, the assistant Love-Givers to keep the child safe and protected while the CLG deal with the anxiety/panic role... and how many assistants do we need on the care-taker team?”

Protagonist identifies 3 assistant roles to care for the child: one to play gently, one to fill the space with joy, and one to offer necessary mindful care. So the assistant roles are named by the protagonist as “Assistant Love-Giver to give appropriate play”; “Assistant Love-Giver to create joy”; and “Assistant Mindful Care to make sure that the child gets cared for mindfully”.

Protagonist gently takes the cushion holding the presence of the Traumatized Young Child (TYC) and speaking in a soft, gentle tone places that role in the chair which is off to the side of the sofa. She describes it as a safe, protected space where no one who wants to harm the child or make her anxious will be allowed to enter. Continuing to reassure the Child, she then adds a cushion for each of the 3 Assistant-Love-Givers, introducing each one to the Child and identifying the special quality of each.

I then suggest that, since the encounter with the anxiety/panic producing role is likely to be full of intense emotion and probably loud, angry vocalizing, it would be helpful to ensure somehow that the TYC is not frightened, e.g. re-traumatized by hearing the Protagonist in that emotional state. Protagonist accepts the suggestion, and gently but firmly creates a “sound curtain” around the TYC’s protected space.

Protagonist specifically mentions that the sound will not be completely cut off, so that TYC “will know I’m standing up for you, I’m going to make sure that role knows and feels the pain s/he caused you, I’ll make sure s/he never even thinks about coming close to you again. You’ll be able to hear my voice, so you know I’m doing it, but my voice will be low enough you don’t have to listen unless you want to. And my

three team-members here, Play, Joy and Minding-Care will be right here with you all the time. I'll come back as soon as I'm finished, OK?"

**Climactic Action Scene:
Warm up with Spontaneous New Insight**

Now we're ready for the warmup to the confrontation. Protagonist as CLG moves back to her place on the sofa. As Protagonist sits opposite the chair holding the presence of the role that produces anxiety, s/he has an unexpected but very significant emotional insight:

"As I look at that role I'm actually feeling some ambivalence."

Encouraged to examine this feeling, she describes two contrasting reactions to the traumatizing role:

"Of course, mainly I'm really angry and hostile towards that role, for causing me so much suffering and panic, I mean my young child role. And I don't want us ever to experience that again. So for that I'd like to kick that role so far out of my life it can never find a way back in. But now I'm aware that maybe this role could also have some positive function....."

When asked to elaborate, she continues:

"...I'm not really clear about that, but maybe it could be to warn me about getting too carried away, to make impulsive choices without stepping back to consider consequences ... or something like that.... I don't know...."

[This is an unexpected new angle! and in the moment I have no idea what will come from this. Maybe she's looking at a different role that seems related.. maybe this is a subtle manipulation by the traumatizing role to deflect the confrontation...maybe a role of hers that tries to see the good in everyone can't stay away....(may possible hypotheticals! Which lead in scattered directions....)]

` in any case, I feel in this moment, it's crucial to continue on the main direction of her warmup to defending the TYC. When that is completed we can return to this new avenue, which, as it will turn out leads to an uniquely creative and revealing third scene.]

“This ambivalence you’re feeling, it may be another side of that role, it may be a different but related role, or something else. In any case, we can look at it when you finish this action, OK?”

She agrees. So I ask her to mark this “unknown role” with a cushion at the opposite end of the couch. And we return to the main confrontation.

Climactic Action Scene: Catharsis of Abreaction

“OK, how about if we get clearer about exactly whom you’re talking to. We need a good name for that role, one that really embodies all the ways the role affects the Child and the feelings s/he creates in her [Child]. What’s a really good name that for you contains the essence of what that role does and how s/he does it?”

Protagonist mentally thumbs through related possibilities. As she warms up to looking for the most evocative name, I help her focus and concretize by pointing to the role’s objectives, with questions like the following: “What is this role trying to do? ... what kind of” reaction does it want? ... how is it trying to make the child feel?... how does the role itself want to feel? what is it trying to do to the child so it can feel that way?.....

Eventually she exclaims “I’ve got it! when it brings all that load of anxiety, it’s like the role is sucking all enjoyment and positive feeling out of me. That’s what was it was like when I was panicing. It’s a life-suckerno, even more...it felt like it was sucking life out of me and into itself.....yeah! that role is **The Anxiety-Bringing Life-Swallower.**”

“Great! OK, so now you get to talk to this Anxiety-Bringing Life-Swallower.[ABLS]. Tell that Life-Swallower how you feel about what s/he does. And this is **your time**. You’re in charge and that Life-Swallower is just going to have to sit there and take it! No more tormenting a young child who can’t fight back. The role has to listen to you, and just take whatever you’re giving out.... in defense of that child.”

Protagonist as CLG begins to express her defense of the TYC. To deepen her warmup, I do occasional echo-doubling or make brief encouraging, supportive doubling statements. When her warmup becomes sufficiently strong, I also encourage her to express in action:

“What do you want to do to that Life-Swallower? ... Go ahead, let your body do what it’s feeling.... Use your hands Reach out.... How do you want that Life-Swallower to feel?... Do it! ...Do it!... Make the role feel what it deserves!”

Protagonist expands her expression into action. She spontaneously begins to take DVD and Video packets to pile around the cushion on the chair of the ABLs role. When I encourage her and also ask what she’s doing, she replies while continuing the action:

“I’m building a wall around you, I’m going to completely wall you up!....an impenetrable wall, so you can never, never get out! You will never, never, ever torture that poor child again!... or any other child!.. or any other person! This is what you deserve!”

When I ask her how she will make sure the wall will keep that ABLs captive, she replies, while also continuing to pile objects around the role-cushion “this is an impenetrable thick wall, 6 inches thick of special impenetrable permanent concrete. It’s special binding substance is Love. It’s a wall made of Love-concrete!”

She continues in this vein for some time, overpowering the ABLs and rendering the role powerless to torment the TYC with form and insistent determination. I continue to encourage her with supportive doubling, to ensure s/he has adequate time and space to release as much emotional energy as possible in this session.

“That’s it! That’s as much as I feel I can do today.” S/he flops on the sofa. In response to my question “How’re you feeling? Does that feel like enough with this role for today?” she gives a satisfied nod.

After a few moments of reflection and integration, we move to the closing action scene.

Final Action Scene: Unmasking the Covert ‘Spy’ Role

To examine the real significance of her previously-acknowledged “ambivalence” toward the traumatizing role, I decide to use an extended interview with this apparently anomalous role, based on the considerations below.

[There is some incongruent and undefined tele that seems to be emanating from the role that arouses my clinical suspicions that this isn’t just some “ordinary” role with an overdeveloped sense of “fairness” that wants to give even the most negative roles “the benefit of the doubt” and holds the position that “there’s good in the worst of us.”

On the surface the appearance of this role has a strong aura of plausibility. I have seen similar conditions in others. For example, a protagonist trying to reduce the power and influence of a “Critical Perfectionist” role will sometimes express ambivalence by acknowledging that the role is also necessary to hold up high standards that s/he can aspire to, and not settle for some level of average or mediocre results. In such cases it becomes necessary to split off the “positive reinforcement” part of the role from the overly-critical and oppressive part in order to confront the latter successfully.

In this case, however, my intuitive sense is that the extreme nature of the ABLS panic-inducing role does not allow space for such a dichotomy. My assumption is that the “ambivalence” expressed by protagonist is something other than an attempt to be in some way “even-handed” and acknowledge that “there’s good in the worst of us.” What that “something” is needs to be unmasked and brought to light.]

If this role is indeed presenting a kind of “mask” or “false face” it will be more easily revealed through a direct extended interview, rather than back-and-forth dialog between protagonist and this role. For this I use a very particular Director-Interviewer role which is sharp, firm, incisive and sometimes directly confrontational.

[using a courtroom image I sometimes refer to this Interviewer role as “...permission to treat this witness as hostile, your Honor...”]

I begin moderately by asking this role to explain why it tried earlier to enter the action, when the protagonist had already begun her warmup to confronting the panic-creating role (ABLS). The role responds with bland generalities, such as.....

“You know, I just want to make sure we cover all sides.....”

When I respond that “We’re not here to ‘cover all sides’ ...We’re here to stand up to that ABLS role that’s oppressing and traumatizing the young child. I’m sorry but I can’t accept that as an answer. You’ll have to do better than that.”

As the role becomes more evasive, I increase the pressure by rejecting the answers of the role with increasing strength, building towards a climactic confrontation:

“OK, look, you are just not being totally honest about who you are and why you’re here today. And I want to remind you that you are here in psychodrama, where everyone is **required to be completely honest**. So, come on, enough excuses. Let’s hear the truth from you for once. *[without giving the role a chance to*

deflect}.... You know what I think, I think you are not just some other role about fairness and balance, I think you are connected to that role over there ...

[pointing to the chair that holds the “walled-up” ABLs role].

... Is that true? Is that the way it is? Are you part of that role? Did that role bring you here so you could sneak into her life and spy on the healing of the TYC. What’s the answer? She needs the truth.... **now!**”

So the so-called “ambivalent role” admits that s/he is indeed a part of the ABLs traumatizer, describing himself as a kind of Big Brother to “infiltrate” and try to find a way to bring ABLs back into the core of the protagonist’s role repertoire.

With that admission, protagonist reverses back into her protagonist role. She decides to deal with this “infiltrator” by joining him back to the ABLs from whom he was temporarily split off. She leaves both parts of the bifurcated role inside the protective “Love-concrete” wall.

Closure scene

To finish the action, she returns to the TYC (young child) with the caring support team of Play-Joy-Minding Care. They relax together as she continues to hold and comfort the TYC, with a role reversal into the child and back to her Present Self.

End of session