



### **The Author**

Söntgerath, A. - b. 1943, Psychologist, Psychodrama Therapist, Long-standing Advisor for Day Nurseries with the main emphasis on early Childhood Relationships and Education, Concept Development, Organisational Advice, Adult Education. Retired in 2007

## **That was, nevertheless, the time I lived through The time was my time**

### **- Growing Older: A Confrontation -**

**- Anni Söntgerath -**

#### **Summary**

During the period in our lives when we stay active and socially involved we do not usually have any specific ideas about the “psychological and emotional problems“ that growing older might bring. This article sketches a subjective journey, a kind of emotional and cognitive snap-shot of the author’s personal experience of growing older. The author’s experiences together with some of Moreno’s philosophical ideas on the issue have resulted in the development of concepts that allow us to investigate the topic of aging using psycho-drama. Introducing these ideas in a social program for the elderly could prove to be extremely beneficial.

#### **Fundamental Ideas**

Becoming older is subjective; It is a challenge, but also a chance to gain insight and clarity through Psychodrama.

***Time, in things it changes nothing.***

***Time, it is a strange thing.***

***When one lives in a certain way, it is really nothing at all.***

***Then suddenly, one feels nothing except time.***

**- Hugo von Hofmannsthal -**

#### **A Challenge with Consequences**

Frankly, I hadn't imagined it would be so profound: The knowledge of growing old. A call, a friendly inquiry. Why not write about growing older? I would have plenty of time now and a project is no bad thing. It should be subjective, a description of the experience of growing older. I react with mixed feelings: Doesn't the topic belong to every field (whether it be the natural-, social-, religious- sciences or philosophy) that has already filled libraries to the brim? In other words: Everything has been said already. Apart from this it is also a topic that causes alarm and is hard to consider closely with a cheerful calmness.

The attraction is the opportunity to express oneself through the subjective process of writing. A process which with the acceptance of this article, as can be seen, gives new viewpoints and is not complete.

The readers will not expect definitions, statistics or literature here, but rather reflections which address the question: What can Psychodrama contribute to understanding the solitary internal process of aging and to help the elderly escape the solitude, as far as this goes? These concerns came to me in a year of farewells. Farewells which were not unexpected. Farewell from 37 years of gainful employment. My work involved the professionalism of educational personnel together with various advisory activities, work which was essentially characterised by encounters with other people.

On the evening of my farewell party I sat in my living-room looking at all the flowers and presents given with such esteem and heart-felt wishes, with the assurance that one is not forgotten, that one is still needed and will certainly have much to do.

I felt a warmth and happiness from all the esteem I had been shown, but nevertheless there was an empty feeling in my stomach that is hard to describe: Something was irretrievably gone. It was more of a feeling that something was "over and finished" than of a having a new freedom before me.

However, the time now at my disposal should be of special benefit to my dearest friend who was suffering from cancer. Time gained, that made it possible for me to help my dying friend. It was unforeseeable that this would only be five months. The death of my friend, six years younger than me, was the next relentless blow in a year of farewells. Here I was also confronted with the feeling of things being irretrievably "gone".

The experience doesn't bring actual knowledge though: I am still the "survivor"; the "fit and healthy" pensioner. I still don't look at the topic of growing older itself ... until ... yes until I hold a first brain-storming session on the preparation of this article and begin a kind of "cognitive" journey.

### **Breakthroughs. Where are they Positive?**

Everything that occurs to me is characterised by restrictions, of uncertain (definitely reduced) expectations, which mark the "irreversible and unavoidable course of growing old until the inevitable moment of death" as Silvia Bovenschen described it.

I register a condition between "no more" and "not yet".

I talk to different groups.

First there is the group of those who appear not to be affected, the adolescents and young adults. This time of life lies far behind me on the continuum of passing time: as seen by society. Filled with inner hopes of their personal fulfilment, the knowledge that all people must grow old and die seems not to affect them personally, as it lies so far in the future. I remember my own youth and I was no different.

Then there is the group of the middle-aged, people who have reached 40 but are still filled with energy, still planning for change and travel and still with various achievable hopes possibilities. If it was humanly possible, many of the older people I have spoken too would choose to be 40 again.

However at 40 there are also many who begin to fear the next zero. Max Frisch calls them the "branded" as opposed to the "pre-branded", namely those who will no longer be considered as having a future.

A future that is now "gone", that is what really triggers the shock and saps my confidence. As Simone de Beauvoir wrote: "Growing old is especially difficult to cope with because we have always regarded it as something foreign: although I remain the same, have I really become a different person"?

I can hardly communicate the shock, even with people of my own age. I have to face many reactions, louder "nevertheless-sentences" which are supposed to comfort me: you see nevertheless... you are nevertheless... you can nevertheless... you have nevertheless. "As long as you feel young, you are young".

But isn't this a kind of pushing away, a minimising or denying of mine or their fears? Am I the only one who is shocked? After all there are differences. Naturally people notice exactly when others start to think of them as being old for the first time. Again and again there are exact and detailed descriptions of this, moments which are definitely not remembered with joy.

Strange, didn't I hear so much about the wisdom of the old? What does it actually mean? Didn't I see beautiful pictures of experienced eloquent faces before me, of people reconciled with their lives and sitting peacefully someplace in the sun or under a shady tree, free from tormenting decisions and responsibility?

I put it aside, this concept of wisdom. I don't understand it and nod my head suddenly when I discover Montaigne: "I have been old for quite some time already, but I have certainly not become wiser. We call it wisdom, the heaviness of our spirits and horror of current things. But in truth we don't discard many of our vices, we only adapt them ..."

Centuries later a contemporary Italian philosopher called Norberto Bobbio wrote: "One says the wisdom of an old man lies in his acceptance of his own limits. However, before one can accept them one must recognize them... I have not become wiser. I know the limits well but I don't accept them. I admit my limits only because I cannot do otherwise." And: "Anyone who praises old age has not yet really been confronted with it."

What did my inarticulate mother really feel in her heart? She was almost 97 when she died. I had always thought she was content in her old age and that she faced death without fear. My 90 year old aunt said something shortly before her own death that is also hard to digest: "old age is the hardest master".

### **Looking over the Fence - Yesterday and Today**

Admittedly I always thought that growing old, particularly in today's society, is beset with problems, i.e. problems that make coping with humanly growing old and dying more difficult or well nigh impossible: A society which cultivates youthful illusion and disregards experience during a time in which knowledge is quickly overtaken.

Life was traditionally subdivided into three periods, whereas today one speaks about the fourth phase of life because of our prolonged life expectations. The threshold of old age has moved forward by 20 years. People who have reached the age of 60 today are only regarded as old bureaucratically. This "younger" age-group is treated like a product, beneficiaries of a consumer society enmeshed in a society of total marketing.

The pictures in the media of senior citizens and nursing homes speak for themselves and show that, all too often today, a dignified old age is also (or only?) dependent on status and material situation.

Time for conversations and meetings, for dying and mourning, is a rare commodity and very hard to find in these days of ruthlessly efficient and meticulously calculated modules.

With all the current problems and alarming situations we now have, I had idealised growing old in historical or so-called static societies. Looking at things more closely however, -such as the detailed writings of Simone De Beauvoir about old age in other cultures, societies and different periods of time-, in fairytales, legends and by poets and thinkers, youth (and with that the creative and socially productive strength) receives priority. Every time-period and culture had it's own form (by no means more human than today) of handling age, right up to the destruction or prolongation of the aged in society's own interest.

However, the experience of the older generation was valued differently and frequently granted a more protected status in society.

Nevertheless "young and beautiful" as compared with "old and unpleasant" was a linguistic association in many cultures.

That the dream of eternal youth is ancient is attested by Homer when he writes that the gods also hate the aged. The dream reveals it's true character as fear of finality.

The older generation's loss of influence and control over what is happening allows the younger generation to take a tenacious hold on their new power. A fight between generations, power struggles in changing form and style right up to our own time.

I come back to what I described at the beginning, the feeling that things are "over" on reaching retirement age, a feeling (I now recognise) that has always existed and was always there. Over means to lose the "Control of my Time". The new age belongs to others in a much more extensive sense than simply work and family. The fashions, the songs and the unlimited dreams are all a part of my time as well. I felt this very clearly watching a film about Bob Dylan whose title "I'm not there" suddenly held a double meaning for me. In the film it was: "... the room was suddenly filled with the past, present and future." At this moment the words perfectly reflected my melancholy feeling of simultaneity.

## First Résumé

The knowledge of aging is a confrontation with unloved truths and (if I resist clichés and glossing over things, or try to penetrate them) a process of disillusionment which at first causes something like an inner paralysis. Positive projections that focus on aging and the aged are more or less strategies on how to cope and how to live with the unavoidable. There is certainly no shortage of loss to cope with. One must deal with a loss of autonomy of a physical, intellectual, social and cultural nature; old truths must be re-assessed as one lives with a new reality and urgency. Admittedly, it is a highly individual process that is experienced, influenced not only by personal conditions but also by social and socio-political factors.

In the following I concentrate on the inner drama of disillusionment and look for ways of staying free from disappointment and counteracting the personal resignation and depression that all too often accompanies retirement.

I will attempt to organise my thoughts and see how my role as a psycho-dramatist can be brought to bear on this process and used to help others in the same boat.

## Defining a Position

Moreno helps me with his reflections and his metaphors of life and although in his books he was often a difficult teacher for me to follow, already in his earliest writings he speaks in an impressively clear language:

"The idea is branded in us, as if independent existence is a constant value throughout all stages of growth, such as the movement of a swimmer who is himself on the flat surface from one shore to the next: From the shore of life to the shore of death.

Life moves more in the sense of a fountain which breaks through the earth, scales the peak and flutters to the ground, or a mountain, sloping down from the highest peak to the foot."

and another quote: "The mystery of life is connected with growth which is mirrored in the increase and decline of strengths." (1914, S. 19-22)

The fountain is an idea which encompasses the whole of life, whereas many other metaphors seem to compare the ages of life to the seasons, like artificial divisions.

Growth is also a part of the deteriorative momentum of life and of the inexperienced stages of development.

Moreno regards the task of man as being, "not to explain life" but rather "to broaden and completely exhaust the possibilities, not to dismantle what is being examined but to intensify it, not to categorise the work but to continue it". (1914, a.a.O.)

This life affirming philosophy resulted and developed naturally from Moreno's then inexperienced methods, especially his postulated *life-source of spontaneity*, "as an appropriate answer to a new situation" (1973, S, 34).

As a young psycho-dramatist I was greatly affected by Moreno's comment on the beginning of life "birth is a victory not a trauma" (1974, S. 13-15) and now in my later years I experienced renewed encouragement from his work and attitudes.

Moreno understood Psychodrama as a way to discover "the truth of the soul through action and behaviour" (1973, S.77). I have also always understood his definitions as a way of life which goes far beyond any localised psycho-dramatic application in its actions.

Thought, philosophy and contemplation as inner happenings, as "cognitive behaviour" in a

debate with spiritual truth. This flows through actions and attitudes and then receives (primarily?) a specific meaning when life passes the mark of middle age.

There is moreover an awareness of the finite, the recognition and involvement of death in the descending curve of life. The "art of aging" as seen by Riemann, with reference to C.G. Jung, is the acceptance of life and death as a mutually dependant contrasting whole, as part of a lifelong individuation.

"Philosophising", Montaigne writes, "is learning to die" without neglecting life, a life of continuously learning to let go and of bounded conscious discussion.

Primarily it is Wilhelm Schmid who, in his philosophical guidance on life, makes an impressive and plausible analysis of death and limitations: "all desire yearns for eternity, but eternity is death, which is also true of life itself. If death did not exist one would have to invent it, in order not to lead an utterly boring life that would consist of an eternity of postponement. Completely independent of the way it is lived, life's limitations give life itself it's existential form and only the limitations of death gives life it's personal individuality.... In a kind of reflected art of living, thoughts about death are really an encouragement for life".

To achieve and practice such a position and to wear it "knowingly" as a second skin, so to speak, especially after reaching middle-age, means to be particularly aware of the present and to beware of the all too frequent idealisation of the past.

### **A Song is Hidden in Everything**

Perception is frequently influenced and sensitised through one's inner involvement with a theme or topic. Something is presented to us and the attention we give it is influenced by the theme.

This became very clear to me when (during the start of this article) I took a holiday in Senegal, West Africa. Senegal is a country where it is not usual to ask about peoples age. I have no idea why this is so, but I made an interesting discovery as I pondered over the normal greeting ritual of the Wolof:

Whenever these Africans meet they greet each other in the following way:

Nanga def? How are you?  
Mangeferek. I am there.

The answer is amazing, because the encounter is used as a ritual to emphasise the here and now in a unique way.

I am there also means: I am here, I am alive. In this way the quality of the moment is used to emphasise the moment of the meeting. Whether this moment in time is creatively and fruitfully made use of remains open. The person can choose.

In some ways this ritual greeting is a form of daily reaffirming anew the "Carpe Diem" (seize the day and enjoy the present, as opposed to placing all hopes in the future).

My shocked atmosphere which I described at the beginning of the article was completely changed and calmed by another kind of encounter I had in Africa: I was in a little African shop full of all kinds of art products when I discovered something almost in the dark on the bottom shelf. I was astonished and gazed at it completely spellbound. A wonderful artistic wood carving of an African woman. She sits naked on the ground with her arms and legs outstretched and her hands tightly holding a water jug that rests on her feet. The artist has sculptured the legs and arms abnormally long and thus artificially enlarged the distance between the body of the woman and the vessel. The abnormally large distance between the body and the vessel is what makes the figure so dynamic. The head is inclined downwards in an air of concentration; the hair is in a long plait reaching down to the buttocks. The natural wood is darkly coloured on one side of the figure and lightly coloured on the other side. What is it that attracts me? Who is she? Could I be like her? Or could she be like me? She is naked. Not from the point of being unprotected or provocative, but unmasked, without make-up or jewellery.

I have the feeling: this is it, life is represented by the jug. Everything that was important and achieved with difficulty, everything that was given, everything that came to me, everything

unimportant and cursory, everything that has been fixed in the memory and everything which still has to come, that still has to be done. There is always something. And yet the capacity is restricted. Limitations. Life - the jug - moves further away from the body and yet remains immanent and close enough to feel, yet can also be looked at as if from the outside. It is the double-sidedness that affects one, which symbolises holding tight and letting go simultaneously.

Holding on tight to life: to remain present, immediate, open and flexible. I am there. Not holding tight in the sense of becoming cramped or tense, but being affirmative and giving life a new impulse, like a warm autumn wind. Feeling the available energy and letting it flow. But the jug also contains injuries, scars, things neglected and unfinished, current and future solitude and fear. The way I accept and face anxiety should allow me to let go of things and perhaps also to learn the art of creative transformation.

Was it the change of place? Africa's sun, it's drums and dances. The holiday mood and all the encounters and meetings, and with it a safe feeling from the experience of solitude everywhere. In every place something to experience, but always effortless and somehow comforting

The discovery of the figure had a kind of essential meaning. Catharsis. The paralysis diminishes. The inner role-exchange lead me automatically and good-humouredly to the psychodrama stage. 14 years ago I had already offered seminars at the Überlinger Moreno-Institute on "Dealing with Time"?

I had called them "Flea Market of the Soul" and invited the participants to a "deceleration" and contemplation of time, in order to organise and use ones time effectively.

Why shouldn't I use the background of the process described here to investigate our "Jugs of Life" with other people?



Abemanga, afrik. Figur

### **Taking the inner drama onto the real Psychodrama stage results in structured and plot-oriented basic principles**

Engross Oneself in Life.  
Exhaust Life's Possibilities.  
Investigate Achievements.  
Continue to develop.

Morenos philosophy on aging and his attitudes to lifelong socialisation, especially his role-theory, form the fundamental basis for the work of the psycho-dramatist on the subject: Age.

Hardly any psychotherapeutic method offers such extensive possibilities as the Psychodrama Group to study and investigate the phases and themes of life. The group itself experiences and learns as a small community. The basic principles are twofold. On the one hand philosophy and target-oriented psycho-dramatic work and on the other hand the corresponding game-phases or work-phases that are used in psychodrama.

### **Going on Stage**

In the following exemplary anecdotal collection I want to show the parallels between philosophy and psycho-dramatic behaviour and experience, and distinguish between group-centred and protagonist-centred work. The themes of my initially outlined inner journey appear repeatedly and are developed further.

### **Focus: Group-Centred Work**

The variability of a group in similar situations means that many topics can be investigated (not just those of anxiety-filled themes) in a theatrical form. It is helpful to have a positive atmosphere here and for the group leadership and the members of the group to introduce their own creative and motivating ideas to intensify the discussions of the subjects.

The sentence one nearly always hears: "That's how things were in my lifetime" can be used to develop themes for the group: Epochs and time periods from a common past can be represented and joined together through simultaneous analysis of the historical dimensions, to build a complete life-cycle; e.g. times of deprivation and loss, times of fear and mourning in war and post-war periods, or the time of the "late 60's", together with an analysis of manageable demands and achievements. Achievements which can be appreciated and experienced both individually and together.

One can also relive the cheerful times and the fashions, customs and cultures that have been experienced, and try to understand the influence they have had in life. Something like the Beatles era or the like. The group itself chooses the topics.

To consolidate, exhaust, intensify and broaden in this case, means the discovery or re-discovery of available energy and creativity and its implementation in day-to-day life. Abstract concepts like "age", "time", "finiteness", can be pictured and sculptured allegorically on the stage, and then formed and implemented in individual work.

### **Focus: Protagonist-Centred Work**

Independent of individual topic preferences, the retrospective biography work has taken on a special value to me. Investigate what has happened in life in order to summon and gather strength for the present and future: Be open - Join together - Protect - Let go.

According to Moreno the tangible aspects of the self or "the crystallisation points which we name it" are the roles a person enacts. (1973, S. 33) Looked at in psycho-dramatic terms the acquired role repertoire, or parts of it, can be re-enacted: A "role-tree" of annual rings with the social-emotional threads of life adhering to them. Things that have been fatefully learned, successful, incomplete, neglected, untried or unfinished can be investigated as part of the daily work. The therapeutic investigation of a life-history should respect the resilience shown and things that are unfinished. The latter is something which prevents many older people from finding an inner peace and reconciling themselves with life. I refer here especially to the experience of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, who is well-known for her research into death. She urgently warns people of the danger, as other therapeutic experience also shows, of dwelling on unfinished matters right up to ones death-bed. The fact that symbolic processing of unfinished matters through psychodrama opens the mind and can set blocked and unused energy free is a truism that could be extremely useful when working on the subject of old age. The paralysing fear of death that so many people experience is also an important subject to tackle in order to fully embrace the present. The experience of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross through her work with relatives of the dying as well as participants from her self-knowledge seminars shows that although many people originally attended her seminars

because of an apparent fear of death, in reality they were frightened of life. (cf. also C.G. Jung in Riemann). This also applies to old people who are ready to give up. In the retrospective evaluation of a protagonist, taking roles to a proper conclusion has a more essential value for the psycho-dramatic awareness than hastily moving on to the next stage, in my opinion. I believe I can also recognise a meaningful part of the "works of wisdom" of the old in the sense of psychological health; Just like my instructor, Wolfgang Gerstenberg, always explained Morenos role theory in such a plausible way: "A healthy person is one who can take on his roles, act them out and finally take his leave of them." Roles no longer used are nevertheless a "dynamic factor" in a person's life and can become "a supporting matrix for new roles" (2000, S. 140). In a personal conversation the author explained this aspect by quoting the following example: If a man has been a father, for example, then later on in his life the fundamental dynamics of the father role are at his disposal (like a virtual scaffold) even when the children have left home and he no longer plays the role of a father. If he is then involved with young people in any way he can actually use his role-know-how (even if he himself believes it has vanished) from the time when he was an active father, so that new roles can develop and follow on from the old ones. Working with old people means opening the mind, trusting in the competent development of new roles or in the development and enrichment of old roles. Dream roles that have never been lived and roles previously untried can also be newly discovered and rehearsed, and can be used to imaginatively enrich the twilight years of life by inspiring and filling them with a new passion.

### **Vision: Allowing Psychodrama Groups to Develop**

It is perhaps already clear that the target group I envisage is not that of a geriatric group in the real sense, but rather a stage for older people who would like to investigate and experience this subjective process in a psychodrama group (either in the free market place or with an institution which offers courses, programmes or training, so to speak, for older people).

Although there are numerous leisure time offers in social programmes for the elderly, there are practically none where the theme of old age is taken as a subject for mutual reflection and therapeutic development. I have the impression that often the main aim is simply to fill the time with actions or events. The motto here is that it is important to be active active. I am not trying to evaluate the activity and creativity programmes for older people, but rather to supplement them.

An example of this is the experience which I had as a participant in a writing workshop. One of the topics of the course was biographical writing, with the focus on the actual writing. So far so good, as writing is also a creative expression. But I was repeatedly aware that the exclusively stylistic working of the text was insufficient to describe the background and details that lie behind the process. What has been experienced gets stuck, so to speak, in the words. Some participants wanted to investigate more closely. Why? Because finally they were part of a group that was witness to the dramas that were being written and read out. A privately longed for investigation here does not really make sense with a group exclusively devoted to the writing process. As a psycho-dramatist I repeatedly had the desire to investigate the subject on the psychodrama stage. Therapeutic writing can also be effortlessly connected with psycho-dramatic work.

### **Fruits of a Challenge**

Writing about the journey through my inner emotional and intellectual states, largely in the form of an essay, was seldom without doubts, especially regarding its usefulness for a professional journal. The writing process was a balancing act in itself and I was often ready to give up and abandon it. Nevertheless putting this genuine inner process in writing led to an extra clarity, similar to a birth, in tackling the theme of aging through psychodrama (even when originally only on an intellectual level). Translating this into action was just a matter of taking organised steps.



I am confident that together with others I can succeed (when my time permits) in using psychodrama to tackle the taboos that surround the theme of being and growing old, and to break free from the isolation and counteract the common depressions of old age.

Regarding the investigation and experience of many "Jugs of Life", encounters occur in a mutual unravelling and understanding of the mysteries of life.

Perhaps I will have the opportunity to report again, as one thing is certain - the topic will never become out-dated.

I would finally like to thank Christoph Hutter for the time, expertise and encouragement he gave me in my endeavours. Also a special thank-you to dear Hilde Gött, your call helped me back to the road we are both familiar with.

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## **Address of the Author**

*Anni Söntgerath, Bornstraße 7, 12163 Berlin, e-mail: annisoentgerath@online.de*