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Seen and Heard: Using Playback Theatre to Explore Spirituality for People with Intellectual Disability

Spirituality and Playback Theatre

Let's call us 'Blooming Reachers', Louise offered, 'cause then we can bloom for ourself [sic], and reach out to others'.

Louise's comment comes at the end of a brainstorming session to name a group of people who wanted to meet more regularly to explore their spirituality. This group was an initiative of the Brisbane Catholic Archdiocese, funded through the Disability Officer of Catholic Education. Many in the group had intellectual disabilities. The program was given the go-ahead in a bid to counter some of the historical practices that had previously served to exclude people with intellectual disability. It was a response to a group of young people who, like many with disabilities, had experienced difficulty in finding a welcoming and supportive church community within which to explore their spirituality.

When I was approached to join them in this exploration, my main concern was what they expected from the program. As an applied theatre practitioner, I was well aware of the imperatives of a value-driven purpose and was keen to understand what they meant by 'spirituality'. From where I stood, it was a complex concept that meant different things in different contexts. However, the group defined it quickly by simply referring to opportunities (both of time and space) to *be* - to be themselves, to be together, and to talk about themselves, about God, and about the church. This became the central intention for the project - I was to work with participants so that they might express what Treloar (1999) called their 'core being' and the ways this linked with the supreme being and their human being or church community (1999: 10). There was further acknowledgment that a person's spirituality attended to their potential and capacity for growth and change, their desire for connectedness and their search for meaning. While the use of drama is not uncommon in programs for individuals with intellectual disability (see, for example, Cousens, 1998), the dimensions of spirituality central to the project goals suggested that Playback Theatre would be an appropriate method.

Most simply, the Playback Theatre form offered a ritualised containment of storytelling and performance. A primary tenet of the form is that individual participation is an act of service, an idea that is congruent with the Catholic Church's teaching about spirituality and membership. Founders and long-term proponents of the Playback Theatre method, Fox (1994) and Salas (1993), claim that the central position of personal story renders it a profoundly validating and communal experience. The requirement of Playback Theatre to enact stories immediately enabled participants to draw on their daily lives as a source of spirituality and soul expression. As a performance medium, it encompassed the potential to empower participants, a strategy that Carlson (1996) claims is central to effective performance while encouraging performance by citizen actors, rather than elite actors, thereby also being accessible. Significantly, Playback Theatre offered a way to express spirituality through personal story that could accommodate myriad communicative ranges, which was vital for this group. This flexibility extended into the requirements for performance where stories were brought to life through enactment and audience witness, enabling many differing abilities to participate in the performance elements of the project. Finally, intrinsic to the interactive process of Playback Theatre are the very elements commended by narrative scholars as critical avenues through which people make meaning of their lives. For example, Bruner (1986) argues that enabling interactive opportunities for the sharing of personal stories to occur in a public forum paves the way for societal and personal reform. He suggests that personal stories hold within them the full social and political story of the era and are imbued with the equivalent cultural and historical tones. In this way, they provide a bridge between our sense of self and our sense of other.

The Blooming Reachers Project

Blooming Reachers comprised eleven participants who knew of each other through a long-term association with the Reflection Network. This had operated over many years in Brisbane as a bridge between mainstream church community activities and 'disability-specific' activities. A key purpose of the Reflection Network was assisting people in their faith development needs so that they might more confidently attend mainstream church events. A significant outcome of the Reflection Network was the earnest efforts of members to keep it going, despite the fact that it was designed to be a transitory process. In line with the philosophy of the Reflection Network, people with and without disability participated equally in the Blooming Reachers project, accommodating something like an intercultural performance opportunity. Of the eleven participants, six had varying degrees of intellectual and/or

learning disability, with some also managing behavioural challenges and communication disorders. Attendance was surprisingly consistent, ranging from nine to all eleven over the course of the process.

The process kicked off with a ritualised commitment in which group members agreed to meet for three hours a fortnight over a ten-week period. After establishing a group name, time was made for individuals to speak about their purposes in participating and their hopes for the group. A major purpose was to spend more time together, time that had a higher intensity than they had previously experienced in the Reflection Network. Other stated purposes included expressing themselves more fully and belonging to a group that facilitated an exploration of many possibilities. During the first few weeks, individuals participated in improvisational acting exercises that enabled them to be more spontaneous with their group participation, to express aspects of themselves and their experiences that they might otherwise find challenging, and to achieve a high level of involvement in the group process. Participants were also coached in the basic forms of Playback Theatre.

There were opportunities during each session for individuals to work in pairs, threes and sometimes fours. It was here that they shared stories. One participant would tell, while others listened closely to the story the teller told. Then the story would be enacted - each listener/performer made a gesture, improvised a movement, added noise or spoke words that captured the essence of the story. One at a time, tellers would emerge from the small group then, again one at a time, listeners would become performers and 'play back' some part of the story. As participants developed skills in the playback form and confidence in their abilities, the performances became progressively more layered and symbolic. Those involved in the enactment would take the initiative to add aspects of the drama that, while unspoken, had been present in the teller's tone, posture and affect. I frequently found the work moving in its content and its aesthetic. Music was a particularly potent element in deepening the enactments, as participants found ways to evoke mood, capture the menace of a character, or find an ending using a variety of percussive and melodic instruments.

While participants developed the ability to retain spontaneity and take risks in enacting others' stories, it took a little longer to see these same risks being taken in the stories that were told. Eventually, the stories they chose to share moved from the detail of daily living to stories of family, friends, and eventually stories that placed themselves at the centre. People were deeply affected by having their stories heard and honoured. A sense of sacredness pervaded the gatherings as individuals watched their stories come to life with an honesty and sensitivity that had spiritual tones. Participants were equally changed in the act of playing others' stories back, where they found themselves present in each others' stories and feeling each others' feelings. Both roles - the telling and the listening (acting) - required them to take risks, to express themselves in a genuine way, to grow in awareness of ways they contribute and participate, to build relationships, to maintain a sense of fun, and to take pride in what they achieved.

The project came to an end after ten weeks became six months, and the Blooming Reachers were invited to perform at the Cathedrals Week Festival. Cathedrals Week is a biennial event staged jointly by the Anglican, Catholic, Uniting and other churches in Brisbane. This renewed focus on a specific 'product' outcome introduced an increased potential for the group to continue to explore their spirituality and to tackle a new purpose: to develop as performers. The following four stories have been chosen to illustrate the various ways spirituality was explored, expressed and developed in the Blooming Reachers project.

Angry with God

Zane approached his participation in the Blooming Reachers project with a passion for both the drama and the theology. Each week he would bring along short excerpts from the Bible that incorporated allusions to people with disabilities. Significantly, there were references to 'possession' and epilepsy - Zane's own disability. The Bible excerpts seemed to enable him to tell the more difficult stories from his own life. One day he arrived with a troubling story. At 21, his younger brother had been diagnosed with schizophrenia. Zane expressed how he felt it was unfair that his brother was sick: 'Isn't it enough that I have to live with epilepsy?' He expressed his anger with God. Others joined him, enacting his story. They took up his angry refrain fully and built the pitch until the room was filled with Zane's anger and disillusionment. In the following weeks, Zane became more comfortable talking about the ways he felt let down by God. Zane's frank and honest stories seemed to free others to say things about God and the church that might seem negative. People began to take greater risks in the stories they chose to tell - stories that revealed more of themselves. The spirit of the group grew as a result of this.

Let's Get Organised

Louise said the main reason she came to the Blooming Reachers sessions was to spend more time with others and talk about her faith. At 25, while she still loved going to church every Sunday with her parents and was involved in helping out, she found the community there limited. She felt church should be about friends and fun as well as God. The social aspects of the group met her needs immediately, but she was surprised by the benefits of doing Playback Theatre with the others. As she listened to others' stories, she felt emotional, and began to develop empathy. Where usually she was impatient with people's lack of punctuality, or what she perceived as lack of commitment for the program, she became curious about why they might be late, and how she might help them. In no time, she found herself organising the more social aspects of the group process. This resulted in people being supported to organise transport, make phone calls, and resulted in a continuing high attendance. Louise's behaviour contributed significantly to the work ethic of the group, and to the establishment of a strong group culture, the sharing of responsibility and enhanced participation, which translated into a greater sense of safety and a stronger holding of the ritual space within which spirituality was nurtured.

Luke Stays Connected

Struggling with his communication disorder, Luke often found the high degree of intimacy in the improvisational exercise confronting, causing him to withdraw and watch from the sides. One evening we were sharing stories of our day when Luke arrived late. He began pacing and remained somewhat removed from the group. He lay on the floor, clearly distressed. What was not clear was whether his distress resulted from being with us, or whether it was due to something at home. Usually, Luke would become increasingly agitated, and this would escalate to include various (self-harming) behaviours. On this occasion, one of the group members began repeating some of what he was saying, and the group began to piece together some of his words. He responded to this and told more of his story. He was distressed about a recent move away from his mother, and was finding it difficult living in his new place. Two of the actors did a short enactment. Luke sat up and watched. He exuded relief. Shortly afterwards, he was able to join the group. The Playback Theatre form enabled the group to respond to Luke in a new way. Together the group made what Schechner (1988) calls collaborative meaning of the story, in the context of the relevant cultural story - when a young adult moves out of home.

Encore

After ten weeks, the project was scheduled to finish. There was significant resistance to this. Participants expressed the view that the ritualised and dramatic elements of the process had provided an experience that others should have access to. As reported above, Zane, Luke and Louise developed their emotional, mental and physical capacities. The opportunity to tell personal stories facilitated the expression of their core being. The group grew in independence and creativity. However, this was very much in isolation, outside of the broader church community - a significant limitation of the program. Various initiatives by the group saw the limitations challenged in what became stage two of the program.

I am not entirely sure how this final stage came about, but somehow the Festival Director of Cathedrals' Week - a two-week arts festival of theatre and choral performances, art shows and other cultural events sponsored by the various churches in Brisbane - heard about the Blooming Reachers and invited them to perform. This goal triggered a change in the group, and planning, preparing and performing took on a different hue. More structure was needed. This yielded a further increase in confidence and capacity, with people taking up tasks with professional zeal. It was time now to publicly (re-)write their story into the broader church story.

Louise prepared her version of a production schedule and facilitated the comings and goings of people in such a way that punctuality was a priority, and productivity was maximised. The group devised the performance. They wanted it to say something about themselves as people with disability, and about their spiritual right to belong and be visible within the church community. Influenced by Zane's enthusiasm, they wanted to dramatise parts of scripture that they saw as negative and unwelcoming for people with disabilities. A series of short works were developed (between three and five minutes) drawing on the structures of the Playback Theatre improvisational forms, and the content of the stories they had been telling to each other, contextualised in scripture or other church teachings. The scenes were based around a narrative shape with a specific theme - for example, 'the church is unwelcoming to people with disabilities', 'people with disabilities can teach the church about compassion and acceptance', and 'a contemporary church will include everyone'. There were no scripts, as memorising lines was too limiting for many of those involved, and many actors filled two or three different roles over the course of the performance. The rehearsal period was four weeks, where participants worked on improvising scenes, building the story and finding ways to support each other in the staging. This supportive structure was accomplished by adhering to a strict ensemble process, and the use of music,

rhythm and chorus.

The show was performed to great applause. One patron admitted she had never thought about the place of people with disability in the church, and found the content extremely informative. Another suggested the performance should command a more central place in the festival program. It was some weeks later that we received a letter from another audience member. It simply said: 'Thank you for telling my son's story. You gave me hope to think he might one day be accepted at our local church.'

Discussion

This larger witnessing of the stories within their performance at the Cathedrals Week Festival may just have been the thing that the Blooming Reachers project needed as a culmination. It continued to provide the time and space to be that participants had identified as a key purpose for the project. They were on stage expressing their 'core being' and the ways that linked with the supreme being and their human being or church community. Yet it was more than that: they were also on stage as performers. Without this opportunity, the project would have struggled to meet the real objectives of an active and inclusive experience of spirituality. While there were many incidences in the first stage of the project where individuals embodied their potential and capacity for growth and change and their desire for connectedness, this latter stage enabled a more real experience. I believe the structure of the Playback Theatre form contributed to this success. The use of the performers' (participants') personal stories added a layer of potency that drove the project to achieve its aims for personal and public transformation.

This was accomplished because the performers were encouraged to present representations of themselves and their experience of church and church community that they felt had previously not been acknowledged. The dramatic framework provided scope for abstraction and symbolic representations of the stories that liberated the young people to be more frank in what they included. This gave participants a sense of their own power to influence and inform from their own experience and enabled them to value their own experiences more. Meanwhile, onlookers were able to see and hear these stories in a new way.

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