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Soma: an anarchist play therapy

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You can learn more about a man in an hour of play, than in a year of conversation. - Plato

Plato was not alone in thinking that, of all human activities, play can best display that which is most truthful in people. Play seems to represent human essence, evoking the child or the animal in a person, since play precedes culture and civilization, language and rationality. Some have argued that humans distinguish themselves precisely by the manner and frequency by which they play. In *Homo Ludens*, Dutch historian Johan Huizinga argues that our impressive ingenuity and creativity is due to play, which he defines as anything done for purposes other than sheer necessity. Play is never imposed by physical necessity or moral duty. It is never a task. It is done at leisure, during 'free time'. Only when play is a recognized cultural function – a rite, a ceremony – is it bound up

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with notions of obligation and duty. Here, then, we have the main characteristic of play: that it is free, is in fact freedom. (8)¹

This idea was also apparent to Roberto Freire, an anarchist doctor and psychoanalyst from Brazil, who, after a lifetime spent in struggle against oppressive powers, took the play postulate to heart, and created a therapeutic practice built upon it. Calling the practice Soma, Freire fashioned his therapy to differ greatly from other forms of psychotherapy. Instead of relying solely on months, or even years, of conversation to understand and treat his patients, Freire realized that understanding could be achieved more effectively through group participation in physically and emotionally challenging activities, what he called “exercises.” Soma, therefore, was created as a combination of play, response, reflection, experimentation, and challenge – everything taking place within a cohesive group setting in order to facilitate honest, independent character growth. All of this, coupled with the regular practice of capoeira angola, is integrated into Roberto Freire’s practice.

To understand Soma, it is essential to understand Roberto Freire’s story. Born in 1927 in São Paulo, he lived through and fought against two dictatorships, and felt the pervasive effects of oppression on his own body and throughout his life. Having come of age in a radical time and place, Freire became sympathetic to anarchism from an early age. Freire was many things in his life: doctor, psychoanalyst, anarchist militant, theater producer, novelist, magazine editor, reporter, and much more.

In April 1964, the Brazilian military carried out a coup d’etat - the first of a series of right-wing coups throughout Latin America. In a matter of weeks, as a result of his activism, Freire was arrested. His house was raided in the middle of the night and he was dragged from his bed in his pajamas in front of his wife and children. He

¹ Huizinga, Johan H. *Homo Ludens: a Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Boston: The Beacon Press. 1950.

was tortured for days on end: beaten, deprived of sleep, forced to read aloud subversive articles he had published. Eventually they released him, but he would be arrested again several times.

Freire attributed going blind later in his life to the torture he endured. One method in particular, dubbed “the telephone,” caused enormous internal pressure on the eye balls: it consisted of repeatedly slamming the victim’s ears at the same time. Surgeries would return his sight in one eye. By the time I met him, he always wore an eyepatch that gave him the fitting look of a pirate.

Freire recalls the years after the coup as extraordinarily difficult. Worse than the physical pain from the torture was the emotional and psychological damage inflicted by the political climate upon his community. He was forced to live underground, always on the run. He suffered through a divorce, struggled with alcoholism and feelings of immense frustration with his art and his cause.

Around 1970, he went to France for a period of decompression, and on that trip he was introduced for the first time to the works of Wilhelm Reich. The Living Theater, an American expatriate acting troupe was performing in Paris. Julian Beck, its co-director, introduced Freire to Wilhelm Reich, the dissident student of Freud who emphasized the connection between body and psyche, and who explained how the causes of emotional and psychological disturbances are to be found in authoritarian social structures.

Freire came back from the trip in France with all the major works of Reich in his possession. He returned to his private practice and for the next several years he studied Reich and other radical approaches to psychotherapy and psychiatric theories. He got together with friends from the theater – people experienced with acting training and techniques – and began to research his own radical method of therapy. This would soon coalesce into Soma.

Another of Freire’s main inspirations and influence was Thomas Hanna’s *Bodies in Revolt*. Hanna defends the theory that we are at the beginning of a human r/evolution. By revisiting the works

of what he calls Somatic Philosophers (Kant, Kierkegaard, Marx, Cassirer, Camus, Merleau-Ponty, and Nietzsche) and of Somatic Scientists (Darwin, Lorenz, Freud, Reich, and Piaget), he sustained the idea that humans have, “through an enormous expenditure of aggressive energy” created a new environment “which no longer ignores man’s existence and needs but which positively supports them. In return, the enormous quantities of energy released by this environment are creating a new kind of human, a cultural mutant”(8).² If in the old environment humans spent most of our energy under the urge of primary drives (physiological needs), the new environment is producing the emergence of secondary drives – precisely the ones related to play.

Proto-mutants, says Hanna, will challenge the traditional culture until they “see the destruction of much of two or three millennia of Western culture.” The Industrial Revolution is a watershed in this process, but Freire, in line with Herbert Marcuse, stresses the phylogenetic information gathered by generations of struggle against the repression of instincts as a major force shaping the mutation.

Hanna lays down the meaning of Soma: it is the totality of what constitutes the human being. It’s the indivisible and non-hierarchical unity of the person’s body and mind, genes and environment, emotions, memories, expectations, desires, culture, social behaviors, relationships, and actions that makes up a person at every moment. It’s a holistic concept that rejects traditional dualities and dichotomies. Somatherapy, therefore, is in contrast with psychotherapies that deal only the psyche.

While other forms of psychoanalysis and therapy have incorporated forms of play into their practice, they have most often employed these games as an auxiliary tool to gain responses from children, or those patients with childlike patterns of communication and understanding. For processes geared towards grown-ups,

cal, explicitly anarchist, challenging people involved in its therapy to refuse that conformism and submission.

Freire’s great insight and contribution was to integrate radical politics and breakthrough psychiatric theories into a cohesive, coherent, and effective praxis. To develop a way for real people to experience, with their entire beings, what many philosophies have attempted to convey with words. He provided a framework, a language to address emotional and personal issues in consensus-based, non-hierarchical groups to help people supersede the unconscious barriers that determine their behavior, and change it according to the ideas and ideologies they believe or profess. ...and he did it through playing games!

Endnotes

² Hanna, Thoma. *Bodies in Revolt: A Primer in Somatic Thinking*. New York. Holt, Rinehart and Winston. 1970.

According to the principle of irritability, all life forms (from unicellular organisms to animals) react in similar ways to external stimuli. In general, a pleasant or beneficial stimulus, such as a favorable temperature or chemical agent, nourishment, light, etc, causes the organism to expand, whereas a negative stimulus causes the organism to contract. This mechanism is easily demonstrated in human beings: just imagine someone being scared or startled by a nearby loud explosion – you can imagine this person would immediately contract her entire body – an involuntary spasm serving as a defense mechanism. If she were healthy, she would relax again as soon as she realizes that there’s no imminent danger. If she were not, or if there were perpetual bombardment of her senses or threats to her emotional environment, she may continue to retain her constricted, rigid posture.

To address this disturbance effectively, it is not enough to address the muscular armor. It is also necessary to deal with the social and political environment with which we are surrounded. While it’s important to regain the ability to relax the muscular armor, one must also create environments that are favorable for this emotional self-regulation. Since capitalist society will continue attempting to subjugate us, it’s also necessary to craft new forms of defense, new individual and collective strategies that do not lead to further armoring.

All of this (and more) is discussed during the Wrap-up. At the end of a year and a half – the average span of a Soma group – the lessons provided by the exercises, the Readings, the Wrap-ups and the sessions without the therapist give each person considerable knowledge about themselves and others. More than just a particular form of therapy, Soma is a rich learning experience, a skill-share, and an experiment in anarchism applied to personal dynamics – for the benefit of radicals, revolutionaries, and other free spirits.

Freire accuses psychotherapists of implicitly defending capitalist ideology by conveying a reactionary message of conformism and submission. By way of contrast, Soma is unapologetically ideologi-

though, none have made the act of playing such an integral part of their methodology. Roberto Freire understood that just as children may make themselves more readily available to observation and analysis when they were engrossed in play, so might adults, interacting in a playful but purposeful manner, be more available to understand themselves and their interpersonal interactions.

It makes sense that such a creation would have been developed in Brazil, a country that is not known for its rigorous intellectualism, but rather for its games and celebrations. Beyond the obvious sources of revelry, such as soccer and carnival, are the myriad of brincadeiras (games and plays) originating from within Brazil’s popular culture. One such game in particular, capoeira angola, was so powerful and rich that Roberto Freire adopted it as an essential element of his anarchist therapy. Capoeira angola is a game of resistance and liberation. Having its roots in African rituals, in Brazil it was shaped through centuries by the resistance against slavery and oppression – it wasn’t until the 1930s that capoeira ceased to be persecuted as a felony under Brazilian law.

When compared to other styles of capoeira, the angola style is commonly seen as the one which has best preserved the traditional elements of a unique Afro-Brazilian art form, because of its stronger emphasis on the rituals, the music, on longer games and closer, more intricate interactions between the players.³ Freire decided capoeira angola was best suited for Soma because it is a more playful style, in which the practitioners maintain a more relaxed posture, doing movements closer to the ground, engaging the entire body more equally, and therefore offering a complete bioenergetic exercise that “massages” the players’ muscular armor.⁴ In

³ Frigério, Alejandro. Capoeira: de arte negra a esporte branco. Revista brasileira de ciências sociais. Rio de Janeiro, v.4, n.10. 1989

⁴ As postulated by Reich, the muscular armor is the chronic rigidity in the body that prevents the full circulation of the bioenergy or orgone. Reich argued that the muscular armor and the character armor are the same, meaning that

contrast, in other styles the movements are more rigid and predominantly in the standing position.

Capoeira angola is a rich, ritualized game in which life lessons are represented and resolved; combat between the two players aims to reenact the struggle for freedom of movement against the restrictive exertion of power from another person. The players display and improve their street smarts and cunning, as well as the ability to deal with conflicts while maintaining a light, playful spirit and positive energy. As an activity on its own, it encompasses all that Freire sought to incorporate into the practice of Soma therapy. It is a social experience, practiced in a group and played in a circle of people who, by singing and playing percussion instruments, create the energy and maintain the rhythm for the two players in the center. It is a game that incorporates aspects of theater, in which body language and expression are immanent. It enables body awareness, teaches how to keep all senses alert, exercises aggression and the ability to confront it – techniques needed in the struggle to defend oneself against repression and to affirm a free personality.

By playing capoeira angola, slaves in Brazil would not only prepare themselves to fight their oppressors by strengthening their bodies, but also, by reaffirming their vivacity, would reconnect with the life force that slavery and domination intended to crush. While playing it, their bodies and spirits were actually free, and that, in turn, provided the spiritual fortitude needed to continue resisting and fighting. Mestre Pastinha, one of the most respected teachers of this art, has said authoritatively of capoeira angola, “It’s an intrigue of slaves yearning for freedom. Its principle has no method and its end is inconceivable even for the wisest capoeirista.”⁵

behavioral and emotional patterns can be affected through action on body rigidity and vice versa.

⁵ Mestre Pastinha is said to have displayed the original phrase in Portuguese at his capoeira angola school’s front door: “Mandinga de escravo em ânsia de

why. For example, people tell about being unable to relax the neck; feeling embarrassed by taking a shirt off; by staring or being stared at; feeling excited; enjoying the entire experience; or disliking being slapped on the butt, etc.

The Wrap-up is where the therapist shares her/his knowledge and insight, tying together the different elements and aspects worked during the activity and the material brought up during the Reading. S/he also makes observations and analysis of a political nature, usually arguing how our capitalist and authoritarian society creates the emotional and psychological issues that come up during the therapy.

In the Wrap-up of the introductory exercise described above, the therapist might stress how the touching and the playfulness have an ice-breaking function, and how that foments the creation of an intimate bond between the members of the group. S/he might explain that children know how to interact in this manner instinctively, but as we grow up we tend to lose that ability by becoming inhibited, serious, or simply formal—you could meet and chat with people for years without ever feeling as connected to them as you did after such interactions. Freire was inspired by a technique called Play Therapy, in which the therapist observes children playing as a way of learning about their behavior. Soma is different, because the entire group observes and gives feedback, providing for a more diverse and rich exchange of information.

The therapist might also elaborate on the relationship between body movements and emotional and psychological states: “A lack of movement can lead to depression, with the opposite also being true. For example, if we feel bad emotionally or psychologically we may have a hard time physically supporting other people.” This fact is explained by Reich’s discovery that the muscular armor and the character armor are essentially the same, which also means that behavioral and emotional patterns can be affected through action on the rigidity of the body.

room. The exercise then escalates into people intentionally bumping shoulders with one another and then with each person trying to slap other people's butts while simultaneously trying to avoid having her own butt slapped. People usually get very excited and euphoric during this part – a striking characteristic of Soma is that it's a fun and pleasant method of therapy.

The sessions include exercises for learning to trust our bodies, for understanding the connection between the body and emotions, for exploring our fears, our confidence, and learning how all this plays out in a social context. One exercise, for example, explores the idea of taking increasing risks and creating intimacy and trust within the group in order to achieve freedom and pleasure through cooperation and mutual support. It starts with a low-risk testing of boundaries and limits, gradually increasing both risk and trust. At the end, people form two lines, with everyone facing the same direction, touching shoulders with the other line. Everyone stretches their arms up, and one person is lifted at the front of the line and laid down on her back over people's flat hands. The group is asked to remain silent, no noises at all, and transfer the person, in a slow but continuous movement, towards the end of the line. One by one, each person in the group experiences this conveyor belt, completely relaxed, eyes shut, arms open and collapsed to the side. Participants are not supposed to touch the head or neck of the person being passed, and the person is instructed to relax their neck, letting their head hang back, with mouth open, and jaw relaxed. At the end, the person is carefully laid on her back on the ground.

During the Reading, people often describe their fear of falling from people's hands or how pleasant it was to have so many hands touch their backs. The Reading of the exercise follows the techniques developed by Gestalt Therapy: everyone is supposed to describe feelings, sensations, or emotions they had or the reactions they noticed in others. People are asked to avoid getting into interpretation, rationalizations, or to start making connections to unrelated experiences. They should focus on how it happened and not

In addition to the practice of capoeira angola, the methodology of Soma includes sessions conducted by a somatherapist (Freire himself or one of his students) and sessions without the presence of a somatherapist.

The sessions without the therapist, one of the unique aspects of Soma, are meant to guarantee the group's and each person's independence and responsibility for the therapeutic process. These sessions are mainly verbal and provide the opportunity for everyone to learn more about each other's life and history, to discuss the collective dynamic of the group and to further develop the therapy by sharing feedback about each person's challenges, needs, desires, and aspirations.

In contrast, the sessions conducted by the somatherapist are less verbal. They consist in the experience of exercises that Freire created and, together with capoeira angola, they represent the play aspect of the therapy. These sessions follow a specific structure and organization: Freire created more than 40 exercises that are organized in meaningful order and sequence. In the first stages of the therapy, the exercises have a more introductory nature; as the therapy unfolds, they will have stronger bioenergetic effects and will explore more deeply the participants' behavior and character armor.

These sessions combine the exercises, which function more like playful games, with remarks by the therapist regarding the scientific, philosophical, and political basis of Soma as well as more practical observations about the collective dynamic and each person's therapeutic process.

During the very first session (which has the purpose of gathering people to form a group), the therapist clarifies that Soma is a unique form of body psychotherapy that combines anarchist political content with breakthrough psychiatric theories and therapeutic meth-

liberdade. Seu princípio não tem método e seu fim é inconcebível ao mais sábio capoeirista.”

ods, such as Bioenergetics, Gestalt Therapy and Anti-Psychiatry. S/he explains that Roberto Freire created Soma, and based it on the studies of Reich. Then, s/he gives a short explanation about Reich and how he shifted away from strictly verbal psychoanalysis by observing the physical manifestations of emotions on his patients. When Reich noticed defensive postures and tense bodies, he would suggest that his patient touch her body, or move in a certain way, and he would apply techniques to stimulate the relaxation of those tense muscles. By doing that, his patients would often feel some quite disturbing sensations, such as tremors, sharp pains, sweating, dizziness, nausea, vertigo, etc. Reich eventually came to understand that these sensations were produced by the release of bioelectrical streams - blocked until then by that rigidity of the muscles.

In the opening remarks, the therapist also gives practical instructions as a preparation for the exercise. For example, in the first session the therapist must ask the participants to wear minimal clothing – but before asking that, he would usually explain certain concepts that justify such a request: “Reich proved that, as with every form of energy, bioenergy can also be measured and exchanged between two bodies. In fact, as the body’s external membrane, the skin is the main channel through which the bioenergetic exchange occurs. Bioelectrical variations associated with different emotional states and sensations have even been measured in the skin – this is called the psychogalvanic reflex. For that reason, for most Soma exercises it is better to wear light clothing and to expose the most skin area possible to facilitate bioenergetic exchange. Usually people use shorts, swimsuits, or underwear.”⁶

These are instructions not rules, though, and each person can follow them to the limit that feels comfortable. However, part of the purpose of the exercises is to explore the barriers and inhibitions one has, and to put oneself in unusual situations for the

⁶ Freire, Roberto. Soma. Uma terapia anarquista. Vol. 2. A arma é o corpo (prática da Soma e Capoeira). Rio de Janeiro. Editora Guanabara Koogan. 1991.

sake of seeing her internal and external reactions, and then to perceive what feelings emerge. The goal is to learn about oneself, and the exercises were conceived to have simultaneous diagnostic and therapeutic effects. Participants are, therefore, encouraged to give themselves to the experience and to go beyond their hesitations.

Every exercise is meant to create a certain mood and to demonstrate specific elements of the therapy. In an introductory session the exercise starts with people walking around the room in a circle. Then the therapist asks for everyone to slow the pace and, as you pass by other people, actively observe and look each person’s body, up and down, from head to toe, front and back. If necessary, you should stop the person in order to take a better look at her. In this situation, some people invariably start to giggle, smile nervously, or laugh. At this moment, the therapist interrupts to bring attention to these reactions. In a playful tone, s/he might remark: “Did you notice that as soon as I asked you to stare at each other, some people began walking towards the outside of the group; some people shyly held their arms together behind their backs. How about all the giggling, the smiling, and the laughs? Most likely, these are signs of discomfort or nervousness. I want you to pay attention to this kind of reaction coming from yourself and the others. Do not censor yourself and avoid judging if a reaction is good or bad – just acknowledge it.”

The observation of this kind of reaction constitutes the most important diagnostic method of Soma. At the end of the exercise each person has the opportunity to share with others her observations about herself and others.

Soma therapy sessions consist of three distinct parts: an activity or exercise, the Reading of that activity, and the Wrap-up. During the activity participants don’t do much talking; the therapist gives instructions, lets people execute them for a short time, and then gives new instructions to move on to the next phase.

So after s/he asks people to pay attention to their reactions, s/he instructs people to continue walking in a fast pace around the