

**Pantomiming: An Expressive element in Wholebody
Focusing-oriented therapy
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Pantomime: The telling of a story without words, by means of bodily movements, gestures, and facial expressions. *American Heritage Dictionary*

A pantomime is a form of theatre and performance in which the actors play parts or express certain characteristics or feelings through nonverbal means. Thus, something done in pantomime would occur via gestures, facial expression, physical movements, often in a farcical or exaggerated manner. As I have been integrating a more Wholebody perspective (as originated by Kevin McEvenue) into Focusing and Focusing-oriented Therapy, I have observed how frequently important aspects of experiencing are expressed through movements, gestures, posture, musculature, etc. The bodily expressiveness can be different from the verbal content of speech or can amplify and extend the implicit felt meaning of what is being verbalized. Pantomiming is a more explicit invitation for clients to *further play out or enact* how their body is carrying or expressing some aspect of themselves to which they are referring. It is especially helpful and freeing for clients who tend to suppress or curtail aspects of their experiencing and/or are aware of certain ingrained or repetitive patterns or parts of themselves.

For the most part, I offer this type of process suggestion when clients are referring to a part (or parts) of themselves and in so doing: 1) are *already* making certain gestural or other physical movements, or showing a distinct type of posture and/or 2) are *vividly experiencing* this place or pattern right now in the session. I reflect back both the words as well as the bodily expression, then invite clients to see if they could allow how that place is feeling, moving, posturing, to be *more fully present* and to give permission for that place *keep doing* and *further enacting what is happening*. I may even use the term “pantomiming” to encourage that this can be a playful, creative, nonverbal dramatizing of some area of their experience. Usually it is not totally nonverbal, as clients will often describe what they are feeling and sensing as they stay aware of the body’s unfolding.

Three examples of pantomiming

Vignette #1: A client is describing some place in her that feels very “heavy,” like it is carrying the weight of the world on its shoulders. She also notes that she is aware that this has been a recurrent pattern in her life, i.e. how some part of her personality tends to take on a sense of responsibility to fix others’ problems. While she was verbalizing (she was sitting), I observed how her head/neck/shoulder area was slowly moving downward. I reflected this back and said, “Sometimes it can help to let your body play out the whole way it carries this pattern. You might sense if it feels right to stand and to maybe allow this place to move your body any way it feels or needs.” She agreed, we stood up, and after a little time spent grounding in Presence, she let herself drop into this body-place and proceeded with the pantomiming. What happened is that her whole posture bent over, with arms dangling downward, then swinging from side to side. What came first was this

sense of carrying a “huge weight” on her back, something hard to hold up. Then, as she followed the felt quality of what her body was doing, she could sense her arms swinging, which felt energizing, and soon her whole upper body (still bent over) was swinging back and forth. The swinging reminded her of being a young girl, and how she loved to play on the swings, feeling alive, free and having fun. As she was invited to give a lot of room to this emerging sense of that playful, alive ‘little-girl’ energy, her posture began to move more upright, and a big breath came out, with some tears. “I had forgotten this part of me, that can have fun, play,...”

Vignette #2: A long-term client struggles with a very powerful “inner critic” that often is quite demeaning and attacking. We have worked with this place as well as the parts of him that are the object of attack for a long while, with limited success in making any lasting experiential change. In one session, he was describing this critical part as coming at him and while he was doing so, his right arm was making a strong downward motion from above his head to his chest area. He said it felt quite strong, like it was coming through him. On an intuition, I wondered if he might allow himself to play out even more fully what that part of him is doing, to embody that energy it is showing. He said ok, and then silently let his arm/hand continue that gesturing motion. As he stayed with it, the gesture shifting from coming down toward him to both his arms moving outward from his chest area, with his hands making a pushing-like motion. His musculature and posture changed as well, from one of cringing and tightening, to sitting more upright, with chest opening and deepened breathing. He said he felt like he wanted to stand (we have done standing work), and when he did so, the thrusting forward of the arms and hands seemed

to flow through more of his whole body. He could sense his legs and feet as being quite grounded and solid while experiencing this powerful sense of strength and empowerment that he said he never fully allowed before. "I am embodying that critic place right now and it feels good. I'm letting it come out through me, instead of having it come at me."

Vignette #3: A young woman comes to therapy to assist in her recovery from an addiction to pain pills. During one of our initial sessions, she is describing how part of her wants to take the pills and part of her doesn't want to do them. She went on to state that it feels like she has two people inside her, one that she called "wild" and "carefree" and the other that she called "responsible." At one point, I observed that when she would refer to this "wild" part, her left arm would rise up, with her hand making a sort of flowing motion. When she referred to the "responsible" part, her right arm tended to move downward, with her hand grasping her leg. I pointed out these gesturing motions (of which she said she had not been aware), and then suggested that she could stay aware and even allow each arm/hand to keep moving just in the way it has been doing. What happened is that she became silent and let each side play itself out- the right side (which now included also her shoulder area) tended to slump and move further downward. "This side feels very serious, heavy, pulling me down. It is showing me how overwhelming it feels, how much its been carrying, and feels like too much."

While this was happening, she also noticed the left arm, letting it rise up, hands swaying as if in a breeze, and the whole left side seemed to uplift. "Yeah, this side feels very playful, light, like a balloon that would float away. (Sigh) Letting it move this way really

gives me a sense of how this place wants to escape, to be free, do whatever I want." As she was sensing the way each part was moving, something interesting happened. Her right hand turned, palm facing upward. "It feels like this hand is needing to hold up this heavy, overwhelmed place- like giving it support so it doesn't sink down." The other hand moved to a gripping position. "It seems like this hand is pulling down on that balloon, holding it from floating away so I don't lose it."

Finally as she was sensing this, I observed how her whole posture changed, more upright, feet planted, so I invited an awareness of this as well, suggesting that she notice how her body position had shifted. "It makes me feel stronger. I don't feel that heavy part is in control, or that I have to push away the other side either. I'm holding these places up- it feels more empowered to have this middle place here." Then her arms and hands moved down the sides of her body, emphasizing the sense of experiencing her body as a strong container. "Now I feel in the driver's seat!"

Conclusion: pantomiming is letting the body-wisdom unfold its own story

As shown in these examples, pantomiming is a journey or story told through the wisdom of the body. Inviting clients to continue to allow and play out what their body is doing can have a very powerful, experiential effect. Pantomiming tends to evoke a stronger felt awareness of how each part of us actually behaves and reacts. It enables one to directly experience in a more full-bodied way how places in us are carried and felt. The process of pantomiming is similar to psychodrama and "role play" (Gendlin, 1996, chapter 13). According to Gendlin (p.192), "Role play has the potential to change *the direction* of a

bodily energy." Instead of clients feeling "victimized" or "controlled" by a part of themselves, they can now experience that part in a more *active* and *embodied* way. This dynamic shift can be extremely valuable as many trauma clients become identified with and caught up in the sensori-motor reactions of a victim place. When we invite a role play or pantomime, we are essentially doing two things: a) changing perspective so that this place can be felt as an active part of the person ("role reversal") and b) allowing (giving consent to) this place to express itself actively and outwardly. "Experiencing something from the opposite side changes the direction of the energy. Before, the energy *came at* the client; now it moves *outward from* the client (p.193)."

In a Wholebody Focusing-oriented therapy, the key element is first establishing Grounded Presence, and then inviting something to naturally emerge from within the body-wisdom. It is not just playing out a part or doing a cathartic pounding per se, but starts from *asking* the body to do or show something and then *waiting* for the impulse, urge and energy to inwardly arise. Gendlin (1996) makes this point when he says that, "If role play is done experientially, the emphasis shifts to the time before the actual performance. It is while people peacefully *prepare* to play the role, that they best let bodily impulses arise inside themselves uncensored (p. 195)." This enables clients to allow their whole body to inhabit the role or part, to feel it from inside and let come whatever arises (impulses, energy, actions, expressions etc.). Thus it is not only or primarily the outward physical playing out, but the inward waiting (in Grounded Presence), embodying and experiencing the impetus to show itself. If it wants to or is allowed to flow outward into expression, action and animation, then this of course is

welcomed, while always reminding clients that this is not a "performance" and not the same as how one might act in their everyday life. Then this new energy can move forward and open outward if it wants. It is this direction of the bodily energy that shows how places are carried, what they embody/express and how they can be allowed to be more fully present.

By adding the quality of letting something *play itself out*, the "characters" in the story "come alive," are more fully expressed and allowed to live further in present experiencing. Giving these places room to explore themselves often opens them to new possibilities of living that were implicit but had been heretofore not been allowed or enabled to come forward. The pantomiming process also seems to strengthen the sense of Grounded Presence, as one is inviting something to enact itself, while observing and sensing the unfolding of the body's story. This seems to aid in the experience of dis-identifying from these places and enhances the sense of a larger Self that can both allow and experience what is happening.

I have found this type of invitation to be quite empowering in working with complex trauma. Clients who tend to disconnect from parts of their body or their experiencing find that allowing something to flow outward, even exaggerate or amplify an aspect of themselves can bring a new and freeing bodily energy. In some trauma victims, there is a part of the person that is terrified of any aggression, so that it either turns inward or results in severe constriction/contraction. When held in the safe container of Grounded Co-Presence with the therapist, clients often experience the bodily impulse or urge to arise from within, so that it naturally can be permitted to move outward. This process can

transform the relationship with this part of themselves, as clients experience that it is not harmful to them or others when contained and expressed in this wholebody way. For example, a woman client (who had felt terrified of anger and aggression due to early life violent abuse by her brother) was experiencing anger, and while standing, allowed it to come outward as a "Godzilla" creature. Playing out this "creature" in a playful and active manner enabled her to feel and embody its aggressive power and strength for the first time. This was a major step in letting this energy move outward, while also discovering an empowering force to stand up for herself and protect the scared part of her.

When held with the Focusing attitude of acceptance and welcoming of what comes, the process of pantomiming can allow something new, more integrative and life-forward to organically arise and unfold from our body's deep inner wisdom. One can call this "somato-drama."

References

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