

# Purpose and Strategy Behind the Magic Shop

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**ABSTRACT.** The magic shop is an integrative activity familiar to many psychodrama directors and group facilitators. It is believed to have been used by psychodramatists for over 40 years, but there is no publication available that elaborates on the resources and strategies available to the facilitator of the activity. This article provides that description, emphasizing the logic behind the strategy and the personal growth potential that the experience holds.

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PSYCHODRAMA DIRECTORS PROVIDE some warming-up experiences for groups, when the groups are newly formed, in order to generate information about the members and open them up to one another. Other exercises, which are provided for the group once it has matured, are believed to be integrative and culminating (Treadwell, Stein, & Kumar, 1990). One of those integrative experiences that appears in the repertoire of many psychodramatists is the magic shop. J. L. Moreno refers to the magic shop in *Psychodrama, Vol. I (1964)* as an established activity and gives as an example a session with a patient that took place in 1948. The magic shop in *Psychodrama, Vol. I (1964)* as an established activity and gives as an example a session with a patient that took place in 1948. The 1970; Blatner, 1973; Greenberg, 1974; Leveton, 1977). I think that part of its longevity and popularity as a psychodramatic activity is twofold: It manages in one session to fill the needs of the various group members simultaneously, even if their needs are inordinately different. Nearly every person in the group manages to take away something personally meaningful from the experience. Second, it is integrative in that it allows the individual to take what he or she has learned in the group and to look for ways in which this might be incorporated into useful and productive behavior outside of the group. It calls for honest self-evaluation and sets the stage for personal growth in the future. For these reasons, the magic



shop bridges the gap between the intensive group experience and the take-home applications for achieving personal growth.

What is remarkable about the magic shop is that, even in the hands of an inexperienced group leader, it seems to have the capacity for providing a successful group experience. Moreover, in the hands of a skilled director, it can provide a group experience that is powerful, memorable, and highly therapeutic. It is as if the activity provides the entire group with license for a shared catharsis of integration, all the more remarkable because it takes place in a setting that is not anchored in reality. Quite the opposite, the setting for the exercise is one of mutually agreed upon fantasy, or surplus reality.

### A Typical Scenario

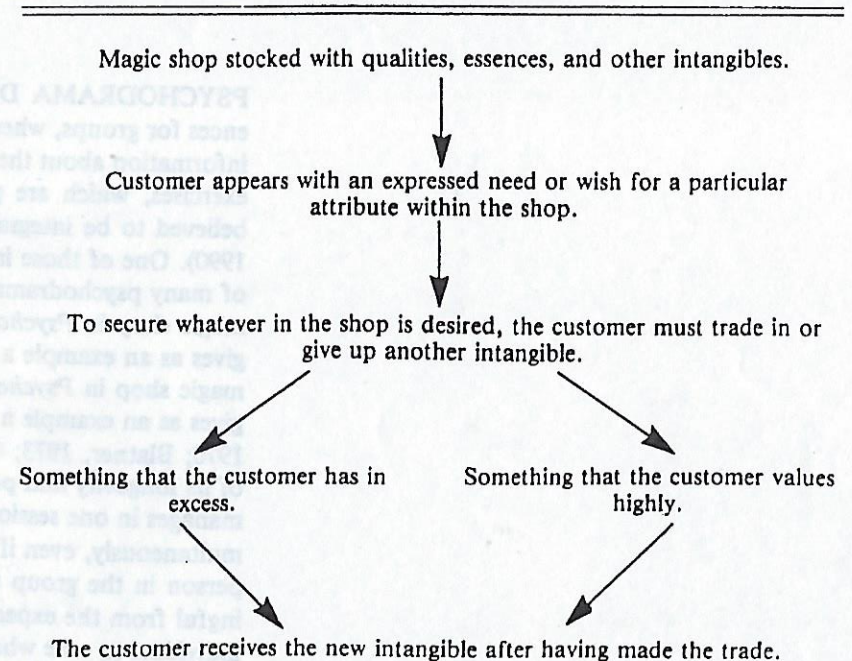
In spite of the fact that the magic shop has been around for over 40 years and is a well-established resource for psychodramatists, there is no available explanation of the logic and strategy behind this deceptively simple exercise. When a psychodramatist opens a magic shop and when a group member comes forward to participate in the exercise, what are they both trying to get done, and how can the director best facilitate the exercise? These are the issues and questions that this article addresses.

In a typical magic shop scenario, one person, the psychodrama director, acts as the keeper or proprietor of a shop that contains no objects, only intangibles and essences. Others in the group assume the roles of potential customers, which means that they are also potential protagonists or auxiliaries. A variation on the typical scenario might have one of the group members acting as the shopkeeper or having the shopkeeper role rotate among the group members. Whereas a customer cannot purchase or acquire a million dollars or a better grade or a new Porsche or an advanced degree, a customer can find traits or qualities such as warmth, openness, assertiveness, or tranquility. Individuals who participate in the magic shop often do so because in previous sessions they have gone through some self-assessment and are at the point at which they may feel the need for some particular intangible traits or qualities that the magic shop may provide. The customer who experiences the need then comes to the shop and asks for the intangible that he or she desires. The keeper of the magic shop explores the request with the customer and provides the intangible in varying amounts, depending upon the needs of the customer and the proposed use of the purchase. It is at this point that some bargaining is likely to occur. The ground rules for the bargaining are as follows:

1. The customers ask for what they believe they need or would like to have.
2. There is no cash exchange (even in fantasy) for what is acquired because the intangibles cannot be purchased with money. In exchange, customers are expected to trade in an intangible that they either prize highly or have in excess.

The psychodramatic exploration of the magic shop customer may occur in three areas. The first area is in the concerns or difficulties that lead the customer to express the need for the intangible. The second is in what the customer will have to give up in order to get what he or she wants from the shop. Ideally, there will be a match or appropriateness between what is acquired and what is exchanged. The third potential area for psychodramatic exploration is what it might be like to have the new quality and to incorporate it into an improved self. A schematic of the magic shop appears in Table 1.

TABLE 1  
A Schematic of a Magic Shop





### Director as a Wizard

Thus far, what has been described has the appearance of a relatively simple trade-off. Customers appear and ask for what they want. They receive an intangible from the magic shop and leave another intangible in exchange. If nothing more than this exchange occurs, then the exercise can be productive, depending upon how insightful the participants are about what they believe they are lacking and will receive and what they will need to give up. What takes this exercise out of the realm of the ordinary and into the realm of the remarkable is how the keeper of the magic shop bargains with the customer about the trade-off.

What is often apparent is that participants are not all that insightful about what they need and what they will have to give up. For that, it is helpful for them to have the perspective and feedback of the group and the skillful facilitation of the shopkeeper. In an effectively run session, the participant will quite often come to the magic shop for one intangible and leave with a different one or may want to trade one quality but end up trading a different one. Whether the exchange is an appropriate one can be clarified in the psychodramatic exploration of what is wanted and what is to be traded. Each customer is a protagonist. Each exchange in the magic shop is a minidrama or vignette. Group members may have insights they wish to share with the shopkeeper and the customer about the trade-off, and they may want to assist in the negotiating process. They can do this by suggesting alternatives to be tried out by the shopkeeper and customer to determine which decision seems best. They can also do this in auxiliary positions by exploring and testing the customer's decisions in old and new roles to arrive at a sense of appropriateness. In addition to the group-centered fantasy aspect of the exercise, it is this "goodness of fit" that occurs during the trade-off that makes the experience appear so mystical.

### Purpose and Strategy Behind the Exchange

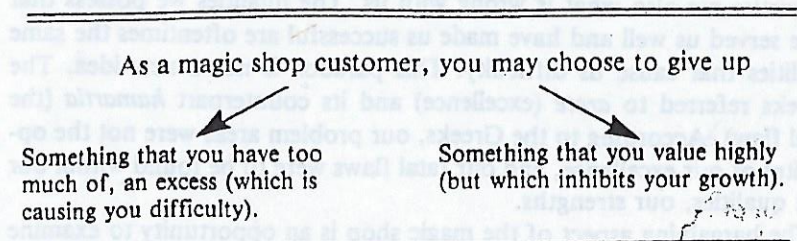
What kind of strategy can the magic shop owner use to make this exercise more rewarding for the participants? The first area that the psychodrama director might scrutinize is the expressed need of the customer. The director can explore with the customer whether what is requested is really needed and how seriously needed. Is the customer asking for something that is basic and essential to his or her emotional survival, or is the customer seeking something that might be seen as an important personal goal or a desired change that would be an improvement on the present self? The exercise allows the customer to show up at the magic shop, expressing a lack or deficiency, a wish or want. It is the presenting problem

for the minidrama and is worth understanding in order to decide later what must be given up to get the need met. The psychodrama director can take the customer at his or her word or can further explore the nature of the need and the importance of the want. The second opportunity the director has for analysis and strategy is the choice point at which the customer and the shopkeeper decide what has to be given up in order to get what is needed. A slightly elaborated version of the options in the previous schematic is shown in Table 2.

Rather than simply giving the customer what is asked for without exploration, the keeper of the magic shop may wish to interact with the customer about what is needed and what the customer should give in trade. For example, a customer may want to deal only in positives. He might say, "I am exceedingly generous, and so I can give up part of that; and in exchange, I would like to be even more compassionate than I am already." Of course, customers can get whatever they want at the magic shop and can leave whatever they choose, but on the face of it, this kind of offered trade does not appear to be a productive one. First of all, the proposed exchange appears to be an avoidance of any kind of challenge. Second, there is no apparent match between what is given up and what is acquired. Finally, this kind of trade-off does not appear to fit the metaphor of personal growth that the magic shop represents because the exchange involves no apparent sacrifice by the customer. (I will return later to the idea of the metaphor that the magic shop may represent.) Ordinarily, the customer will want to acquire an intangible that satisfies a need or want and is somehow seen as an improvement. But the question remains: What will the customer give in order to improve?

It is helpful to look upon the alternatives for what the customer is to give in trade as being negative, even if they sound like highly positive words. That is why it is necessary for the psychodrama director to keep in mind the phrases "which is causing you difficulty" and "but which inhibits your growth." A customer may want to give up skepticism because it sounds

TABLE 2  
Possible Options for the Customer





negative and to acquire hopefulness or trust because it sounds positive. That sounds like an appropriate trade-off because one is the opposite of the other. A healthy skepticism, however, is not all that bad, and trust should be selective. With a skillful director administering the magic shop, the customer can come to understand that too much openness, frankness, humility, pride, patience, and discipline (all of which sound good) can be excesses that cause him or her difficulty. A person can be too patient or too humble or too disciplined. Participants can also come to understand that something that they value highly, such as independence, self-control, idealism, generosity, or dependability, may keep them from having something else that they want to have.

I remember very well a magic shop conducted by Zerka Moreno in which the customer had to give up some status and prestige, which he valued greatly, in order to have a few friends. His difficulty was captured in the old maxim "Love flees authority." He had worked for years to achieve status and superiority, only to discover that he was now unapproachable and isolated. I remember another magic shop in which a sweet, kind, cooperative, and gentle woman had to give up some of those admirable qualities because she was unable to stand up for herself and subsequently was taken for granted and frequently used by others. It may be difficult for the customer to give up something so highly valued, but it may be necessary to do so in order to get what is wanted.

### *Arete and Hamartia*

Here is the paradox that the magic shop confronts and explores. The customer comes in because of a felt need or deficiency, such as some developmental deficit or character flaw. That is where the exchange begins, but what often gets explored in the minidrama is an overdevelopment, something the individual has in excess or something that is valued and difficult to give up. The paradox surfaces in the magic shop because the magic shop, in being an integrative activity, deals with personal growth, fulfillment, or actualization. One of the curious aspects of personal growth is the realization that some of our most positive and valued characteristics are also what is wrong with us. The qualities we possess that have served us well and have made us successful are oftentimes the same qualities that cause us difficulty. This paradox is not a new idea. The Greeks referred to *arete* (excellence) and its counterpart *hamartia* (the fatal flaw). According to the Greeks, our problem areas were not the opposites of our excellence, and our fatal flaws were to be found within our best qualities, our strengths.

The bargaining aspect of the magic shop is an opportunity to examine

such strengths and weaknesses, to look at what a protagonist has and might even have too much of or prize too highly. One further aspect of the paradox is that some of our acknowledged weaknesses might be strengths in disguise. If we are willing to admit to being fallible or flawed (which is the human condition) and to examine those flaws, we may discover that we have been exaggerating them, that they are sometimes helpful to us, or that others see them more positively than we do. We might question how others would see our flaws or weaknesses as positive attributes or how they might see our strengths as negatives. We must remind ourselves that when we are discussing strengths and weaknesses, we are discussing perceptions or value judgments. What we might regard as a strength or a weakness, others might not.

### Putting Language to Our Perceptions



To the extent that someone is a particular kind of personality, he or she is not some other, different personality. To the extent that we have some outstanding, positive personal traits, we will also lack other particular personal traits. To the extent that we are one way, we are not some other way. To the extent that we are reliable, we may also be predictable. To the extent that we are systematic and methodical, we may not be spontaneous. To the extent that we are resolute, we may also be rigid. To the extent that we are mature, we may lack youthfulness. And even our most positive traits can be described negatively by someone who does not value them. One person's self-control is another person's inhibition. One person's patience is another person's procrastination. One person's frankness is another person's cruelty. One person's bravery is another person's stupidity. It is not so much the trait itself that is at issue, but how the trait is perceived and interpreted as it filters through another person's value system. The magic shop has the capacity for acquainting us with that which we have in excess or value highly and which is problematic or growth inhibiting. It has the capacity for acquainting us with how others perceive our more positive qualities, so that we might reexamine them. It can also acquaint us with how some of our most valued qualities are inappropriate and counterproductive in some contexts.

More often than not, the issue confronting the protagonist and the keeper of the magic shop is not so clearly one of positive or negative traits, but one of self-perception and the perceptions of others. Because the shopkeeper can dispense or receive intangibles in any quantity, he or she can also deal qualitatively with how much or how little of a trait or quality a person might require. If, in the exploration of the presenting problem, the shopkeeper identifies a difficulty not of type but of degree,



then he or she can achieve balance for the customer in the quantity that is taken from the customer and the quantity that is received.

The keeper of the magic shop has the capacity for letting the customer see what it is like to have given up that which was valued or excessive. What is it like to be without it? How would that change things? The shopkeeper can also have the customer try out the new trait or quality psychodramatically to see how it feels and how it might be used once it is acquired. It can be tried out in brief scenes with members of the group acting as auxiliaries. The protagonist can experience what it is like to be smart or seductive or assertive. The protagonist may find the newly acquired trait or quality to be uncomfortable or disappointing or different from what he or she had anticipated. On the other hand, it might be wonderfully rewarding. This exploration of the surplus reality is, of course, role training.

### Scene Setting Warm-up

Some directors will warm up the group to the magic shop by explaining the expectations, setting the stage, showing where the door is, where the intangibles are stored, and even identifying some of the intangibles that are available to customers. If a director wants to set the scene in this manner and wait for customers, she or he might unroll the awning outside and get an imaginary broom and sweep out the shop while waiting for customers, anchoring the shop in space, making it familiar and comfortable for the group members. While the scene is being set physically, the director can be speaking with the group about what is available inside and making the qualities and essences attractive to customers. The director can model spontaneity for the group and set the tone for conducting the session. While this kind of monologue unfolds, the customers will have time to consider the possibility that they can have wisdom or decisiveness or peace of mind or leisure, or whatever else is available in the shop. The shopkeeper's monologue also gives the potential customer some preparation time for making personal decisions and for warming up before entering the shop.

### Trading in Possibilities

Although all of this discussion thus far has been about the magic shop as an activity that is provided when a group is matured, some directors will use it to open a group and get it going; still others will use it at some midway point to clarify group and individual progress. My own bias about training is that group facilitators cannot have too many resources

for any stage of group development. The more resources they have, the more options they have in group facilitation and the better equipped they are for meeting particular group demands. There are a number of ways of closing down groups, of achieving termination, and of assisting the group members to make the transition from the intensive group experience to the world outside of the group (Barbour, 1977). In my opinion, the magic shop is best used as one of those resources. The advantages of the magic shop as an activity are many. Because it takes place in fantasy and deals in magic, it is relatively nonthreatening. Psychodramas involving dreams have shown us that some people are able to learn things in dreams or fantasy that they resist learning otherwise. Most customers who come to the magic shop will already have in mind what they think they need and what they might want to trade in so they will feel more secure than they would if the situation were more uncertain.

The expectation that the trades are not extended dramas but are brief exchanges makes them easier to attempt, even if the potential is there for a drama at a later session. As a training activity, the magic shop is loaded in the direction of successful learning because each person who comes to the shop wants to take away something positive and, if allowed to, will most likely see the experience as beneficial. Participants are virtually guaranteed that they will get something positive from the experience, because after all, it's magic. With magic, all things are possible.

The word *process* comes from the Latin word *procedo*, meaning "to move forward." Personal growth involves change; in fact, it is not possible without change. Not all change, however, is growth. The change that is growth-producing is that which moves an individual toward maturity. A person who does not grow personally will remain immature but will not remain young. Some people mature, and others who do not experience inner growth merely get old.

We recognize that it is usually easier not to do something than to do it, easier to avoid challenges and to seek comfort and stability. Nonetheless, a growth cycle calls for leaving predictability, routine, and comfort, for shattering the stable world structure, and for restructuring one's world view to include a changed reality (Jourard, 1969). It calls for one's moving forward and for taking one's foot off first base in order to get to second base. The magic shop is a virtually ideal activity for facilitating that growth cycle. Participants begin by acknowledging faults, imperfections, and mistakes. They trade in a part of their current self-image or self-concept that is problematic to them. In exchange, they acquire another "possible self" that is an improvement on the way they were. They do this visibly, vocally, actively, and in the presence of others, a virtual public declaration of their willingness to change in a positive direction.



Earlier, the concept of the magic shop as a metaphor was used. On one level, the magic shop is already a metaphor that involves trading and bargaining, but a metaphor for what? I believe that if we examine it closely, it is one of death and rebirth, because inherent in the activity is the idea that we do not gain unless we are also willing to give up. A part of us dies so that another part of us can be reborn. There is no growth without cost, no getting without giving—the opposite of that old theme: The best things in life are free. That which has a low value has a low cost. That which has a high value has a high cost. In the “real world” outside of the magic shop, we set goals for ourselves somewhere between that to which we aspire and that for which we are willing to sacrifice. The magic shop allows us to confront that which we believe we need or wish for or want, to assess what the value of that might be, and to determine what we must give up in order to get our wish.

Moreno (1966) presented several rationales for the use of psychodrama. The psychodramatic method overcomes the “conserved,” blocked, and frozen condition of people through action. It uses the group as a therapeutic agent and encourages creativity through spontaneity. It moves in time and space and is nonanalytic. Perhaps most important, the psychodramatic method has an optimistic view of human potential. It tells us that we each have the capacity to improve our condition if we can discover and mobilize the resources we have within us. From among the many techniques and activities available to psychodramatists and group facilitators, the magic shop is a superior resource for the synthesis and accomplishment of the psychodramatic rationale.

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