

ne example of judgmental, insightful for the activity of listening. aply extremely common.

and judgmental listening is that it to hear much. They're so preoccupied at they miss, or dismiss, the totality been my experience that when we people say, we're much more likely - and whatever brilliance, wit, sub-

e an environment in which people o one another. We do that by challenge-oriented" categorical listening Then one member of the group, A, up, B, responds judgmentally/categorically group is likely to tell B: "I don't go to get it. Instead, give something

erely because I believe that it's morally to that activity. As a practitioner a people's efforts to create meaning ne principal ways in which we give

to practice creating a listening environment one sentence, and no one can conclude: The first person says, "I flew to the", "It took me much longer than usual,

Family Values

For the last hundred years or more, the institution of The Family has been analyzed by social scientists of every persuasion. Some of them, it seems to me, have had some valuable things to say on the subject.

There's all the difference in the world, of course, between a group of people, straight or gay, who share a life together and consider themselves to be a family (your family, my family, whoever's family), and The Family (with a capital F), which as a societal institution exercises enormous influence over all of us (whether we live in a family or not). I think it's helpful to view the institution as both an ongoing play and a drama school.

Most people tend to act out family life according to the societal script "written" for roles in the play "The Family" — Wife, Husband, Mother, Father, Daughter, Son, Sister and Brother — roles in which we have been cast primarily on the basis of age, gender and sexual preference. We are much less likely to "improvise" with the people who share our lives.

It is very typical, for example, for members of families to say things to each other like: "Don't talk to your father that way!" or "You're my wife... that's why you should come with me!"

The Family drama school is where we first learn that there are such

things as roles, and we learn how to play them. The role of Parent requires teaching children how to act "right," which they do in many different ways. They go over and over the rules of good behavior: "Sit up straight." "Wash your hands before you eat." "Don't talk with your mouth full." "Say thank you." "Don't interrupt." They buy their children "appropriate" toys (trucks for boys, dolls for girls) to play with. And they act as role models that children imitate without ever being told to do so.

Like all acting parts, "Family" roles come with a fixed set of *dos* and *don'ts* that govern everything from what, how and when everyone eats to where they sleep and with whom. Roles also come with a fixed set of values — the authoritative reasons that are invoked to justify the rules. You've probably heard them (or said them) a million times: "Because I said so." "Don't argue with your mother." "That's what the Bible (or Dr. Spock, or whoever) teaches us." "This is how we've always done it." "That's just good manners." "I'm trying to teach you some common sense."

Home is the theatre where "The Family" play runs, all day and all night long. It's also the "rehearsal" space where children are prepared for the roles they will assume as adults, when they'll be expected to have a family of their own. It's here that we first learn the limits of who we are, as societally defined: "Daddy's girl," "the baby of the family," "a troublemaker," "a brain," "a little gentleman," "a problem child." Ironically, we learn those roles so well that we come to think of playing them as "doing what comes naturally."

The notion that "real life" is "natural" and theatre is "artificial" seems just plain silly to me. After all, what's called "natural" is simply the acting out of predetermined roles in a play that was written long before any of us had anything to say about it. As I see it, the only way we can actually create who we are in this kind of societal environment is to perform.

Imagine drawing a chalk circle and then saying to your child, your mother-in-law, or your co-worker: "I don't think that last half hour of life was very good. Let's step over onto that stage and perform it differently." Why should performance only take place in special places called "theatres" where specially trained "actors" do their thing?

For the last 20 years I've been working, as a playwright and a director, with a number of very talented people, to create what I call "developmental

theatre." I'd be delighted to have
Castillo Theatre in Manhattan

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preconceptions of the playwright
anyone else. The trouble with
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So we take all of the elements
personalities, looks and experience
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theatre." I'd be delighted to have you come and see one of our plays at the Castillo Theatre in Manhattan the next time you're in New York.

At Castillo we are creating theatre that's not overdetermined by the preconceptions of the playwright, the director, the critics, the audience or anyone else. The trouble with having a fixed, idealized vision of what a play ought to be is that the ideal is constantly "telling" you whether you're doing it "right" or "wrong." It doesn't allow you to take everything — "good" and "bad" — and do something developmental with it.

So we take all of the elements available to us — the script; the talents, personalities, looks and experiences of the actors; the skills and ideas of the "technical" crew; old plays (our own and others), which we rework and combine — and create with all of it. We're constantly playing around with the elements that we have, to see how they can be used to "complete" each other in the creation of a performance. Rather than making a theatre piece conform to a preconceived plan so that we end up with a product we had in mind all along, we engage in a developmental process and see what comes of it.

That is, as well, the social therapeutic approach to life: we help people to create their lives continuously, out of whatever there is. We teach them to "do" life as a developmental theatre performance. (Twice a year I conduct weekend workshops where large groups of people — some of them social therapy patients and some not — practice this activity by producing and performing a play that we create then and there.)

As family members, co-workers, friends and lovers, none of us has to act out the roles in which we've been cast. No one has to know beforehand how the "play" is going to turn out. All of us can perform our lives — and if we don't like how it goes, we can do a different performance the next day, the next hour, or the next minute! Completing, not competing, is the way to do it.

What it means to complete is to respond to whatever happens as something that could transform the totality of what's going on. Someone does something different, something new, something unexpected — and now the whole thing is different and new! Your play may have started out as a murder mystery, but it could turn out to be a musical comedy, science fiction, a quiz show or — who knows what? It doesn't have to be the realization of a preconceived plan.

One thing that keeps people from completing rather than competing is the tendency to assume that a story has to go a certain way. Most people tend to think that if you start out with A, B and C, then you have to do D, E and F — regardless of how you and the other performers responded to A, B and C. In other words, they tend to think that how the story was preceived has to determine how it will turn out. And then they compete to see who can come up with the right ending.

But just because you've gone to a football game doesn't mean that you have to stay until the end of the last quarter. Just because you're in bed with someone doesn't mean that you have to have sex. Nor does it mean that, if you do have sex, it has to go a certain way. Just because you have a degree in accounting doesn't mean that you can't decide to become a nurse, an artist, or anything else...

Maybe there is no "right" ending. This is what the social therapeutic approach helps people to see: as human beings, we can create something new from whatever there is.

In doing therapy with members of a family, the social therapeutic task is to create an environment where we can expose how heavily societal roles press down on everyone in it, and how "The Family" itself — as the play — forces them to stay locked into those roles. When families come to me for help, I ask everyone: "Who here is ready to participate in the work of creating what this group of people is and redefining what you can do together? Who is going to stand up for all of you, and not just for this or that role? Who is willing to put aside the 'The Family' script so that you can create something together that allows all of you to grow and to develop?"

In other words, the social therapeutic approach helps people to determine what they want their family to be; it's not about coaching them to say their lines in the script better, or getting them to adjust to the roles they've been given so that they can put on a better act.

Take Dorothy and her family. At 70, Dorothy is having an extended temper tantrum. She stays at home all day, sleeping and watching television. At nights and on weekends she refuses to go anywhere with her husband, Norman, a successful businessman who at 71 loves going out. Dorothy is always angry at someone: Norman, for something he said or did half a century ago; her daughter, for getting divorced; her daughter-in-law, for the

"inconsiderate" way she treats to something; the cleaning lady. Although her doctor said family that she "knows" she out," Dorothy smiles sadly at be "old and fat and ugly."

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“inconsiderate” way she treats Dorothy; lifelong friends, for not inviting her to something; the cleaning lady, for coming too late, or too early.

Although her doctor says she's in excellent health, Dorothy tells her family that she “knows” she's dying. When her daughter urges her to “get out,” Dorothy smiles sadly and says that no one understands how it feels to be “old and fat and ugly.”

I believe very strongly that the most respectful and loving thing you can do with people, including old people, is to make the demand that they continue to grow. What I mean by this is to demand that they participate with you in the lifelong process of reshaping and reorganizing what your family is — to make it an environment where everyone in the family, young and old, women and men, is supported to develop. Anything else — compelling them to remain in the roles of Mother and Father, or reversing the roles and becoming their Parent — is deadening for everyone concerned.

Terrific! you may say. *But that seems terribly hard to do.* It is! All of us, including old people themselves, have been taught that the elderly have nothing left to give, emotionally, intellectually, or otherwise. They're typically viewed, and view themselves, as victims — of time, circumstance, poor health, their children, or all of the above. Chances are that they're ill, or unable to see, or hear, or walk very well. They may be in pain or unable to think very clearly. Like Dorothy, they may be grieving over a “loss” (in her case, her youth) that can never be “made good.” From a societal point of view, they — and those who care for them — may ask: “Why bother?”

So we hesitate to tell them that they need to continue to grow. And they're likely to insist that they can't and won't. That, in my opinion, is the real reason why so many old people often feel humiliated, bored, sad, angry and exhausted. So do five-year-olds, 15-year-olds, 45-year-olds, and other human beings who are forced to exist in no-growth environments.

Oh! you may be thinking. I get it. You're talking about encouraging old folks to take an interest, to get off their duffs.... No. Encouragement is often a polite form — if there is such a thing — of coercion: getting other people to do what you want them to do, or think they ought to do, “for their own good.” The environment I'm talking about doesn't have an end in sight and it's not overdetermined by judgments. This kind of environment is characterized by radical acceptance.

How do you make the demand, in practice, that old people develop? You do it by imitating how adults relate to very young children when they're first learning to speak. Create an environment in which you support them to do what they don't know how to do, and accept whatever it is that they do. That's the developmental activity which enables children to grow, and it works for grownups too — if they choose to participate.

From the social therapeutic point of view, every human being — whatever his or her psychological “diagnosis,” score on a standard “IQ” test, “age,” or any other societal label — has an unlimited capacity for development. Accordingly, the social therapeutic approach relates to people not in terms of their “pathology” or their “problems,” but as human beings who may be undeveloped, or underdeveloped, but whose development can nevertheless be reinitiated at any time. The capacity for development is what makes us human. From this point of view, to relate to people non-developmentally — regardless of their age, or anything else — is therefore inhuman.

EXERCISE:

This can help you and the people you live with to “take an intermission” from “The Family” play and see it from another vantage point: Ask someone in your family to exchange roles with you for a day.

Playing a role — whether you're Lady-in-Waiting — can be very to do and say just because you're allowed to do or say just because:

Things are even more complicated, changing very rapidly. Many of might have changed since last year.

Consequently, nowadays (their parents. Youngsters of nineteenth things are changing — after a long world. Meanwhile, their lives changing at the rate they were young. Chances are that the past and the qualitative character of

A few years ago I spoke at a women taking an introduction of mine in a trade union column were enormously relieved. The