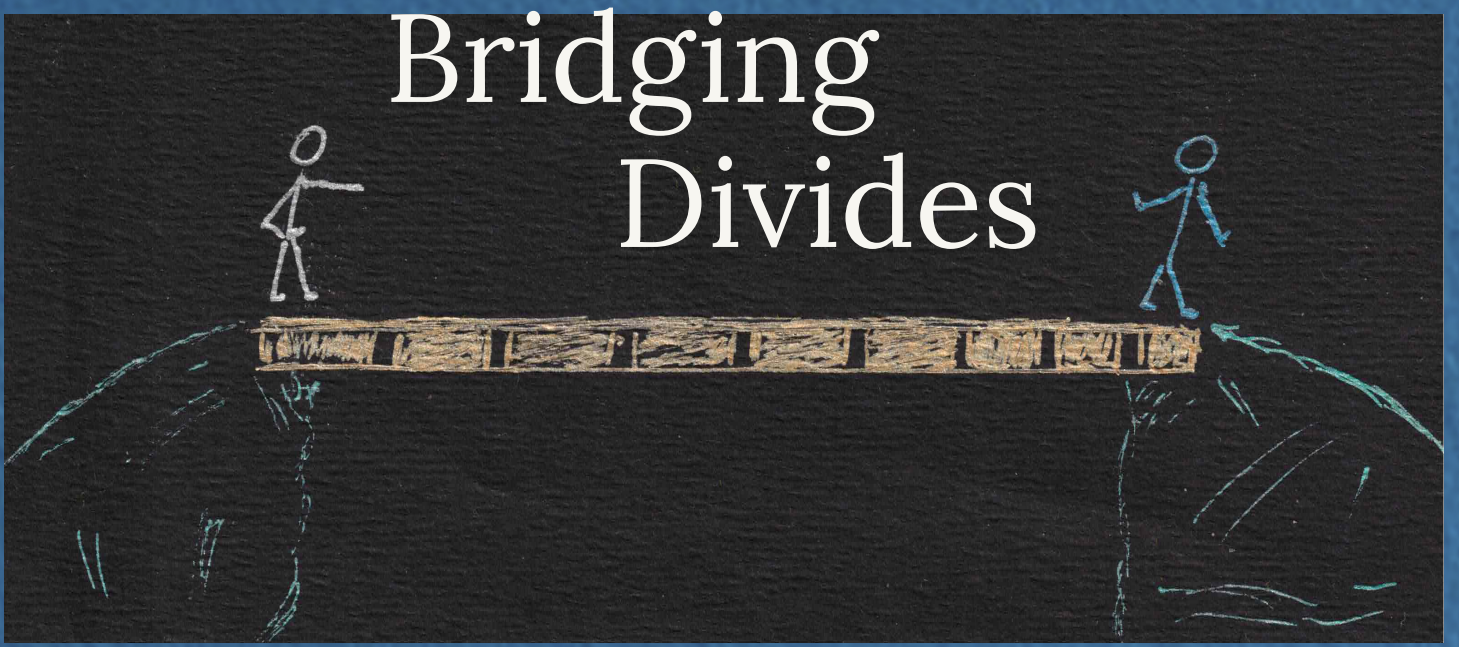
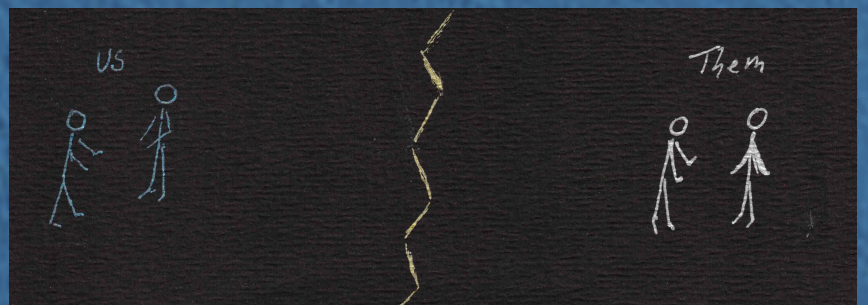


# Bridging Divides

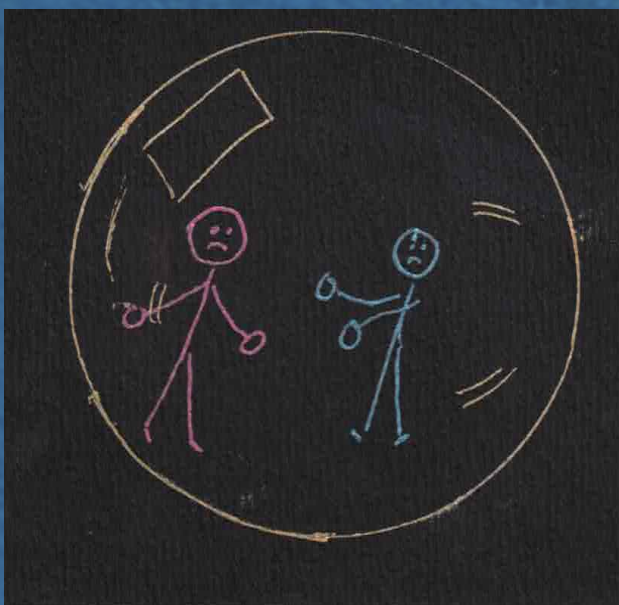


by Regina Sewell, 2023

To thrive, we need to belong. We need to feel connected to others who share similar beliefs, values, and/or experiences. We need to feel like we are part of a group. Belonging helps us feel safe and supported. It also shapes our identity – our sense of who we are. But belonging has a dark side. When we come across others who have different beliefs, values, and/or experiences, we may feel threatened. We have a tendency to celebrate those who are “like us” and to dismiss and/or demonize those who are “on the other side.”

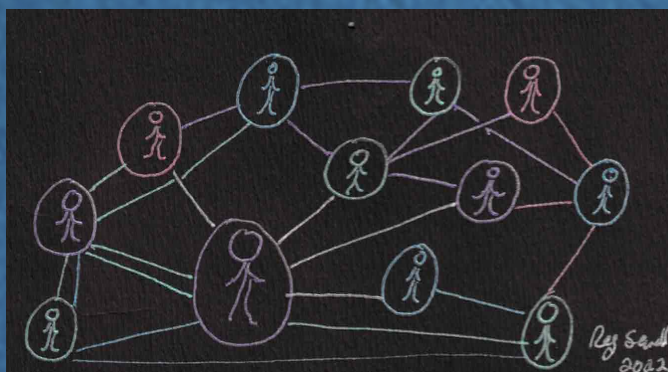


We live in a world that is deeply divided based on political, cultural and religious identities which often shape our beliefs about social issues such as climate change, abortion, LGBTQIA rights, and/or gun control. Limiting our connections to those with whom we feel most “like” leads to polarization and more importantly, to personal stagnation.





When faced with those who are “not like us” it often feels like we have two options: to say nothing in order to avoid conflict or jump into the battle, guns blazing – fervently preaching our truth in the hope of convincing those on the other side that we are “right.” Both options keep us from connecting more deeply to others and make it difficult to get things done in our more task-oriented groups.

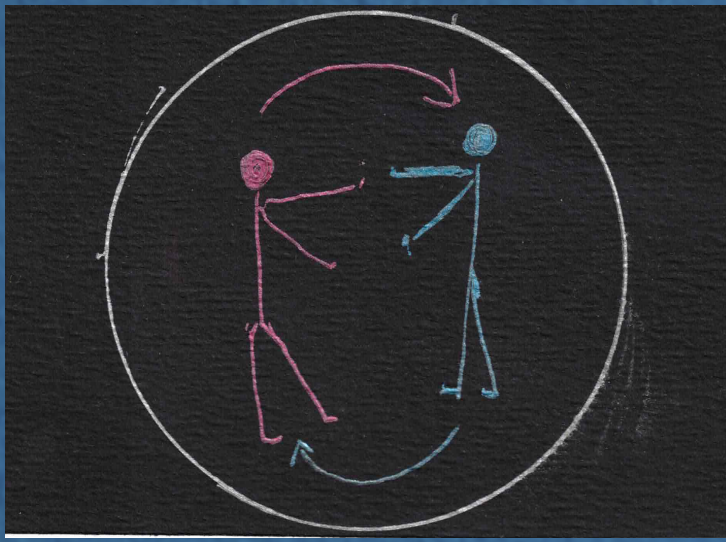


There is a third, more life-giving option. J.L. Moreno developed Sociometry, Psychodrama and Group Psychotherapy to help people connect more deeply with others and bridge the divisions between groups. Sociometry helps us find commonalities with others that go beyond and beneath the areas of difference. When we are able to relate on other factors, we find that the rigid stereotypes we have created about “those people” do not hold up and we become more willing to see and hear each other. Finding commonalities with others expands our sense of belonging and makes it safe to share at a more vulnerable level.

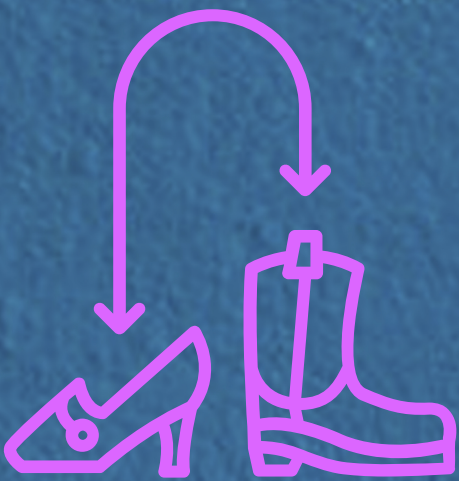


For example, Ron may be a devout Christian who believes that abortion is a sin. Emilia may be agnostic and believe women should have a right to make their own healthcare and reproductive choices. Through sociometric exercises, Ron and Emilia may realize that despite this major difference in belief, they have a lot in common such as a shared preference for ice-cream or a shared love of hiking.



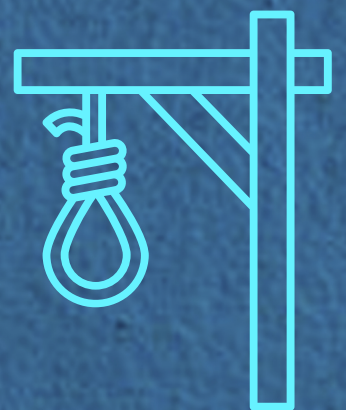


As the themes move from more peripheral criteria (“I prefer ice cream to cake”) to more central concerns (“Right now, the role I find most challenging is the role of parent”) Ron and Emelia may find that they are both very concerned about the safety of their teen-age daughters. This is important because if we feel like we can connect to others we are more able to see and hear them. This allows us to have empathy for them and it is empathy that bridges divides.



Another tool J.L. Moreno gave us to help bridge divides is sociodrama. Sociodrama provides a way for groups to explore difficult topics and helps group members find the shared humanity of the other by reversing roles with an imagined other and tuning in to the other’s underlying feelings and motivations.

For example, in a classroom setting, students can explore the complex motivations and feelings around the death penalty by taking on roles such as the convicted murderer, family members of the convicted murderer, family members of the murder victim, defense attorneys for the convicted murderer, the prosecutors, etc. Thus, group members explore attitudes and beliefs that may be held by people occupying the various roles by giving voice to their beliefs and feelings.





Stepping into the shoes of the convicted murder helps group members tune in his or her sense of remorse about committing the crime, a sense of frustration and/or hopelessness about being punished for a crime they did not commit, or a sense of hardened indifference stemming from a sense of rage against the world for the harms they perceived they have endured or from a complete lack of empathy for others.



Taking on the role of the victim's mother may help group tap into a mother's compassion for the damaged soul who killed her child, a desire to prevent other parents from having to go through what she has had to go through, or a seething resentment towards the convicted murderer for taking her child from her.



Through role reversal, group members are given the opportunity to explore the deeper universal themes that are part of the human condition such as fear, shame, anger and hurt, and allow themselves to see beyond stereotypes. Because group members are invited to take on perspectives that are not necessarily their own, they are able to explore their own beliefs more fully and have more compassion and perhaps acceptance for a diverse set of views.

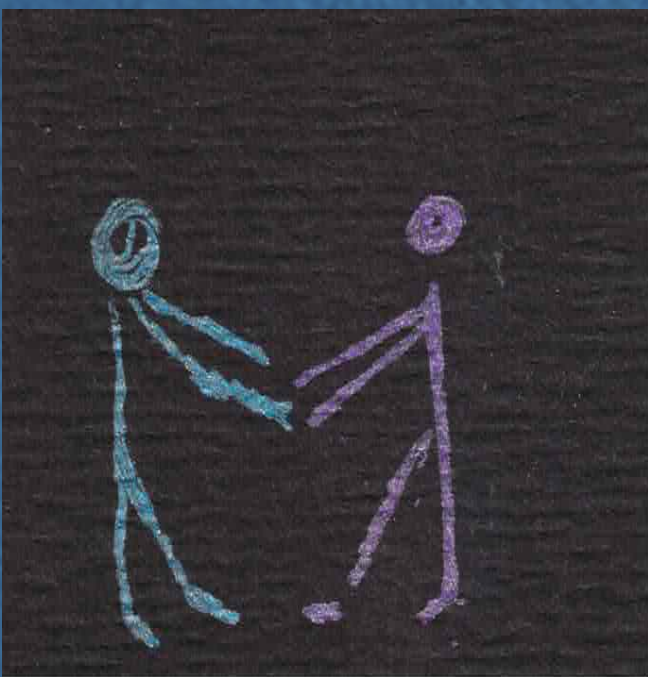
While sociodrama can help bridge divides by exploring social and systemic issues, psychodrama provides a way for individuals to explore interpersonal conflicts with specific others. In psychodrama, participants reverse roles with a specific other whose opinion, beliefs and experiences conflicts with their own to gain insight into what lies beneath.





For example, Bryan may be angry at his husband Freddy for sending \$300-\$500 dollars to his mother every month instead of putting the money into their joint savings account. By bringing the conflict onto the psychodrama stage,

Freddy has a chance to explore the hurt and fear that lies beneath his anger. He may realize that he doesn't feel like he is Freddy's priority and fears that Freddy wants to leave him.



By stepping into Freddy's shoes, Bryan may come to understand the world from Freddy's perspective. Bryan may see that Freddy feels responsible for supporting his mother because unlike Bryan's middle class parents, Freddy's mother struggles financially. He may also gain insight into how the cultural expectations for first born sons in Hispanic families make

Freddy feel that it is his duty to take care of his mother. This enables Bryan to gain an appreciation for their cultural differences and have compassion for Freddy. With this understanding, Bryan can practice talking about money with Freddy and develop strategies to talk about joint finances in a way that allows both of them to feel heard and seen.

Through Moreno's gifts of sociometry, sociodrama and psychodrama, we are offered opportunities to stretch ourselves personally and enrich and deepen our connections. We get a chance to experience belonging to multiple groups and to the whole of humanity. And by stepping into the shoes of the other, we get a chance to escape the conserves and paradigms that keep us stuck.

