In ancient Greek and earlier Egyptian Mythology there lives a beautiful sacred bird capable of rebirth and who in that sense is indomitable. The one of a kind Arabian Phoenix or Firebird would live for a thousand years, and as it approached the end of life would fly to the coast of Phoenicia and build a nest of beautiful twigs and aromatic spices such as myrrh. It would then face East and sing a song so beautiful that even Apollo, the sun god, had to pause in stunned admiration to listen, before again spurring into motion the four horses pulling his golden chariot. A spark from one of the horse’s hooves would then set the Firebird’s nest ablaze. After three days, so goes the myth, the Phoenix would rise from the ashes and live again for the next one thousand years.

The symbolism of the Firebird has always held great meaning for me personally dealing with injuries, losses and transitions, and as a psychotraumatologist working with severely traumatized people who often feel destroyed by crushing life experiences.

The Phoenix was believed to regenerate when hurt or injured, and thus represented an eternal being, incapable of destruction. Early Egyptian representations of the bird relate it to the Bennu bird, connected to the verb “weben” which means “to rise brilliantly,” or “to shine” (www.newworldencyclopedia.org).

I am just returning to my office today after a four day intensive training in Jamaica Plain which was directed by the iconic Saphira Linden. Saphira is to transpersonal drama therapy as Freud is to psychoanalysis or Einstein is to the theory of relativity. For decades since learning her craft directly from Jacob L. Moreno and Zerka Toeman Moreno she has developed her own particular approach which she refers to as Omega Transpersonal Drama Therapy.
Zerka Moreno (2013) stated in her foreword to Linden’s excellent book, The Heart and Soul of Psychotherapy. A Transpersonal Approach Through Theater Arts, “This points to the fact that therapy through drama is the core of her work, and that the spiritual dimension is essential of her proceedings.” Zerka Moreno went on to offer her concise definition of transpersonal: “The term transpersonal indicates going beyond the personal into infinity. So how do we achieve the level of ultimate truth, where the human being knows itself to be not merely an individual, but part of the cosmos, where we are all one?” Moreno then adds, “Saphira shows us some of the ways in which that sublime state can be achieved.”

The title of the training I received from Linden over the past four days was Psychodrama and Drama Therapy for Special Populations. I was fortunate to work with an amazing group of actors/drama therapists and learned a great deal about the process of Linden’s approach. I saw from my own work in the training how Linden’s methods can unlock and resolve past traumas, clearing the way for new growth and transformation, like the mythic and sacred Firebird rising from the ashes of its own destruction.

I was first exposed to drama therapy about four decades ago when I took an undergraduate course at Antioch where I was studying psychology. I was fortunate to take a drama therapy course almost before the field started as a profession, from a very young instructor named Renee Emunah. I was able to observe the inspiring work she was doing with hospitalized patients experiencing psychosis and how her techniques, exercises and methods brought new life to them. Emunah is now a leader in the field of drama therapy and has authored numerous publications including her 1994 book Acting for Real. Drama Therapy Process, Technique, and Performance which is considered a core text.

Many psychologists have been able to implement drama therapy in their practices. One such psychologist, is David Read Johnson, who is the co-founder of the North American Drama Therapy Association. Johnson has been doing very innovative work with trauma survivors at his center connected to Yale University. I love Johnson’s words in his foreword to Linden’s book, “My guess is that the most frequently used words throughout these chapters are love, wholeness, and sacred, words I can assure you are not to be found in the DSM or latest CBT manual. Other words you will find are gratitude, heart, beauty.”

Linden was also able to incorporate in her training some recent findings from neuroscience that are important for drama therapists to consider. In an interesting synchronicity, a book has just been released by another Linden, David J.
Linden (2018), who edited Think Tank. Forty Neuroscientists Explore the Biological Roots of Human Experience. David Linden is professor of neuroscience at The Johns Hopkins School of Medicine. David Linden’s book aims to have neuroscientists clarify what is scientifically known about brain functions and dispel what he refers to as neurobullshit.

We live in an exciting time of therapy, a time where we can truly begin to integrate the best of the expressive and theater arts with neuroscience to offer real change, cure and healing to a traumatized world, ever looking to the transcendent. Saphira Linden wrote on the inside of the cover to her book a personal inscription to me that her favorite of the 12 principles she developed for her work, is “Creating Our Lives as Works of Art.” People just don’t talk that way anymore. But I am so glad we still have some Saphira Lindens left. One other such person is Jodi R. Leib who wrote a chapter in Saphira Linden’s book entitled, “Benefits of Drama Therapy for Actors with Creative Blocks.” I was fortunate to meet Jodi at a Michigan Brain Injury conference where I was giving a presentation on TBI and PTSD and the effectiveness of individual and group psychotherapy in working with this population. I hope to collaborate with Leib in bringing drama therapy to patients with TBI and PTSD sustained from auto accidents. I prefer my term vehicular trauma syndrome which I have blogged about previously and will write more about in future blogs. In the meantime, here’s to integrating the arts with science!

About the Author

James F. Zender, Ph.D., is a clinical and forensic psychologist who specializes in auto accident trauma treatment and care.
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