



# LUKENOTES

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## **It Is Their Drama, Not Yours**

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Psychodrama is a powerful therapeutic tool that allows individuals to examine their behaviors as well as their underlying intentions. In a typical psychodrama session, a person (a protagonist) is chosen to tell his or her story to the group using action methods. As the story unfolds, the protagonist chooses group members (auxiliaries) to play the roles of the different characters in his/her story. Often what surfaces when the intended conversation becomes enacted is an unconscious duplication of long-standing interpersonal patterns. These long-standing patterns of the storyteller also influence the auxiliaries in the drama to draw from mannerisms that closely resemble the dynamics from the protagonist’s original story. Psychodrama helps us to recognize that these dynamics also play out in our everyday lives. We respond to others out of our unique backgrounds, establishing blueprints for interacting. We unconsciously select those persons who can fulfill the necessary responses to complete our earlier stories or scripts. Often neither the individual caught up in his or her old patterns nor those who become ‘supporting actors’ are aware of the script they are recreating. Recognizing and understanding old scripts can assist us to live more effectively in the present.

This dynamic of unconsciously recreating old scripts can be especially problematic for those serving in leadership or supervisory positions. Simply being in authority may unintentionally become a trigger for someone under their care. Past difficulties with parents or others in authority can lead an individual to slip into one of these long-standing relational patterns. For example, a person may have internalized this painful yet familiar message: “Once again you haven’t measured up to my expectations!” If this dynamic is unintentionally recreated with a superior, what might result? A superior might meet with this individual, wanting to offer constructive feedback, and suddenly become uncharacteristically abrasive or harsh. The superior has become the reluctant auxiliary, unknowingly helping to recreate a model that is familiar to the other person, but foreign to the leader. What was intended to be a resource (constructive feedback) has unwittingly become a part of the problem. It is possible that neither the individual nor the person in authority understands the dynamics that occurred.

Symptoms of getting caught in the other’s drama may include reacting in ways contrary to your normal interpersonal style or shifting from your intended goal for a meeting and taking directions that are on a tangent to your initial purpose. Further evidence can be experiencing strong emotions that don’t feel authentically yours. For example, when an individual is passive, but creating problems in an assignment, rectory or community by avoiding

obligations or responsibilities, you might find yourself attacking, rather than listening and being supportive. Here you unconsciously fulfill that individual's critical script at your own expense. You can help them to relinquish these old scripts by attending to their behavior and words.

In a psychodrama session, the small, sometimes insignificant shifts that auxiliaries make in the protagonist's internal script can challenge the person to jettison this worn-out model and become more engaged in the present. By holding individuals to their actions as well as their words, a psychodramatist helps them to recognize the consequences of their behavioral choices and their cognitive intentions. Often, a protagonist has been oblivious to the power of these internal blueprints until they are observed in action. Someone who says she wants to move on with her grieving, yet continues to engage in angry attacks, needs to align her unconscious behavior with her conscious emotional needs. If she does, she can make an intentional choice. She might discover that working through anger needs to precede her conscious goal of moving on. If others unwittingly engage and maintain her focus on this conflict without recognizing this pattern, her anger is perpetuated, rather than resolved.

Supervisors working with someone caught in a self-destructive script can help free the person by naming these dynamics. "Your behavior is telling me that you are unlikely to manage finances without supervision" presents a different message than reacting to subtle cues and then responding as the person's internalized critical father who says, "I can't trust you with money any more." An individual who is unhappy and passive-aggressively sabotaging an assignment can be better helped by challenging behavior, not his/her words. Saying "Your actions are telling me you want to leave this position" at least offers an opportunity for the individual to take ownership for his actions. "You're fired!" can let a person continue to be a victim, their characteristic blueprint for resolving conflicts.

Getting caught in another's drama can happen before we realize it. For those in a supervisory role, it is critical to have a peer with whom they can talk out when they feel pulled into behaving uncharacteristically or at odds with their own purpose. This is not an invitation for leaders or supervisors to engage in therapy with those under their care. However, when we free ourselves from responding to another's script, we can remain more aware of our own resources and goals. Avoiding these unintended roles increases the likelihood that we will address a situation with some creativity and fresh insights. There also can be positive, unexpected results when an individual realizes that a past pattern is not only infiltrating the present but also is no longer necessary or effective. This allows others to also view their resources from a fresh perspective.

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