

## The Drama of Everyday Life<sup>1</sup>

Karl E. Scheibe

Wesleyan University

*"Everyday is all there is."*

Joan Didion

It is useful and even liberating to take a dramatic perspective on the psychology of everyday life. We are accustomed to viewing psychology as an extension of biology, or as the study of the mechanics of behavior and, these days, as part of neuroscience, or even more abstractly, as amenable to the analyses of information technology. These perspectives on psychology are not wrong, but each has a limited range of convenience. This is true as well for the dramatic perspective on psychology. It is not the only true perspective, but it has a range of convenience that allows fresh and powerful understandings of the human condition.<sup>2</sup>

Drama is no more confined to the theater than education is to the classroom or religion to the sanctuary. Human beings seek dramatic enrichment in their lives and are generally averse to boredom. In drama we can easily see that things are often not what they appear to be. The actors come off the stage. When they do, they are transformed in appearance, in attitude, in their relationships with others and often in their moral qualities. Characters onstage undergo remarkable transformations. Viola, in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* is quickly transformed from lass to lad and does not regain her femininity until the last scene; after the performance she becomes an actress who portrays Viola/Cesario, but even then we can observe her identity to be provisional, subject to transformation, not fixed. Identities for all of us are fluid, not fixed, through rates of change are highly variable.<sup>3</sup> As Goffman has observed, "All the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn't are not easy to specify." Put more positively, there is advantage in becoming comfortable with the possibility of continual dramatic change, of accepting surface appearances as only provisional, of knowing that human life is layered and variegated, never revealing all that is secret, never speaking all that is true.

A consideration of two current social dramas—one small in scale, the other massive—will help to reveal the advantages of this perspective.

---

<sup>1</sup> Prepared for the conference on "Psychology and the Conduct of Everyday Life," conducted at Roskilde University, Department of Psychology and Educational Studies, Denmark, June 26-28, 2013

<sup>2</sup> See Scheibe (2000).

<sup>3</sup> See Scheibe (1995) for a full treatment of this proposition.

**The paradoxes of injury:** A middle-aged woman was discovered to have a ligament problem in her left leg that required surgery. Her doctor advised her that the rehabilitation from the operation would take as long as a year, during which period she would be required to wear a cumbersome boot. She was, in a word, devastated. Even so, she made the decision to go ahead with the operation. The operation was a success. As predicted, she was required to start using a boot, and was told that it might be required for an entire year. However, the consequences for her of having this continual inconvenience were not what she expected. Her husband, who had been rather distant and indifferent, became newly and enthusiastically attentive. He started making meals for her. He arranged for her transportation when she was unable to drive. He did the shopping and housekeeping—and he did this in good spirits. His attitude was shared by their two adult sons, who began to be more attentive to their mother—to visit her more often, often bringing her gifts and flowers. The dramatic loss by this woman of her capacity to act as usual resulted in major gain for her in the context of her family life. It is as if latent bonds of affection were newly awakened.

Daniel Kahneman (2011) has made a distinction between the experienced self and the remembered self. An empirical root of this distinction is the observation that individuals who go through painful episodes, with disabling consequences, commonly recover an entirely positive mood regarding their condition—forgetting the agony of what was experienced in favor of remembering the joy of recovery. Those of us who are able-bodied must marvel at the courage displayed by amputees and paraplegics. Pain and loss is endured. But this can result in a dramatic transformation for the person that is, paradoxically, positive. It is not as if the disabled do not know of their loss; but they learn to accept their loss and not to be tortured by it. In the dramatic sense, suffering a grievous loss can confer an advantage.

**A dramatic reconfiguration brought on by the Boston Marathon bombing.** On April 15, 2013, two homemade bombs were detonated on Boylston Street in Boston, near the finish line of the Boston Marathon, with over 5700 runners still on the course and where crowds of spectators stood. Three people were killed and 264 were injured. After two suspects were identified by means of photographs and surveillance videos, a massive manhunt was initiated—involving an estimated 9000 law enforcement officers. Several extensive exchanges of gunfire ensued, resulting in an additional death of a police officer, injuries to 16 other police officers as well as the death of one of the suspects and the injury of the other. A lockdown of Boston and some surrounding communities was put into effect on April 19, resulting in a paralysis of traffic and commerce. On the afternoon of that day, four days after the bombings, the injured suspect was found in hiding and was arrested.

The national and international reaction to these events was immediate and powerful. Sporting events were cancelled or postponed. President Obama addressed a national audience, promising aid to victims and a relentless investigation of the bombings. Aid funds were established for victims, and millions of dollars were quickly collected. A benefit concert with top entertainers was conducted in the next month, and much more money was raised for victims. Shows of support and solidarity with Boston poured in from around the world. The term Boston Strong was coined just after the event, celebrating the speed and effectiveness of that community in apprehending the suspects and of aiding the injured.

The essence of drama is transformation. Beginning with the explosions, a series of dramas unfolded. People came to the aid of victims. Lives were saved. A period of terror followed. Fearful uncertainty pervaded the local atmosphere and was shared by a worldwide audience of hundreds of millions of spectators. The perpetrators were found; one dead, the other severely wounded. And then celebrations—spontaneous, widespread, and joyful—the streets of Boston were filled with deliriously happy citizens. Follow-up stories continue to appear—of valor, of heroism, of the recovery by amputees and those severely injured by the blast—who show, just like the woman who had suffered a leg operation, a remarkably positive acceptance—one might say, a *noble* attitude—of self-possession, of fortitude, of appreciation for those who helped them. How many experiences were shared? How many conversations were animated by these events?

No means exists for calculating a final hedonic balance of the effects of the Boston Marathon bombings. But certainly for the media, the event was enormously profitable. For the morale of the Boston community, the consensus as well is strongly positive. Boston Strong will live on for decades. A few voices are heard grumbling about overreaction, about the lockdown being unnecessary, about the fusillades being a splaying out of fear and machismo. These voices are overwhelmed by the general attitude of celebration.

I cite this episode here merely as an example of the general principle that horrific events are often the seeds of multiple dramas of heroism, courage, and pride. These paradoxes are most readily intelligible from the perspective of drama. “Out of the mud grows the lotus.” Our attention is captured by such miracles.

But there is a danger in allowing our attention to be fixed on such extraordinary events. We are drawn to spectacle, to displays of violence and conflict, of horror and deliverance. Our

entertainment industries, knowing of this attraction, present countless episodes of crime, or romantic intrigue, of thrilling adventures. It is something of a shock to realize that our everyday life is not made up of such stuff. I have never witnessed a murder, a kidnapping, a train wreck, though vicariously I have seen thousands of such events. The times I have seen one person strike another person in anger during my adult life can be counted on one hand—and I live in a country of gangsters and cowboys. I am not unusual. But our newspapers, movies, and media in general—because they concentrate on the rare and the spectacular, create an altogether different image of what is ordinary in our lives.

Even so, I do claim that everyday life is a drama. But now we must examine more carefully how drama is part of our quotidian existence. In the remainder of this paper, I shall summarize the main features of the drama of everyday life.<sup>4</sup>

In virtue of the choices made by human players, time successively molds definition out of mere possibility—the arbitrary becomes essential. Our performances always take their significance out of the frames and boxes that provide their context, and it is sometimes hard to know that these figurative frames and boxes are not coextensive with the whole world, but are necessarily affordances of the theater of the moment. Drama implies not only an actor but at least two actors, or an actor and an audience, or a hypothetical other. The play necessarily involves cycles between and among these parties. Drama is not stasis but transformation—a change in form or quality resulting from the playing out of cycles of exchange.

A dance provides a clear example of all of this. A dance is a stylized set of gestures, a realized essence chosen with some degree of arbitrariness from myriad possibilities. The dance takes place in a particular place in a particular context, conditioning its meaning. Dances involve partners or audiences, or an all-seeing other, and involve cycles of reciprocation among the participants. Finally, the dance itself is a transformation—the ensemble creation of a new human pattern of expression and experience for the partners, who now are not just people, but dancers.

The drama of everyday life is taken seriously—or not, depending on the disposition of the actors to be loyal to their professed commitments and true to their promises, and, of course, depending on the way settings change. Genuine human caring is created out of the natural background of profound indifference by the connective properties of dramatic narrative. The motivational significance of drama is revealed by its capacity to relieve human beings from the boredom of sameness and repetition, even as boredom is never completely lost as a phase in the dramatic cycle.

---

<sup>4</sup> Much of what follows is taken from the *Reprise* section of *The drama of everyday life* (Scheibe, 2000, pp. 243-245).

We are material creatures, animal bodies—and as such we must be clothed and made up in order to be suitable for participation in the drama of everyday life. We are conditioned by millennia of scarcity to acquire goods and properties that will enrich and extend our dramatic ambit. But increases in human productivity and material efficiency have made it possible for substantial numbers of players to acquire more stuff than they need, with curious and paradoxical effects. Too much plenty can be debilitating, too much beauty palls. In the stock market, fear and greed operate in a way that is quite independent of actual need for wealth, producing a set of dramatic cycles of despair and euphoria—with fear taking bigger steps than greed as the dance proceeds, but with greed dependably reasserting itself. Our material and animal natures are also manifest in eating and in sex—but the real significance of these activities is in the dramatic extravagance built upon biological necessity.

Like many other primates, human beings are social and thrive within relationships. Dramatic encounters may last for minutes or for a lifetime, but all relationships are provisional on the scripts for the dance, recognized and legitimate or secret and illicit. The world of gambling is a social arena that is liminal—between the legitimacy of seeking gain and the sinful forcing of God's hand. The mental hospital is radically different social arena, wherein the enveloping force of schizophrenia as a constructed dramatic category created an institutional tyranny that is only now yielding its force. The classroom is another example of a social arena that conditions and controls the relationships among its inhabitants, often in a way that discourages the ostensible purpose of teaching and learning and produces only boredom. But the classroom, properly animated, is potentially a most lively venue for conducting dramatic exercises of intellectual and personal discovery for students and teachers alike.

The self has concerns other than bread and company—namely concerns about its own meaning and value. Human beings are given life and the capacity to reflect upon it. But reflections quickly produce recognition that the gifts of life are by no means equal but vastly disparate, raising serious questions about cosmic justice and injustice. By the exchanging of gifts human beings negotiate their credits and debits; and by exercising these dramatic cycles they establish and maintain their solidarities—with their fellows as well as with the cosmos. Human goodness is a fragile achievement and considerable pleasure can be had in dramatic reduction of the apparent goodness masking false piety—tearing it down. But keeping the faith through the extension of caring beyond the confines of the self, even though that caring can take the quite arbitrary form of religious commitment, represents genuine piety, a possibility that distinguishes our species from ants and rats. Finally, personal authenticity is hard to achieve in a world that is overfilled with imitation, replicas, and vast storehouses of scripts that have already been lived. Even so, an authentic drama of the moment is possible; even psychotherapy may bring about a living freshness for people who have grown dull and listless in the clutter and confusion of our modern arenas.

Theater can be deadly—utterly boring. The British dramatist, Peter Brook, has a typology of theater—dead, holy, rough, and immediate. He admits that much of contemporary professional theater is in the dead category and therefore is an institution in serious trouble.<sup>5</sup> But the challenge for our times is to find ways to revivify the drama of our everyday lives—to seek drama that is holy or rough or immediate—to honor what the psychodramatist Jacob Moreno honored—spontaneity.<sup>6</sup> As Prospero observed in *Twelfth Night*, “We are such stuff as dreams are made on.” Our better dreams are made not in sleep but on our waking lives.

## References

Brook, P. (1968). *The empty space*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

Kanheman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

Fox, J. (1987). *The essential Moreno*. New York: Springer.

Scheibe, K.E. (1995). *Self studies: The psychology of self and identity*. New York: Praeger.

Scheibe, K.E. (2000). *The drama of everyday life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

---

<sup>5</sup> See Brook (1996).

<sup>6</sup> See Fox (1987).

