Agnes Bouwen,

Safety First

As a bibliodrama leader one of my duties is to do everything in my power to create a safe environment, a safe group and a safe planning of my workshop. This way the participants can open their mind, heart and spirit for the Word and Action that make bibliodrama “successful”. Perhaps the best way to illustrate this is an example of the opposite.

It is about five years ago, I leaded a bibliodrama session that is still fresh in my memories as it felt like a complete disaster.

I wanted to introduce a group of about ten participants to bibliodrama. It was only one evening in a series of five with creative methods in spirituality for starting religion teachers. The setting was ideal: engaged people, a small group, two whole hours… What on earth could go wrong?

As a bibliodrama addict I really wanted to immerse them into a real bibliodrama experience. I knew some of them didn’t feel very comfortable about participating. But I was sure I could convince them. I would seduce them into a way of discovering the Bible that I loved so much… However I lost track of some quite important parameters . The students had some questions about the previous gathering. They wanted to share some experiences before starting. And the time was running…

Finally we could read the text of Luke: the archangel Gabriel bringing the message to Mary. We exchanged our questions and reflections, and then I introduced an open chair and asked the participants to use scarfs and their imagination to put the archangel on the chair. Even telling it now, you might feel that I was hurrying. We ran short of time.They looked at me as if I was some kind of “medium” calling “a spirit” into our circle. It was so awkward and it went completely wrong. I failed to prepare the group, to introduce the method properly, to explain simply and clearly what bibliodrama is about. I focused too much on myself instead of guiding the group.

All of us ended the session in frustration. I was very unhappy as I failed to practice what I was preaching in this perfect setting. They were disappointed and even a bit angry, because I didn’t see them as the beginners they were. I really violated the rules. I was an example of a bad example. I desperately wanted to “delete” this malpractice and start all over again. But unfortunately life is no computer where you can simply “select and delete”. You always have to keep going. Until this day I hope these people will try to experience bibliodrama again someday as it is a treasure I really would like to pass on.

As a leader in a successful bibliodrama session I hope to facilitate immersing a connection between the message of the text and the life of the participants. When a word, a sentence, an action resonates during the following days or weeks or even during the further life of the player then bibliodrama has done the job!

Let me now tell something about a second experience I had, this time working with a group in the prison where I work as a voluntary spiritual caretaker. “Safety” is one of the keywords in a place like this and of course, talking about bibliodrama, not in the first place the physical aspect of it. People living there are very cautious in sharing their real feelings. Showing vulnerability is not recommended. Organizing a bibliodrama workshop is therefore quite a challenge.

That day there were eight participants of different ages, some of them in the insecure situation of being recently arrested, others counting the months or the years of their conviction. Most of them were participating in a bibliodrama session for the very first time. Explaining the rules and giving the instructions as clearly as possible was therefore very necessary.

The theme of the gathering was “ Hearing the Word of God”. We worked in the chapel, a quiet and peaceful place in the noisy setting they usually live in. We started by introducing ourselves briefly by telling what image of God was important in that very moment, using a simple symbol. A little candle, a stone, a feather, a letter, a white piece of paper … expressed which face of God they looked for or experienced. The group was very open, full of attention and supportive to each other. This prepared the safe environment for the rest of the program. After that, they could choose what they wanted to hear from God. They could find some inspiration in about twenty words of God taken from the Bible spread around in the chapel. They were given the time to feel what they personally needed to hear from God. One after the other they were invited to ask someone from the group to take the role of God. They were the director of their little play and could give instructions to the one playing the role of God. Or they could speak the Word to themselves as God. Although the instructions were given clearly, the participants felt free to do it the way they wanted. For some of them it became a very intense experience.

We ended with a new symbol of how everyone experienced God, which face of God he met. For his turn, one of them took a little candle and lit it with his lighter. He gave it to one man in the group who was very emotional, with the words “ I give you a little light to help you to never give up.” Another man told me a few years later that that moment had changed his life. When things get hard, he still hears the voice of God calling his name and he gets the feeling that there is Someone who grabs him by his shoulders and pulls him out of the mud.

I consider this as a successful bibliodrama. There was the connection between the text and the life of the participants, between the members of the group and the experience resonated in their further life. Although I did not have the idea that I used specific methods to create safety in this exceptional group in this special situation, the “magic” happened. The participants felt safe enough to go in the process. What made the atmosphere “safe”? Certainly the clear instructions were important. Of course explaining the rules was necessary. But considering the freedom the participants felt in handling the instructions and the rules, it showed that those were not the most important. I now presume that” acceptance “ was the keyword. It was very important that I as a leader accepted them as a person. I gave them responsibility and showed them my confidence. I accepted with an open mind their special way of handling the instructions. All this created the opportunity and the challenge also for them to accept what happened with themselves and the group. The respect they felt, was multiplied because they felt “safe”. And I gave all the time necessary and let things happen. I didn’t try to force anything. Perhaps this is the biggest difference. It was not about my project, not about my plan. Together we created the open space and the atmosphere of acceptance. That made it safe to let the Word happen.

*“I still see myself as Joseph, released from prison and pushed at the feet of Pharaoh. He is full of power and demands me to kiss his ring to recognize him in his position as son of the gods… I did not want to see him as “god”. At that moment I found out that sometimes it is better not to discuss, but to just look for another way. I heard myself saying: “I am not worth doing this, My Lord, I am a foreigner.” In my heart, however, it was an act of resistance. He accepts it and when he asks me to explain his dreams, I manage to make him come down from his throne to really see the people he needs to take care for. “*

*I made contact with a great strength in me which is brave, gentle and connecting instead of dividing. After months it still feeds me and reminds me of a way of living that really is part of me, but that I have forgotten… It opens new perspectives. ( can be left out, if necessary)*

For me as a participant and as a leader a bibliodrama session is successful when it challenges people to discover more about the text and the connection with their life, with society, with God, the Mystery... It is successful when it helps people to practice what they believe in and to confront it with the people they meet trough the play. But to get to this result there has to be “safety” first.

Agnes Bouwen

Kerkstraat 85

2370 Arendonk

Belgium

agnesbouwen@telenet.be

Bibliodrama leader and trainer for 10 years in Bibliodrama Tussen Hemel en Aarde and Hof Zevenbergen Ranst

Since August 2015 she works freelance together with Anne Coussement and Tineke Boekenstijn in an new organization Het Leerke, also organizing the European bibliodrama Conference 2017 , <http://www.hetleerke.com/bibliodrama-conference.html>

She was a religion teacher for 30 years in the high school Sint-Claracollege of Arendonk.

She works also as RK chaplain in the prison of Turnhout and Hoogstraten. She leads retreats for school groups and uses bibliodrama in personal and group processes.

