

Doing the Dance

Jim Ellis, received his Masters of Social Work from the University of Iowa. Currently at Children's Hospital of Wisconsin, Jim functions as the social worker for kids and their families who have chronic illness. He is also an internal consultant to special programs to include the Clown Program and the Animal Assisted Therapy Program. He has worked with children and families for 32 years both in hospitals and in private practice. Dedicated to sharing his work, he is also an experienced presenter of workshops and seminars.

His clown character Kudos was born at Children's Hospital approximately 8 years ago and makes appearances at fund raising events. Kudos is a juggler, jester and pied piper of sorts for children large and small. Kudos is most often disguised as Jim as he does his work of encouraging the hearts and spirits of the children to laugh, play and soar." Kudos/Jim is a devoted student of "The Dance".

He is known as the "eyeball guy," this nick name being derived from his juggling of glow in the dark eyeballs. More than a hundred sets of these have been given out in the last 18 months to his successful students of the art of juggling. "The eyeballs are an invitation which, if accepted, opens the door to an adventure for the child and me which makes their visit to the hospital easier."

As part of the extended education program of Clowns for Children's, Jim Ellis gave a workshop. Korey sent me the tape and I am passing the information on to you. I will be ever

Jim walks by the room of a frightened hospitalized child. He bounces a ball outside the room making occasional eye contact with the child. He exaggerates his response and turns away – sort of peek-a-boo with the body. He drops a ball and then finds it, still outside the room, thus enticing the child's curiosity. When the time feels right, he bounces the ball into the room. But Jim can't quite catch the ball and keeps dropping it. The game goes on until Jim is in the room and interacting with the child. In doing *the dance*, the play becomes communication between Jim and the child. *The Dance* is the spontaneous work of all parties of the play that is happening in the present moment.

Jim first formulated his theories on "*the dance*" while reading [The Man Who Listens to Horses](#) by Monty Roberts. "The book is about training horses, but it got me thinking about my work with kids. (The movie "The Horse Whisperer" was based on this book.) The traditional way of breaking a horse is to break the horse's spirit. Monty thought there must be a better way. He went out and watched horses in the wild to figure out how to talk to horses. To get horses to join with him – he would do a routine with body language. He actually turns his back to ask the horse to join him. The horse has taken a great risk and now has trust in him. He proceeds, slowly, to honor that trust. He knows that he must never do anything to harm the horse – to honor that trust he must never betray that trust. So all this got me thinking about working with children. By going to the level of the child and engaging the child in their body language -- their play, you create an abstract which is like a *dance* – a spontaneous *dance*."

"When we are in a playful state, this *dance* is the joining of hearts which is an experience greater than each of us individually. When you are asking someone to join with you, you are making a heart connection. With a heart connection you are making something larger than the two of you individually. That is life enhancing. This is what we live for -- this enhancing of the heart."

Clowns have a unique opportunity here to make these heart connections, an opportunity that a civilian doesn't have. Clowns don't have to use words -- that is one of the beauties of being a clown. They can work without words. Most of the communication in *the dance* takes place nonverbally. *The dance* becomes a process of moving in and moving out - of eye contact and no eye contact. Clowns also exaggerate reality. By exaggerating the child's response, the clown way, it is done in play. If she is shy, you are even more shy. If she is frightened, you are frightened or your puppet is frightened of the child. This becomes play. Anything that is done in play is absorbed kinetically into the learning process. And fun is always an open route to the heart.

However, there is a flip side. Sometimes children and parents are afraid of clowns (of that exaggerated reality). Jim explained that he too was afraid of clowns until he worked one summer with the circus feeding elephants. It was a hobo type of clown (and could have been Emmett Kelly as he was clowning at the time) that changed his experience of clowns. "I was ten at the time, but as I look back on the incident now, the clown did a *dance* with me. He picked up that I was frightened and found a way to play with me and the elephants that turned that fear around into curiosity and then into play and fun."

Jim spoke of the theory of therapeutic hypnosis by Milton Erickson -- "Pacing and Leading" that is helpful to be aware of in *the dance*. *Pacing* is a method used by communicators to quickly establish rapport by matching certain aspects of their behavior to those of the person with whom they are communicating - a matching or mirroring of behavior. *Leading* is changing your own behaviors with enough rapport for the other person to follow. Pacing and leading is a part of Neuro-Linguistic Programming Theory.

For our purposes: You follow the child's lead, pace them and then let them take the lead. The example Jim gave: "If I am helping to train someone in track, what do I do? I join them on the track, I pace with them, and then I step it up a little. When the other person takes the lead, I know I've made the connection. It is a joining, a trusting. You let the child set the pace, and you know that you have made a connection when you step back and they take the lead. It requires that you slow down and watch *the dance*."

When you imitate a child's behavior, it means going to where they are. You can then lead them to where you are. Another example. If a child is breathing fast, you can match their breath and then slow down the breath and calm them down until you are matching their breath again.

This type of play is spontaneous. You know it is there when people begin to initiate something new and/or take the lead. By being in a spontaneous state, as in improvisation, a clown is in heightened awareness. It allows you to be aware of *the dance*."

The Theory of Spontaneity by J.L. Moreno of “psychodrama fame” expounds, “An individual . . . is involved and engaged in what he or she is doing at the moment; the individual is not detached or observing his or her behaviors or interactions. The thoughts, feelings, and actions are directly related to what is taking place at the moment . . . An individual in a spontaneity state emits a flow of energy commensurate with what the situation calls for.” The energy put forth becomes appropriate and often with profound results. Spontaneity is the energy of *the dance*.

With this spontaneity there are infinity possibilities in what can make the connection to do *the dance*. Someone in the workshop gave this example. “Knocking at an 11- year old’s door who was watching TV, I said ‘May I come in?’ The boy barely nodded, so I said ‘Oh, you must be really interested in what you are watching.’ He got into explaining what it was and then I said ‘I have something interesting for you.’ So I made an origami frog. He would watch me and then the TV, but when I made the frog jump he got really intrigued. By the time I left the room he and the father were playing jump frog together and not paying any attention to the TV.” She didn’t ask the boy if he wanted to do something, she went in and showed him something and then invited the boy and the parents to play.

One of the challenges in learning to *Do the Dance* is be aware of what is going on around you. You have an audience. Everyone is in your audience: staff, parents, other children, siblings. Learn how to be engaged but also be aware of what is happening around you. Broaden your awareness and play to include those around you -- especially parents. It is so important for a parent to get out of parenting and to join in the play. When a parent comes to the hospital with a sick child, often the stress is thinking “I’ve failed as a parent. I didn’t protect my child from all harm.” There is a feeling of helplessness. And there are also all these medical giants walking around. They too need some play, some heart to heart connection. That is why it is important to watch *the dance* - to watch what is happening and then be able to control its direction to include others or change the pace.

Another workshop participant gave this example. “One little boy was having a bad day. The nurse said I should go in. I peeked in and when the little boy saw me he got scared. So someone picked him up and started coming toward me and he started to cry. I turned my body sideways to break eye contact. I had my bubbles out and so I started to blow bubbles. He immediately stopped crying. The family member carrying him sat down on the floor and she started to pop the bubbles. Then the kid started to pop them in the most wonderful different inventive ways -- stomping on them and popping them in the cutest different way. We were in the Play Room all sitting on the floor playing together. Later when I passed by him he gave me the biggest smile.”

Jim commented: “In the bubble story the child took the lead and did for himself what he needed. He was acting out some of his frustration by being aggressive with the bubbles. The family got involved also. This also points out the physical factor. For a child with all the medical ‘giants’ walking around, getting down to their size helps and sitting on the floor is always an invitation to play for a child.” [In the hospital setting use newspaper or blue surgical disposable “blankets” on the floor for infection control].

“In *Doing the Dance*, the focus is not on what am I doing, but what is happening. That is movement out of self. Out of our self and into the experience. In *the dance* when people are spontaneous they are ready for change, for the opportunity to move forward and the possibility of a new way to deal with whatever their problem is.

They are focused on what is happening, not on themselves, but on the present moment.”

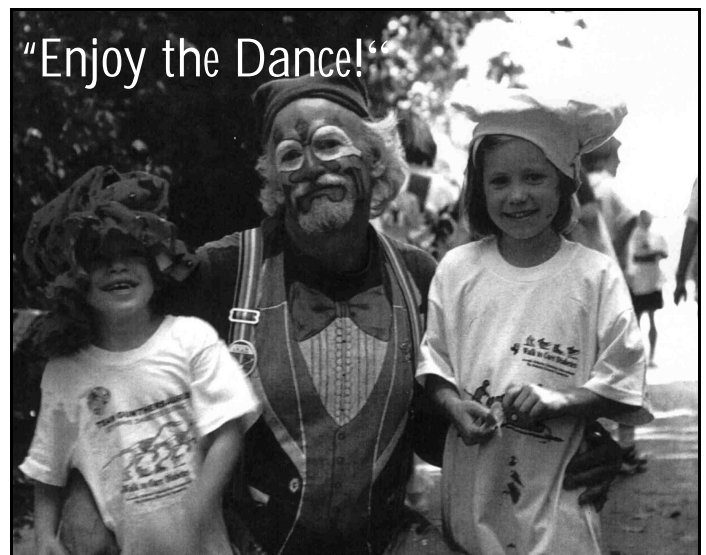
With a young child a lot of sense of self is with the body. For example, they just learned to go to the bathroom for themselves and here they are having to push a button if they want to go to the bathroom. Then the nurse takes 10 minutes to get there and it is too late, so they put the child back into diapers. At that age they are trying to get control of their own independence. So here is this 3-year-old who just learned to go the bathroom by himself and now he is back in diapers.

A lot of sense of self is hooked up to “How I look.” Being hospitalized they have been stripped of everything familiar, including their clothes. They are in a strange place often hooked up to strange machines. They may have bandages on or even someone else’s body part in them in the case of a transplant. All this is an assault on the sense of self.

There is also a disruption of parental roles. Parents are an emotional safety net. It’s true at any age. Even an adult at 30 who loses a parent feels like an orphan. In the hospital there is a disruption with their connection with the parent and the child’s sense of security is under assault. They have been told all their growing life ‘Don’t talk to strangers.’ In the hospital her/his parents are telling the child to trust the stranger. The child is surrounded by strangers asking questions and getting familiar with procedures. The child is helpless by being immobilized in bed, and can’t get up and run away from these strangers.

The child has lost all the routines - the lessons of his upbringing. His rituals are disrupted. Clowns have an opportunity to provide them with some predictability. You come at a certain time which they can trust. You can develop a ritual of play. The play and *the dance* can be repeated and becomes a familiar game. Sometimes you lead, but the empowerment comes when the child learns to take the lead and leads the clown. So you can see why this empowering of the child who dealing with the extreme loss of control is so important.

In an email Jim write: “Clowning energizes my heart. Working with Korey, the Clown Program and with you has provided me a forum to give voice to the heart of my work with kids. The longer I practice, the more clear I am that *the dance* is not only the essence of my work, it is the work. The participants are empowered to heal themselves and to achieve increased awareness and connection to themselves and the world around them.



Jim Ellis “Kudos” at a benefit in Milwaukee, Wisconsin