

The Magic Circle

By Camilla Gryski



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Joanne, a young teen who is waiting for a bone marrow transplant, weeps when, for the second time, Posy the clown is interrupted as she paints an elaborate pattern of flowers, vines and hearts on her arm. "But we aren't finished," Joanne protests. Mom, the ECG technician, and Posy all rearrange themselves around the bed to accommodate both the ECG and the completion of the floral design.

For Joanne, the second interruption was more than she could bear. But what exactly was being interrupted? The intensity of Joanne's reaction makes us suspect that it was more than just a favorite activity with a clown who had become a playmate and friend over a period of months.

The child in the hospital, particularly one with a life-threatening illness, must adapt to a reality that is no longer normal. Separation from family and friends can give rise to feelings of isolation and abandonment. The child feels a loss of control and a shaken sense of self-identity. Pain and fear are a part of everyday life. Nothing can be taken for granted. As psychologist Barbara Sourkes says in her book *Armfuls of Time: The Psychological Experience of the Child with a Life-Threatening Illness*, "the unknown lies ahead like an uncharted chasm, without boundaries or guides." She later continues, "In a sea of uncertainty, the child's ongoing quest is to find a 'safe place' within the storm."

A safe place within the storm. Play theorists agree that play happens in a place and a time apart. It is a "framed event" that takes place in a temporary world created within but surrounded by everyday reality.

Johan Huizinga, author of *Homo Ludens*, calls this space "the magic circle."

Stephen Nachmanovitch, in *Free Play* talks about play space: "In ancient Greek thought, the *temenos* is a magic circle, a delimited sacred space within which special rules apply and in which extraordinary events are free to occur." He speaks of the potential for rich and subtle play in a confined, marked-out space.

Anthropologist Victor Turner has called play liminal or liminoid, something that happens in a threshold place between one reality, one moment, one place and another. Liminal spaces, he says, can give rise to insecurity as chaos seems to break into order, or can offer great opportunities for creativity.

It is interesting that the child who seeks refuge in the creation of a play world is already inhabiting, both physically and metaphorically, a liminal or transitional space. Barbara Sourkes characterizes the experience of the child dealing with serious illness as "living between the light of hope and the shadow of threat." Like the initiate undergoing a Rite of Passage, the hospitalized child is set apart from society, set apart from life before illness, enduring treatment, hoping for a return to health and normalcy. And it is not only the child's space that has become circumscribed. With no clear promise of future time, Sourkes says, "the particular intensity of the life-threatened child reflects his or her existence, dramatically compressed into the present."

Those of us who bring the possibility of play to hospitalized children enter as playmates and companions into their play worlds: worlds inside of worlds, time within time. Surrounded by play's magic circle we are enfolded, safe in a space rich with possibility. A flashlight "ghost" dances on the ceiling of a darkened room; stalactites of magnetic marbles transform the underside of the bed table into a cave world; an entire family is transformed into clowns.

The boundaries of these play spaces are usually fluid and generous, but newcomers may cross the threshold by invitation only. Perhaps for Joanne, the appearance of the ECG technician represented an unwelcome intrusion of the reality outside our play world of flowers and hearts. Safe space was shattered, connection broken, the circle breached. Only when the validity of our play was acknowledged, and the circle widened to encompass the person and the paraphernalia of the ECG was calm restored.

For those of us who are invited and choose to cross the threshold into a child's play place, a gentle caution though. As Turner points out, liminal spaces are particularly conducive to what he calls *communitas*, "the direct, immediate and total confrontation of human identities." Others may call this meeting transcendence, or the giving and receiving of spirit. It is a grace, a rare and unlooked-for gift. But in return we must offer our full presence, our caring and our own vulnerability. Within the magic circle there is no place to hide.

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