

Creating the Play Space

by Camilla Gryski of Toronto, Canada.

Camilla is a regular contributor to this newsletter, but for those of you who are new to the Newsletter, Camilla has worked as *Posy*, the clown for the Haematology/Oncology program at Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children, since 1995. She is also a graduate student in Holistic and Aesthetic Education.

Play has been called "an otherness." It is a "framed event" that happens in its own space and time. Play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith suggests that everyone knows about this otherness of play, understanding that "play involves transition from one realm of being to another realm of being."

It seems to me that the role of the hospital clown is to help create for the child and the family this "otherness" - this place of play and delight within the larger physical place of the hospital. Within this other space everything is possible from pure silliness to flights of the imagination that can take the players anywhere.

How then do we as clowns best work towards the creation of this much-needed play space? What understandings and qualities must we bring to the play?

Recently I was reading a book about Doors. The author pointed out that "whenever we pass through a doorway, we encounter and most likely become involved in what lies beyond." As clowns working in health care settings we constantly go through doorways into the lives of families coping with diagnosis and treatment. Again and again, we cross that most powerful and protected place, the threshold. We must always be aware that we are entering a space that is not our own, that permission is required which once given must be received with gratitude.

Of course, one can play with a child without ever crossing the threshold into the room. If the child seems tentative, clown play can float into the room along with the bubbles. My clown Posy also has a repertoire of silly walks and waves for play across the doorway space.

The presence of a clown charges a space with potential. Who knows what may happen? I remember a summer workshop I took with Avner Eisenberg, the clown Avner the Eccentric. He impressed on us the necessity of taking time to breathe. We practised entering our "performance space", finding a comfortable place and settling in with a breath. That breath in the context of the hospital room happens after I have washed my hands and am ready to play. The breath says "Here I am; here you are; here we are together." The pause gives time: time for the child and family to absorb my



presence and time for me to become aware of the physical and emotional environment of the room. The famous Swiss clown Grock said that he became "as sensitive as a mimosa plant." I centre myself, focus and "listen" on all levels. I believe that my focus also focuses the attention of the child. That shared moment of attentiveness and expectation builds connection and connection helps to create the play space.

There is no need to hurry. Hospital time, like play time, flows at a different pace, so we can slow down and then slow down some more. Charlene Belitz and Meg Lundstrom in their book The Power of Flow use a phrase which encapsulates for me this

moment just before the play begins: "Hold open the space in which potentiality exists," they say. "Like a dancer poised in the still moment at the start of a movement, we can go in any direction the music suggests." Holding open the space instead of rushing in with pre-conceived play activities or clown shtick allows the play to develop naturally with input from both players - another important aspect of creating play space together.

I am always fascinated by the way play flows from one activity to another. Sometimes it proceeds along

well-travelled paths - a phenomenon I have called The Play Conversation. This ritual aspect of play - which still allows for variation - is comforting for children and enhances their sense of control in an environment where much is unfamiliar and unexpected. At other times we seem to play at everything and nothing, exploring the contents of Posy's yellow and red boxes, idly looking for relationships between the toys, looking at the spinning tops with the small kaleidoscope or popping bubbles with the large mouths of our eyeball-puppet hands. The players are in the moment, following "the thread of the moment", as Arina Isaacson would say.

Staying in the moment means allowing the play to assume its own full and satisfying shape. A clown's fragmented attention - letting the mind drift away from the play - can easily translate into loss of connection and the abrupt shattering of a play space already made fragile by the situations and the environment in which it exists. The bubble of safe space which surrounds the players can all too easily burst. It requires skill, patience and flexibility to balance the play needs of the child with the requirements of the hospital environment. It goes without saying that the clown must be responsive and sensitive to the needs of the other members of the health care team.

The clown's ability to be flexible and adaptable allows for the creation of play spaces that take into account the child's changing or worsening health. I remember a gentle and lovely playtime in a darkened room with a child who was very ill. His mother sat on the bed beside him holding in her hand above our heads a pink light. In its rosy glow, we played with Posy's little balancing bird and her changing filigree orb. By its light, I painted designs on the hands of both the child and his mother. The light illuminated and defined the play space in the surrounding darkness.

I often think as I grow in experience and knowledge as a therapeutic clown that it matters less what I do than who I am, that the small toys and activities I carry with me are less important than the spirit in which they are offered. The bubbles I blow carry into the play space the wonder or silliness with which I invest them. So I return to my touchstones: Ask permission. Remember to breathe. Centre, focus, listen. Slow down. Hold open the space. Stay present. Follow the thread of the moment. Be flexible.

And I return often to the words of Frank Ostaseski in his article "Exploring Our Intention in Service," printed in the Hospital Clown Newsletter:

When the heart is open and the mind is still, when our attention is fully in this moment, then the world becomes undivided for us, and we know what to do.

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"The most precious gift we can give others is our presence. When our mindfulness embraces those we love, they will bloom like flowers."

Thich Nhat Hanh, Living Buddha, Living Christ. p. 20

"Whatever expertise we have acquired, the greatest gift we bring to others is our wholeness. Listening is perhaps the oldest and most powerful tool of healing."

Rachel Naomi Remen. Kitchen Table Wisdom, p. 220.

