

Probing Play:  
A Narrative Inquiry

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B.A., University of Guelph, 1987  
B.Ed., Acadia University, 1993

Thesis  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Education (Counselling)

Acadia University  
Fall Convocation, 2001



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0-612-62355-6

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**Table of Contents**

**Approval of Thesis ..... ii**

**Library Permission ..... iii**

**Abstract..... v**

**Acknowledgements ..... vi**

**An Invitation to Play..... 1**

**Sense in the Making..... 11**

**Creating from a Base ..... 22**

**Influences on the Making..... 31**

**A Way to Sew Connections ..... 41**

**The Spirit of Playmates ..... 46**

**The Quest..... 60**

**The Taming..... 70**

**Play’s Magic Circle ..... 79**

**References ..... 95**

**Appendix I: Fairy Folk Consent Form ..... 97**

**Appendix 2: The Giant’s Gang Consent Form ..... 98**

## Abstract

This is an examination of how hope, understood as a consciousness of possibilities for personal growth, is accessed through play. Using a narrative research framework, I document and discuss some of my life experience of play in order to better understand the optimal conditions for accessing hope within contexts of play, including how, as a play therapist, I can best prepare myself to help children become conscious of their own possible ways of being.

After explaining the practical and conceptual bases of this thesis, I present my field texts and develop the thesis' positive themes. Accessing hope requires that play is a place where children may sample possible alternative realities. Especially in play, children are very competent teachers who, when they have the opportunity, capably direct others to the possibilities that they themselves want and/or need to sample. Helping children to access hope thus involves providing this opportunity where it is absent. To do so, I prepare myself by becoming a good playmate; that is, someone who communicates acceptance and security to the other and who engages her spirit of play to meet the other on common ground. Optimally, a playmate exhibits certain qualities: an openness to connection; a non-judgmental approach; a non-defensive posture; and a willingness to be vulnerable within the safe, trusting relationship. When the strength of their vulnerability permits playmates to meet each other on common ground, the opportunity for accessing hope is realized.

## Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank my partner, Jason, for his continual supportive manner, moving gently with my many moods during this process, taking on extra responsibilities to free up time for me, and for his relaxing, grounding touches and always believing I would see my way through this process.

To my family, friends and wonderful community, who have supported my work since the beginning, who freely share their wisdom, and who have offered help at every turn. To all of you, your love and support provide meaning to my life.

I am deeply indebted to two of my friends in particular, Jill Gatfield and Carole Ewert. The more than considerable amount of time they offered in conversation was invaluable. Jill and Carole laid down stones in my muddy waters, preventing my sinking so I could continue on. Jill and Carole were instrumental in alleviating my fears, reminding me that this was the right making for me and continually provided a light in my moments of darkness. Thank you for your faith and guidance.

My supervisor, Miriam Cooley proved to be an apt look out to prevent any possibility of my getting caught in any death rolls as she encouraged me to swim on through the waters of this process. Thank you, Miriam, for your thoughtful, knowledgeable and caring contributions.

On a paper I submitted to Terry Lane five years ago, he commented – never apologize for telling a story. These words are among the most valuable comments I have received. To have received them in an academic context was truly a gift. Thank you, Terry. Your presence on my committee provided me with a source of confidence.

Most importantly, I would like to share my gratitude to all the children, past and present, who have given me the privilege and have entrusted me to play and be with them. It is my commitment to continue to strive to see through the eyes of such experts – children, and to learn through the many lessons they afford, as I continue to hope for a landscape of love for all. Thank you for all the magical moments.

## An Invitation to Play

### *A Doll's Tale*

I have a story to tell. Come sit, listen; play with the images as they skip through your thoughts as you entertain my story. I know things from my making, and I'd like to explore and share them with you. Journey with me as I am informed by the magic of my experience. Threads of wisdom, constructed from the ordinary, lean towards a way. My story takes place within the landscape of play. My Doll's intuition, if you will, transports me. I am an adventurer, and I will follow my tracks, the imprints that inform on a direction and a way to my intention as a playmate.

My thesis is an examination of play. The phenomenon that I explore is my lived experience of play, on a whole and specifically, in so far as I am a student of children. I believe play is a way to access what I call "hope." I believe there is an experiential quality given in and by the spirit of play or playing that allows players and playmates to become conscious of possibilities - possibilities for becoming, for growth. This consciousness, realized by players either reflectively or directly, is hope. Barnes (1996, p. 168) cites Russ's (1995) theoretical beliefs

that play helps children deal with fears and reduce anxiety and that *something* about play itself is important and *serves as a vehicle for change* (p. 382, emphasis mine).

My use of the term "hope" is meant to capture the *something* to which Russ refers. One of the questions that guides my work is: "Is hope at the heart of play?"

Russ's ideas also speak to the value of hope. As I understand it, the hope that is experienced in play does alleviate fears, reduce anxiety, present opportunities, and

facilitate change. Here, I refer to no less than the power of hope, not only to soothe but also, to create and transform subjectivities. Play fosters a safe place to be oneself and to move through transitions. Play is a place where inner dialogues of experience find imaginative expression. Play creates from wonder a space to awaken the consciousness of possibility. Again, this approaches my notion of hope at the heart of play. When we better understand the connection between hope and play, I believe that we will better understand how to witness and support our own and others' subjectivity in evolution.

This project is thus motivated by the idea that there is much to be gained, in terms of understanding ourselves and each other, from better understanding hope's inherent potential to positively affect our well-being, in general as well as the particular learning and therapeutic relationships that engage us. The challenge of taking responsibility to join with a child in a therapeutic relationship further drives me to immerse myself in the phenomenon of play - a child's natural medium of self expression (Axline, 1947). My set goal is that I may better understand accessing hope in general, and accessing it in learning and therapeutic settings in particular. My ultimate aim, which necessarily reaches through but beyond this current project, is that I may contribute ideas that lead to more children experiencing hope.

For the purposes of this work, there are three words in particular that are used throughout the work that can hold different meanings for different people. In order to understand this work, it is important to understand the working definitions I used for hope, spirit and play. My working definition of hope is being conscious of possibilities, forming a connection to the possible, and moving toward an integration and actualization of the possible.

My understanding of spirit is that it is fluid, that it is something within, yet permeates all around us. With this image, I believe there are potentially “no ordinary moments”, that there are many opportunities for connections between these permeating spirits that integrate and form a spirit beyond us. I must be both responsive and responsible for these moments. It begins as an inward motion and extends beyond me. There is a free flow of connection in which I am changed by what is around me and I have the power to affect what is beyond me.

My construction for the meaning of the word play developed, in part, by the words of a five-year-old in Fred Donaldson’s (1993) book. “Play is where we are not different.” My construction includes play as natural and not something instilled, and, thus, accessible to all. Play, for me, is a cooperation between the imagination and creativity. It is a willingness to suspend our beliefs and invite connections. For the purposes of this work, I did not attend to the kind of play that involves contest, winners and losers, rules and regulations, and prescribed outcomes. Rather, I looked to recognizing plays’ crude existence.

Some discussion about my methodology and its relation to the subject matter of my thesis is in order, since the two are intricately connected. My inquiry into hope being at the heart of play is philosophical, personal, and professional in its nature. I position myself within a narrative research framework, which enables a holistic understanding and acknowledges my sense that roles and relationships are not separable. Connelly and Clandinin (1988) suggest as they speak to the process of narrative inquiry, “the field is no longer being studied in a detached way. It is the field in relation to the researcher which is the object of study” (p. 5).



These researchers also aptly describe my own philosophical approach to life in general and to education when they claim that

(n)arrativists believe that human experience is basically storied experience: that humans live out stories and are story telling organisms. They further believe that one of the best ways to study human beings is to come to grips with the storied quality of human experience, to record stories of educational experience and to write still other interpretive stories of educational experience. Properly done these stories are close to experience because they directly represent human experience; and they are close to theory because they give accounts that are educationally meaningful for participants and readers. (1988, p.1)

They explain further:

We try to gain experience of our experience through constructing narratives of that experience. It is here that we deal with questions of who we are in the field and who we are in the texts we write on our experience of the field experience. What becomes apparent here is that many of the ways we come in touch with our own experience, come to know what we know of our experience, is through stories (1988, p. 11).

In fact, I do include stories. In this thesis, I explore my lived experiences of play, hosted in the stories of both past and present, that inform and give expression to my ongoing constructed knowledge and images of hope, play, and practice. By practice, I mean the ways I immerse with children in counselling relationships. However, for me practice also suggests a way of being - a discipline.

I follow Teresa De Lauretis's (1984) description of experience as a process in which subjectivity is constructed.

The process is continuous, its achievement unending or daily renewed. For each person, therefore, subjectivity is an ongoing construction, not a fixed point of departure or arrival from which one then interacts with the world. On the contrary, it is the effect of that interaction – which I call experience; and thus it is produced not by external ideas, values, or material causes, but by one's personal, subjective, engagement in the practices, discourses, and institutions that lend significance to the events of the world (p. 159).

There is no doubt that revisiting and recording of some my experiences of play in researching and writing this thesis contributed to the ongoing construction of my own subjectivity. Additionally, however, the value of using a narrative approach lies largely in the fact that I have become better equipped to share my stories with others, who may be sparked to share their experience.

What justification is there for this type of inquiry for the reader and for academic study? How is it relevant? Connelly and Clandinin (1988) comment that our stories can have a powerful impact on others. Van Manen (1990) says, "We gather other people's experiences because they allow us to become more experienced ourselves" (p. 62). I trust that I have a voice in the dialogues immersed in the spirit of play that can inform and, perhaps, even inspire.

James A. Munchmore (1999) discusses the critiques of narrative research approaches. He outlines criticisms directed at the reliability, validity and generalizability of research findings. He notes that, while adherence to the positivistic approaches to research appears to shelter the results from such criticisms, all research is vulnerable to the possibility of fabrication of data. Furthermore, the scientific method, while claiming to ensure objectivity and remove experimenter bias, can, in fact, become a screen that prevents acknowledgment of the biases that may be present in the research and that can, therefore, affect the research outcomes. The criticism "that researchers cannot make generalizations from an in-depth study of one teacher – is based on a limited notion of generalizability. Firestone (1993) identifies three broad arguments for generalizing from data – sample-to-population extrapolation, analytical generalization, and case-to-case transfer" (p. 22). Munchmore identifies that while positivistic approaches aim for the first

of these arguments, interpretive research approaches, including narrative inquiry, are best understood for their generalization of research findings in the latter two ways.

When choosing an area of interest for a research project, all researchers must decide whether they wish to explore the breadth or the depth of experience. Approaches consistent with the scientific method will generally look to the breadth of experience of the phenomenon, while qualitative approaches focus on the depth of experience. Any of these approaches has the possibility of enriching our understanding of the phenomenon to be studied.

It may be clear already that I am not interested in informing readers of any universal truths. An important part of my intention is to speak to my truth. I am committed to a subjective conception of truth. I do not claim a definite account of hope's connection to the spirit of play. Rather, my interest is the construction of my truth, at this time, found in dialogues of experience. I invite the reader to entertain how this research story might speak to his/her truth. In the words of Maxine Greene (1995), "I hope to stimulate a kind of silent conversation that may move readers to discover what they have to say once they attend to their own situations, to the activities of their lives" (p. 2).

I have said that it is Russ's *something* about play that I want to better understand, and that "hope" is the term that comes forward from the language of my experience. My hunch is that this *something* may have many names all of similar experiential meaning, depending on the teller's perspective.

To be sure, one of the main reasons that I am drawn to the integrity of narrative as a methodology is because it honours a truth recovered in the dialogues of experience. The dialogues that I present as a substantive part of this thesis are essentially dialogues with

my self, as I am both researcher and participant. In writing this thesis, I try to build, as Clandinin and Connelly (1988) suggest, "links between experiential inquiry and life experience more generally" (p. 3). My experience shall no doubt overlap and intertwine with that of other subjectivities, but our stories will differ in content and, often, in meaning.

Further motivation to use experiential analysis and narrative framework comes to me from a recognition of the sometimes elusive character of "matters of consequence", and the fact that there are, at least potentially, "no ordinary moments" when it comes to relevance and meaning. Relevance and meaning are open-ended as well as subjective; they rely on contexts and often defy predictability. A "matter of consequence," such as the request of De Saint-Exupery's (1943) Little Prince for a drawing of a sheep, is only understood as such when the stories, present and past, are combined in the retelling – stories leap-frogging through time, springboards from which to dive. As the telling unfolds, the reader comes to a deeper understanding of matters of consequence, as well as a better understanding of the meaning folded into the relevant moment, such as the Little Prince's request in the example just mentioned. The Prince's action, the request, at first seems silly, but comes to be understood as, indeed, a matter of consequence, when the reader engages his dialogues of experience, and the construction of his subjectivity within the context of the whole story. As with the story of the Little Prince, the meaning of any individual's personal experience is understood more deeply within the context of the person's whole story.

Narrative is also uniquely suitable for studying my particular subject matter, hope at the heart of play. Play and hope are knowable as experiences, as modes of being or

consciousness. I believe they can only truly be accessed experientially. Donaldson (1993) supports this idea, when he claims that "(w)e have become so far removed from the play in ourselves that we can hardly honour it in others" (p. 60). My vision is to honour the play of others, to acknowledge and respect the spirit of play that is partly responsible for creating and transforming their subjectivities. Through narrative study, I believe that I honour the spirit of play in my experience and deepen my understanding of play and hope, as well as what I call my "sensitive use of self" in my practice of play with others. "Sensitive use of self", I recall, was logged in my vocabulary during a course of my Masters program. I believe I first heard these words used by Dr. John Sumarah. To me, they indicate knowing myself, viewing my process, and using what is natural in relationship with others. I choose a narrative framework for this thesis because I think that it allows me to better understand the sensitive use of self when working with children towards a way of accessing hope in all its expressions.

Finally, it is worth noting that the stories here are not always presented in chronological order nor according to some other common organizing principle, but according to the themes that, as it turns out, structure my thinking on play and hope. Van Manen (1990) suggests a lived experience is something that "can never be grasped in its immediate manifestation but only reflectively through past presence" (p. 36). In many ways, the stories that I present here are current stories, as much as they are stories about experiences past. That I am creating them, examining them, and presenting them now affects what they amount to. Clandinin and Connelly (1994) write:

Methods for the study of personal experience are simultaneously focused in four directions: inward and outward, backwards and forwards. By inward we mean the internal conditions of feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, moral dispositions and so on. By outward we mean existential condition, that is, the environment, or

what Bruner (1986) calls reality. By backwards and forwards we are referring to temporality, past, present and future. To experience an experience is to simultaneously experience it in these four ways and to ask questions pointing each way (p. 7).

What follows is the mural of meaning, recovered in scaffoldings of stories<sup>1</sup>. Inward, outward, backward, and forward reflection imbues this dialogue.

In addition to choosing a narrative research framework, I have carefully chosen to present the substance of this thesis using two distinct modes of presentation: a fictional mode and an analytical mode. I include, at the beginning of each section of analytical prose, a brief piece of fiction. The fictional story, "A Doll's Tale," continues from one section to the next and to its conclusion in the last section of the thesis. "The Whacked Out Fairy" is present in the discussion of the themes. The inclusion of these stories is intended to serve several purposes. It is meant to reflect, and indeed it is an attempt to *demonstrate*, the ideas that are more straightforwardly and analytically recorded in the text. I believe these two types of writing together best do justice to my subject matter. The fiction guides and frames the academic work, but it is a form of play. With it, I play with words and images, creating a fictional story to fulfill the purpose of this narrative exercise, in both research and presentation.

There are thus two voices in this research text: one for children and the child-like, and one for academic dialogues. Voices of left-hand knowing, such as "A Doll's Tale" which opened this thesis and continues throughout, serve to tickle the imagination. My hope is that these are voices with which anyone can engage, and that they may will my adult readers to play and to wander towards their own meanings, considering open-endedness in ways that a lot of our analytical writing does not easily permit. The fictional

work appears in a different font. The academic voice emerges in the analysis of the field text to create the research text, which is also a truth that continues to evolve.

To speak more specifically now about the content of this thesis, I shall introduce the particular areas of my experiential life that I explored and analyzed. Developing the themes, discussions, and inner dialogue that constitute this thesis follows from exploring four areas: two playgroups in which I immersed myself for the purpose of this work, personal historical and developmental experience, academic perspectives, and therapeutic implications. The playgroups, personal history, aspects of the academic perspective, and therapeutic implications speak to an outward look at experience. My inward dialogue, the academic perspective that I carried in, as well as to the backward probe of memory and personal experience moved me towards the stories I chose to tell. Ideas of practice and therapeutic implications project the leaning forward of experience. Can hope be at the heart of play?

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<sup>1</sup> Because this work involves my construction of meaning, I draw upon the language of construction as an image of the ways in which I am dealing with ideas.

### **Sense in the Making**

I began as an idea invited through a friendship. I came to be in movements of creative spirits' expressions of love. I was made in the likeness of Ya Jing whom I would meet in China. I was made in collaboration with others who are generous with their gift of making magic. They certainly coloured, textured, and cushioned my world. The material and substance that's me was spurred to construction through their offerings. The colour of my face was the same as theirs. They knew the material I needed. They knew I should be soft in warm colours. I was intended for a one-year-old who would be up close to strange-looking faces. I would be like her, hoping I would convey, "It's O.K., there's nothing to be afraid of. I love you. You are loved."

When I consider some of the experiences some children endure, my stomach drops and my heart pains. My question: How can I help? My insecurity: Do I know enough? My fear: Making mistakes and doing harm! In conversation with my dear friend, Lisa, where I expressed fear about having and raising a child and knowing what to do, she spoke these fine words: "Jennine, don't worry. They teach you what you need to know." Cliché as they may sound, these words speak to my truth. I nonetheless recognize that to learn from children, I must prepare myself to meet them on common ground, a place where, in our moment of meeting, we are not different.

My approach to interacting with and understanding children importantly involves looking and listening for a common ground where a child and I can experience a connection. It is the common ground that supports the giving and receiving of



communication which, in turn, allows those who occupy common ground to collaborate, share and honour the moment by being present to the situation and to each other, without distraction of purpose.

Play is my focus in this thesis, as well as in my professional practice, because it is a domain where children are the most competent experts, without being self-conscious of this fact. For me, play is a wide, open area where I am able to connect with children, without specifically intending or directing any particular form of connection. It is an area where I may follow their direction towards our mutual discovery of common ground. My understanding is that the spirit of play is common ground in a broad sense, and that it is a domain where I can discover smaller, more specific patches of common ground with particular children in particular situations. In my experience within contexts of play, the high regard and respect given to the moment allows children and myself to meet where we are not different. The distinguishing roles of reality fade and are replaced with the distinguishing roles of the play.

A number of theorists and writers have discussed the important aspects of play, for both children and adults, as they relate to the healing process. Erikson (1950) stated that “(f)or to ‘play it out’ is the most natural, self-healing measure that childhood affords” (p. 222). Erikson (1972) discussed the paradoxical dilemma that results from attempts to define such concepts as playfulness, youthfulness and aliveness, which he believes are undefinable.

There is a reconciliation of the irreconcilable in all ritualizations, from the meeting of lovers to all manner of get-togethers, in which there is a sense of choice and ease, and, yet, also a traditional pattern of improvisation in all formalization of surprise in the very reassurance of familiarity and of some leeway for innovation in what must be repeated over and over again. (p. 142)

Erikson goes on to note that for an adult to recapture the essence of play, s/he must “transcend his (sic) everyday condition and be beside himself in fantasy, ecstasy, or togetherness” (p. 158). Cohen (1993) expands on Erikson’s ideas to say that play is not just the means by which therapists can measure a child’s faults and progress, but, rather, should be observed and treasured.

Henricks (1999) states that “(p)lay represents activities separated from the various demands or entanglements of life” (p. 263). The three integral components of play identified by Henricks are that play is intrinsically motivated, it is entered into voluntarily and with freedom, and it involves activity in which the subject attempts to “control or transform the conditions of its existence” (p. 265).

Erving Goffman (1976, in Cohen, 1993) noted that “(t)he function of play has been commented on for many centuries, to little avail” (p. 3). While much of the writing and discussion of play and play therapy has focussed on its function, for both children and adults, my focus throughout this process has been to develop an understanding of what is required of me to meet with children and create the space where play can emerge in ways that lead to the creation of possibilities.

Considering play to be common ground, I develop a thick description of my constructed meaning of the spirit of play. Donaldson’s (1993) idea of “Original Play” is where I begin:

We begin the vision of original play creating life and life creating original play. I use the word “original” to denote play that is prehuman, precultural, before all conceptualizations and learned responses. Play is a gift of creation, not an artifact of culture. It is the stillpoint and the energy from which all else is evoked. (p. 14)

While Donaldson’s assertion of the “prehuman” and is that “from which all else is evoked.” may be seem to imply an essentialist stance, it is not that reading that I wish to

take. Rather, the inclusion of this quote is meant to acknowledge its influence on my basic sense of the spirit of play and on my constructed meaning of the role of play in human experience. Donaldson's words contribute to my sense that the spirit of play is natural, not instilled and, thus is accessible to all. We might say that the spirit of play has a raw or crude existence within the nature of human beings and that this underlies the play that we witness in our everyday lives; the latter being play shaped by culture and imbued with cultural meaning - the molded version of the raw material.

In so far as the spirit of play exists crudely within us as a simple, fundamental part of our nature, play deserves respect. To respect basic human nature is part of respecting our selves, and each other. The idea of play's precultural or presocial existence also may be taken to imply that it is more accurate to say that play *finds expression* than to say that it is *created anew* through our language and actions. This is why it is so important to me that I honour the play of others and myself. By honour, I mean that I respectfully appreciate the inherent value of play, as well as the intimate connection between a player's playing and the person who is the player. In honouring play, I also honour the person playing. Again, I mean that I respectfully appreciate their inherent value. This is not to say that I always appreciate the particular ways that the spirit of play finds expression in people's actions. Sometimes what is called play and is intended as play seems inappropriate by socio-cultural standards or harmful by psycho-physical standards. I mean only to suggest that play has profound value and, thus, deserves to be respectfully appreciated as a natural given and for which we will always need to find appropriate expressions.

Donaldson's idea of "original play" also can be understood to support the view that children themselves are the best teachers of play even, and indeed *especially*, when they are also the ones who are meant somehow to benefit from the play interaction, as in play therapy. Compared with adults, children have less cultural baggage, and tend not to be as definite and unyielding in their worldviews. Hence, children may have more immediate access to the spirit of play being discussed here. Their worlds may be smaller, in many ways, than the worlds adults occupy, but their small worlds tend to contain infinite possibilities. Their realities are created and are made sense of within these possibilities, a theme I develop later under the title "The Taming".

Trusting children to be my teachers, I seek to meet them on the common ground toward which they direct me. In play, they, consciously or not consciously, pick out from among their possibilities places they want or need to visit, and I aim to connect with them in our moments of play's possibilities together. In order to do this and to learn from children, I feel that much of my task consists in *preparing* myself to connect with them in spaces and moments of their choosing.

With this thesis, I pursue an opportunity to ready myself to connect with children, and perhaps others, on common ground within contexts of play. Engaging with this project allows me to draw on my experience and my studies and to carefully examine and articulate how I might best prepare for connecting.

One thing that that I know from my lived experience is that connecting involves my whole self, and that my sense of spirit, perhaps more than anything else, has the power to enrich the connections that children and I make in moments of play's possibilities. It is with my sense of spirit that I am able to fulfill the role of playmate and

engage my imagination in meeting children on common ground. Donaldson (1993) observed that, "All playmates have two very special gifts to share with us. You are lovable and there is nothing to be afraid of" (p.30). This claim reflects my understanding of what it is to be a playmate, and inspires me toward the inclusion of this kind of understanding in therapeutic relationships.

Perhaps it is pertinent to consider a comparison between playmates and friends. Strangers, as well as friends, may play together and may connect with one another in playful moments. In the case of strangers, though, they connect *only* as playmates in these moments; there is nothing more to their relationship. People do not need to be friends, or even acquaintances, to be playmates.

I believe that part of what makes it possible for strangers to be playmates is that playmates do convey assurances of lovability and security, and that they can do so merely momentarily. Examples might be as varied as an adult and child making funny faces in the supermarket checkout line to strangers making up a foursome for a round of golf. However fleeting the encounter may be between playmates, play between them is possible because, in the moment, they accept each other, as lovable or somehow otherwise inviting, and they convey to each other that the space they share is safe - a place where there is trust between them. Although friendships can certainly take many forms, one thing they are not is merely fleeting or momentary. Friends often convey lovability and security, but usually the relationship rests on much more than these simple and direct, but delightful, assurances.

In my quest to become a good playmate, to ready myself for this role, I feel that the assurances of lovability and security are basic to being able to connect with children

on what we discover together is our common ground. I feel also that my whole person must convey these assurances, but that my spirit plays a special role here. My body language, for example, must not shut out or shut down my playmate; my intellect must not quash ideas; my emotions must not threaten. Above all, however, I believe that it is my spirit that is most capable of conveying the positive messages of lovability and security; my spirit collects the other aspects of myself together and bestows sincerity upon them.

In becoming a good playmate, I also prepare my imagination. As Maxine Greene (1995) points out, it is the active imagination that strives for creativity and generates possibilities for connections to be made.

Imagination is what, above all, makes empathy possible. It is what enables us to cross the empty spaces between ourselves and those we teachers [and therapists] have called "other" over the years. If those others are willing to give us clues, we can look in some manner through strangers' eyes and hear through their ears. That is because, of all our cognitive capacities, imagination is the one that permits us to give credence to alternative realities. (p. 3)

Several ideas in this quote from Greene speak to my understanding of the importance and role of imagination. I adopt wholeheartedly the main idea here. I find the idea that imagination is responsible for giving "credence to alternative realities" to be compelling. In order to empathize with someone, it does not seem to be enough to simply entertain their possibilities. Empathizing involves adopting the other's *perception* of the alternative realities present to them, and this includes adopting the emotional and evaluative aspects of those perceptions. Given the kinds of extraordinary ideas that can actually count as "alternative realities," especially for children, I sometimes need to suspend my adult sensibilities in order to be able to attach a positive "feel" to them, in

order to sincerely affirm their possible reality, in order to give them credence. My imagination directs me there.

At the same time, “It is imagination that ... suggests the contingency of the reality we are envisaging.” (Greene, 1995, p.30) My imagination permits me to give credence to all kinds of different possibilities, sometimes even seemingly outrageous or contradictory possibilities. But, it also permits me to move back and forth between possibilities, with the understanding that none is the final endpoint, that the others may still be chosen or explored, even if one is given priority for a time. With imagination, possibilities can be combined in various forms and in various orders. Each new configuration invites new understandings.

Furthermore, it is thus not surprising that we may turn to imagination to better understand play’s general mechanics, so to speak. Winnicott’s (1971) idea of play is that a child in play is near a withdrawal state that he sees as analogous to concentration of older children and adults. He says, “This area of playing is not inner psychic reality. It is outside the individual, but it is not the external world” (p. 51). According to Winnicott, the child in play puts out a sample derived from inner or personal reality, and lives with this sample “in a chosen setting of fragments from external reality” (p. 51). This is imagination at work.

With these ideas, Winnicott has influenced the construction of my meaning of play in that I, too, recognize play as a place to “put things out there,” a place to “try things on,” to sample possibilities. Play is a place to commit to being in ways that are without the purposes that are often more valued and which may seem, to some, as frivolous. The nonsense of content is accepted and appreciated, suspended through the

concentration paid to play. The collaborative aspect of play is that it is neither directly inner nor outer reality, but rather related to and emerging from both spurs; play is a place where a sense of power can be felt in movements, large or small. The player chooses, though it may be tomfoolery, how the inner and the outer shall meet. What is essential is that the player is the master of play's evolution and, thus, the master of their own being.

Winnicott (1971) says that "playing is itself a therapy" and that a healthy community will promote "the establishment of a positive social attitude towards playing" (p.50). It might go without saying, I suppose, that I agree with him that play is not simply a domain of trivial amusements, but a place of health and healing, exploration and growth. Winnicott even goes so far as to suggest, that

(i)t is playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative the individual discovers the self (p. 54).

I hold fast to the idea that we need not be looking to play primarily for the purposes of self discovery or self development, but rather to play for its own sake, opening to the possibilities and the inherent value that holds. When we play for play's sake, I believe we are more likely to discover how deeply its movements can touch us, sometimes changing our lives.

I believe that there are potentially no ordinary moments and I deem every moment as a possibility to meet and play as playmates. These "no ordinary moments" I deem as a felt connectedness where spirit flows. I have come to know my felt meaning in life through various experiences of connection and images of being connected.

I understand myself as striving to learn to be a playmate, and know that, for me, this involves allowing my spirit to be fueled by my imagination. In preparing myself to



connect with children on common ground, I aim to receive their possibilities, and I strive not to interfere with what they determine to be their own truth, nor with how they so determine this. My imagination allows me to respectfully empathize so that, by way of the direction of the children themselves, I may connect with them where we are not different from one another. My spirit allows me to be in and with the moment wholeheartedly – as, myself, without reminder.

Cohen (1993) says, "It seems possible to accept that play does involve a varied set of activities and behaviors. Usually, there is no difficulty in recognizing when children are playing. And children themselves experience no difficulty in knowing when they're playing" (p. 6). While I contend that there are developmental or organic factors that make it difficult for some people to recognize play, the important point is that, without ever being externally defined, there is something about play that is uniquely recognized by players and playmates. Although play can be described and aspects of play can be defined, the experience of play lies outside of the intellectual or cognitive realm. Rather, it is a felt experience of meaning and connection that is closely aligned to my understanding of things spiritual.

I understand my thesis project as a quest for the spirit of play, and I seek to ensure the presence of the spirit of play in my relationships and, indeed, within myself. For me, this must begin with acknowledging the primacy of the present and the given circumstances of the moment. As Steiner (1965) observed,

The spiritual investigator will therefore of necessity respect existing things. However great the need for improvement he (sic) may find in them, he will not fail to see, in existing things themselves, the embryo of the future. At the same time, he knows that in all things 'becoming' there must be growth and evolution. (p.8)

It is only in acknowledging and respecting what exists, being fully present to the reality for myself and for others in this moment that this existence can evolve into possibilities for the future. It is my sense of spirit and its inclusion within this work that enrich my sense that this is the right making for me. This is the base from which I understand all of my other experiences.

### Creating from a Base

First stretchy, flexible material was stuffed with lamb's wool that had been carded to a waxy; fluffiness curled together in a firm yet soft ball that formed my head. The material was stretched taut around my beginning form and sewed at the base, material hanging below the stitches. A needle was threaded with a strong, coarse thread and hands danced instructions without expectations. Loops through and around my taut-skinned head. Three to be exact, forming foundations for the features of my face, indentations for ears, eyes and uniqueness of head form. My inner workings outwardly gave me my familiar features - a base to continue from.

When I consider the journey that has led to the point of my engaging in this work, many moments come forward. Connecting those moments, I sense a fluid dance of loop and glide, loop and glide, travelling high and low, fast and slow.

Today, I stand as a woman 37 years of age, the youngest of five in a privileged family of European decent. I continue to live a privileged life as an educated white woman who lives with a partner and three dogs in our own home, who cares deeply about the people I am privileged to have included in my story, and whose heart dreams of a landscape of love for all. I come with stories of dragons befriended and dragons yet to be met. I come with experience as an advocate for youth, of liking them and wanting to spend time with children. I come with experience of knowing unconditional love at an early age and throughout my life. I have felt successful and inadequate. I come with a desire to soak up, as well as spill over, stories that inform each other, and I come with a practiced silly self, as well as an imagination I like to exercise.

I have been a successful student, graduating high school with grades that allowed my entrance to university, and I have been an unsuccessful student. I started my university education wanting to be a veterinarian. My father, two brothers and my sister all became successful doctors. It seemed natural to go into sciences, and I never really considered any other path. I flunked out. Actually, I had too many courses with a mark of D or below. My father asked if I would continue my university education. I thought, "What an absurd question! Of course I would continue." That's how life goes. High school, then university. That's how you get to be what you want to be. But what did I want to be? I moved into psychology and sociology and graduated with a B.A. My question then became, "Now what?"

At the employment center, there was a card indicating a job working with youth 8-18. No experience needed, B.A. required. "Pick me! Pick me!" They did, and so began my journey working with children who were contending with pains of life experiences with which I myself had no experience. The job was as a youth worker in a treatment group home for girls who had been sexually abused. This was pretty much the end of the road for these children before a hospital setting. The abuses these children had experienced were violent and horrific. In this house of nine children, violent behavior was the norm. I had no formal training for this job. I leapt, acting out of intuition and drawing from my own life experiences. I learned in the moments from the residents, my shift partner, supervisor and directors. I learned by doing, and each relationship was a teacher.

In my first observation shift, I witnessed some intense anger displacement in which an enraged child slapped a staff member across the face with great force. "Whoa!

How do I contend with something like that?" I decided on preventative measures. I figured if everyone was busy, there would be no time for lashing out. I quickly realized through experience that, if we had creative endeavors after dinner, the house was much more peaceful, confrontations more manageable and opportunities to witness personal magic making presented themselves. The creative zones were a great privilege to share. I learned much from that job and, more importantly, from those relationships. I learned I could be very strong and clear during crises and that I liked creating spaces for creativity, play and being silly.

From this background, I continued work in various places with and for disenfranchised youth. One such place was an agency that consisted of a group home for teenage girls as well as two independent living programs. The first one was for young women still enrolled in high school and the second one was for young women who had either dropped out or finished high school and were looking for work. I was a youth counsellor in the first program and, my second year, I was supervisor of the second. I learned to trust my intuition and that, if people have a will, I could be helpful on the way. I learned about being an advocate.

In the first week of the program for high school youth, one resident had broken the rules by having a party, during which something of her roommate's was broken. I made an impromptu visit to the apartment and discovered the party underway. I told them all to go to bed and that I would talk to them the next day. The next day when I came, I was told the story of the broken object. I told the resident who had the party that I needed to speak to her and she walked out of the apartment saying that she didn't want to talk right now, but I didn't hear her, so I followed her, thinking that she wanted to talk

outside. She went walking down the street and I called to her. She said, “All you social workers are alike! You think you’re going to fix me!” I continued to follow her because she was visibly upset. She walked on, quieted down, and came to rest on the curb. I sat quietly beside her for a few minutes. She then said that she felt so judged. She was particularly talking about school and the various cliques, and her perception of teachers and how the teachers saw her as a “bad kid”. My response was that the only way we can really combat that was to be an example and to not judge ourselves. At the time, I meant not judging others, but I would now include not self-judging. I told her that, as an example, she judged me. She was surprised by this and asked when she had judged me. I told her saying that all social workers are alike was judging me, that I was not even a social worker and that I wasn’t there to fix anything. She was the only one who could change things for herself. I was there to help her find ways, if and when she knew what she wanted to change. That totally broke the ice for us.

She did want a change and she told me about it; she wanted more school success. When we worked with her school work, we were silly which allowed her a trust to be vulnerable. I helped her advocate for herself with those who she felt were judging her. For instance, she was attempting an English course for the third time and each time it had been with the same teacher. If she arrived for class without a pencil, she was kicked out. I met with both her and her teacher and talked with them about finding an alternative way to approach each other. The resident and I had talked before the meeting and I encouraged her to share her view and be willing to hear the teacher’s perspective. I told her no one can know what you need unless you tell them. Once it was approached like

this, the teacher was open to trying alternative ways. She became less disciplinarian and more playful.

Four years in this type of work led me to believe I could be helpful, but I was contending with the tension that I required more training. I returned to university to complete a B.Ed. with the intention to pursue a M.Ed. in counselling. I intended to go through an elementary program in my B.Ed., wanting to gain more experience with younger children. All of my work experience at that time had been with adolescents. I thought that acquainting children to their strengths and believing in themselves at the youngest possible age had the potential to thwart some of the tragedies experienced by adolescents I had seen.

I took a number of general courses the year before I was accepted to the B.Ed. program. Children's literature and children's theater were the two courses that had the greatest impact on me. I became more aware of and experienced the power of story and imagination during these courses, and the storyteller in me got sparked. I was looking to volunteer, in some way, with younger children, and my professor suggested that I do a story circle at a local day care. They welcomed me in, and so began the experience that realized a love for story reading and telling. I looked forward to each visit to the day care, knowing some magic would present itself. I was dazzled, both by the sparkle in the children's eyes as they became immersed in the story of the day, and by how easily my imagination and possibilities were spurred on with the telling of each story.

My love for stories continued throughout my B.Ed program. It was a valuable tool for teaching. Possibilities for learning a set curriculum of multiple subjects presented themselves in constructing a central theme and story that connected different subjects and

learning styles. As a teacher, I could better imagine how the needs of different learners could be met by seeing their place in the aspects that developed the story.

In the M.Ed. program, my experience with children continued during my practicum placement at a mental health clinic that was housed in a hospital setting. I looked for a supervisor who had experience working with children and I was able to work with a supervisor who had referrals who were 80% children. In my work with these young people, I continued to draw on my experience of story and play through the use of play therapy modalities. My caseload was 90% youth age 13, one adult and one nine year old. My supervisor worked with the parents of each of the 13-year-olds. I had opportunities to work with anger management groups and groups designed to combat depression.

I had many lessons during my internship. I learned the value in silence and rapport, to name a few. My greatest lessons, however, were on joining with the person wherever they were at, with all they were and all I was, creating a space for creative expression and reflection of experience, promoting images of possibility that could lead to change. As a practitioner, I used a variety of strategies and looked to a variety of theories from my courses and colleagues to guide me on what would be helpful with each individual. I also incorporated things I experienced in yoga, crafting from nature, celebrating and forming rituals with friends and traditions of other people. My supervisor encouraged the sensitive use of my self and helped guide me to do just that, from a place of confidence.

My qualitative research course introduced me to narrative research. From the moment I heard it described, without fully understanding what it was, I thought, “Yes!



That's a way I can embrace, full of possibilities, to meet my goal of writing a thesis." I remember thinking narrative research seemed to suggest that things are constantly in evolution, and its apparent non-linear form appeased my sense of subjective truth.

Another poignant action was a writing assignment for my qualitative research course. It was a thick description of a moment that evolved into a symbol of being connected to my mother and became the first gift of writing I gave her. Initially, I chose this moment because it was a recent good memory that I felt I could easily describe thickly. As I sat with the prospect of this writing, it became a much more daunting task than I had initially anticipated. In the thickness of its description, I found my writing moved back and forth through time, in passages of metaphor where an image seemed to come alive for me. I cried and laughed while I wrote. I touched places of meaning I did not even know were there. The externalization of this story transmuted memory to deeper meaning and, later, in the form of a second draft, became a gift for my mother with the potential to affect her subjectivity and create yet new meaning beyond myself.

Having finished my course work and internship, I focused solely on my thesis while continuing to make a living wage waiting tables. Problem: I had no burning question and I was unsure, fumbling through ideas and dialogue surrounding the narrative process. My father became seriously ill with the progression of cancer, and I moved even further away from writing a thesis.

Disillusioned, I quit my job with the intention to pursue work related to counselling with children. At this time, I went home and realized I needed and wanted to be with my parents during a difficult family time. I moved back to Ontario and left my life in Nova Scotia on hold, for the moment. I had one whole suitcase devoted to books,

articles and my journals. I intended to do my thesis while I was living in Ontario, and I thought then that the phenomenon I would study was grief.

I did not do a thesis. I read articles and I tried to formulate ideas, to no avail. My time with my parents was very stressful for numerous reasons, but it was also magical, and I am thankful for every moment. Pondering the helpful moments during that time, a movie of memories runs through my mind. Setting up my parents' breakfast in front of the kitchen door, with the sun streaming in, pretending they were at a table for two at Tiffany's. Their playfulness, with each other and me, brings tears to my eyes. Moments like these were uncommon when I was growing up. My father and I had a ritual of walking to the end of the driveway each day after breakfast, for as long as he was able. My dog walked each morning with us, waiting for my father to accidentally kick a stone as he shuffled. He paid little or no attention to my dog in our first months there. However, a morning came when he noticed her invitation to play and intentionally kicked a stone for her. Smiling, he commented, "What a silly dog." From that moment on, he played with her every morning that we walked and, soon, she would not leave his side.

As the caregiver to my mother in failing health and to my father in his last seven months of living with cancer, it seemed that very small things became huge. Most profound were the subtle moments of play, precious indeed. They were a place of refuge as well as tears. They were moments where everything seemed like it would be O.K. They were the moments where fears fell away.

Through my lived experiences, finding ways to be playful in what would otherwise be moments of difficulty has made it possible to approach those moments with hope. These experiences inform the ways in which I hope to be able to provide a space

for others, and in particular, children with whom I am engaged, to access hope through play in what could be otherwise their moments of difficulty.

I have actively sought to enhance and enrich my understanding of the hope as I have experienced it through play. The influences on my thinking around play and hope have come from a number of writers and practitioners. The knowledge that I have gained from study, reading, and attending play therapy conferences has been enriched and brought into focus as I have incorporated alternative and holistic practices gathered from friends, colleagues and a diversity of therapeutic traditions.

### **Influences on the Making**

Magically, my face material was stretched over my formed head and sewed in place. More features, created in all the tucks, sewed down. Threads sewn to look like her. Dark eyes sloping down and out narrowing. Black hair and tiny mouth. My features, in their subtleties, became detailed. A hood is pulled over the back of my head and tucked under my chin, framing my face. My bonnet and sleeper were a gift of special material that had been loved through the years. It came to my gifters through another magical playmate who died but still spreads her spirit. I was textured in yellow cotton flannel with pink and blue polka dots. I was stuffed with the lamb's wool my playmates so generously shared to encourage my becoming. There was much care taken in its carding so it would be just right. I became soft and warm. I wanted to be inviting.

To receive this invitation [to play] requires a child like participation of our senses and a way of knowing that is more holistic than analytic, more heartfelt than discriminating. Coming out to play is more than an iconoclastic technique, more than recapitulation of childish frivolity, more than comic relief from stress or a recreational diversion. It involves a genuine transcendence that is ground in and nourished by life (Donaldson, 1993, p. 124).

The writing of a variety of thinkers and theorists have influenced the development of my perspective and, therefore, the process of this work. Their influences are less about what the others have had to say, but, rather, how my understanding has been influenced by what they have had to say.

I began the journey of writing this thesis with influences that, in many ways have not changed throughout the process. This is in keeping with how I understand the process of narrative inquiry. My intention was to explore more fully the assumptions and beliefs

that informed my interest in this work, and carry the transformations that occurred into the practice of therapy that will continue after this work has been completed.

Because of the importance that I place on storytelling, in all its facets, the narrative framework has provided me with a way to engage with the concepts of play and hope in ways that are consistent with how I experience my own understanding of my life. Furthermore, the primacy of the stories brought by other people are foundational to the narrative approaches in therapy and are likely to always be a valued part of any therapeutic relationship in which I am engaged.

Craig Smith (1997) said that “(r)ather than taking an authoritative stance with clients, narrative therapists attempt to adopt a curious, ‘puzzling-together’ posture. They help elicit clients’ own meanings and experiences to assist them in generating more useful and empowering life stories.” (p. 4) This respectful and inclusive stance is equally important in the creation of spaces which allow for the spirit of play to emerge between playmates.

Michael White’s (1995) words speak to the importance of honouring the stories that people bring to therapy and allowing them to explore possibilities in a supportive and non-judgmental relationship with the therapist.

I’m interested in providing context that contributes to the exploration of other ways of living and thinking. There is always a stock of alternative stories about how life might be, other versions of life as lived. I’m interested in how I might assist persons to step more into those stories that are judged, by them, to be preferred – to perform the alternative understandings or meanings that these alternative stories make possible. (p. 19)

Such an experience acknowledges the importance of their experience of their own reality, and defines the role of the therapist as one who can help them de-construct this reality

with an eye to finding and acting upon creative and imaginative alternatives. These are the same characteristics that exist within my understanding of the spirit of play.

I wholeheartedly agree with Rosen (1988) that “(s)torytelling and story re-telling allow a child’s view to emerge, safely.” (p. 105) Memory is not the recall of events that have occurred, but, rather, is the recall of the story we have told ourselves about those events (Janet, 1921 in Ewert, 1997). Attending to the story, therefore, is the attention to the person who has told the story. We will learn about their experience of the event through the story they share with us.

The wonderful aspect of storytelling is that the stories we tell ourselves and others can change. With some stories, the changes occur in the re-telling. In others, the stories can be acted upon in different ways. In yet others, the acting out of the story changes the experience of the teller. When the story changes, through imagination, the storyteller may be able to re-vision themselves within the story and be open to new possibilities.

In addition to the stories I have shared with others and those they have shared with me, I have also been changed by works of fiction that I have read. Greene observed that, Sartre “reminded readers that, when confronted with a fiction, they have to create what is disclosed when they read – they have to give it life.” (Greene, 1995, p. 77) When I read fictional material, it draws up experience from my own life and informs my understanding of my experience and the story that I am reading. Two people can read the same story and experience and understand the work in very different ways. It is what I bring to the reading that creates the meaning, regardless of the intention of the writer. My relation to the reading brings the story to life.

I have read the story of *The Little Prince* many times and for many reasons. Each time, I have been informed in new ways by re-visiting the story. The importance and power of connections, which in the story are represented by the Little Prince and his tie to his rose, and his commitment that with ties come responsibility deeply touched a part of me I hold as sacred. I continue to look for ways to be increasingly responsible and responsive to the connections in my life.

Deepak Chopra's (1995) *The Return of Merlin* takes the story of King Arthur and transposes it into current themes. His words remind me that the key to the miracle of life is through my consciousness. I am called to attend to the dragons, which represent my shadow self, and to the wellspring of life within each of us. As a therapist, I must attend to my own issues and fears or they may become displaced, resulting in projection and counter-transference with my clients.

J.R.R. Tolkien's (1937) *The Hobbit* speaks to me about leaving home, discovering self, meeting adversity, and returning home with a new sense of self and an appreciation of what already exists. Within the process of therapy, each of these, taken together, provide me with a metaphor for understanding what is happening for the other person. There are times in the therapeutic relationship that I find myself in a place of not knowing. When I begin to fear such a place, understanding that the journey is not mine, but will be named and owned by the client, allows me to be present without undue worry. This also speaks to my sense of home as the intuitive place from which I engage with others.

Alice Walker's (1998) *By the Light of my Father's Smile*, gave me an understanding of the importance of connecting past experiences with the present. By

attending to these sorts of connections, she demonstrated the power of transformation that comes with resolving parts of my experiences that may have been deemed unacceptable, but which remain an integral part of who I am.

An integral part of my perspective is the use of holistic approaches. Barnes (1996) emphasizes that when we speak to health in a holistic way, mind, body and spirit must be included as an advanced life essential. “When I am working in the realm of the holistic, I am taking into account a potentially infinite number of influences on a person’s life. Wholeness implies a completeness, a completion.” (p. 185) Barnes goes on to talk about ways to integrate alternative approaches to health and healing with traditional models.

The value that I place on the inclusion of my spirit and my sense of things spiritual is echoed by Barnes (1996). “The field of mental health would be vastly improved if it focused on heightening awareness of nature and spirituality in people’s lives... By spirituality... I am referring to life with reference to a greater meaning outside oneself.” (p. 96, 102) In creating a space for children to explore a spiritual sense of themselves, I am reminded that “(t)he creativity of the child is the inner driving force for spiritual realization; a seeking for wholeness.” (Mashedor, 1994, 167 in Barnes, 1996, p. 85)

Holistic approaches cannot be understood without recognizing the importance of the individual, the process and the ways in which all of this is embedded within the community. As I approach engagement with others, I cannot be holistic in those engagements without the sensitive use of my self. This requires that I first know and understand myself as a whole person – recognizing and affirming the dragons befriended and the dragons yet to be met.



One opportunity in which I was able to come to a deeper understanding of myself was participating in a Shambala education-training weekend. The workshop centered on rousing intuition and opened myself to further possibilities. Through creative movement, collaborative construction and space for meditation, we received opportunities to be aware of the senses and preferred perspectives with which we intuitively engaged. We came to be further informed on our strengths and weaknesses as far as paying attention, listening and responding with our whole selves. I related strongly to knowing kinesthetically and preferred wide open, simple space and I preferred to relate with a Winnie-the-Pooh “no bother” sort of attitude. Knowing our strengths helped in trusting them. Knowing and working with our weaker areas created awareness of what needed practice.

Barnes (1996) speaks of yoga as one of the “psycho-physical methods” which are being recognized for their benefits for health and healing. Through my practice of yoga in a supportive and playful community, I have learned about the inward and outward meeting of my self. This has opened me to both inward and outward movement, physically and spiritually.

To practice yoga requires that I work with where I am at and in the moment. I have learned to breathe with it. There has been an increase in my flexibility and awareness and a heightened sense of what I need. If I need support, I am able to give myself permission to meet my self in supportive postures. This requires that I slow down, pay attention to what is needed, identify what I need and move toward ways of promoting ways of meeting the need. Within the therapeutic relationship, I strive to provide the same supports for my clients.

As a therapist, when I first meet with a child or adult, I hope to be able to create a space that is inviting. This space is one in which the person does not feel the need to be defensively organized. Out of this initial space, I try to develop with the person a sense of trust and rapport. This involves a non-judgmental outlook and the suspension of my beliefs so that I can be fully present to the immediacy of the experience of the other person.

In searching for the meaning in a child's (or adult's) inner world, it is safe to assume nothing. We must enter that person's world with a very open mind. (Barnes, 1996, p. 218)

While I bring a background and the "tools" of counselling, I desire to remain open and willing to try new things. This means that, having had success with one person using particular approaches does not mean that I expect the same outcome with others. The willingness is required that I be open to trying on new things and allowing that same openness for the other person.

Some of the specific tools that I bring to the counselling relationship are strategies and activities that I learned through attending Play Therapy conferences. The practiced use of metaphor, sand play, and the inclusion of games that allow for children to explore and experience alternative realities are among the tools that have generated specific activities in my counselling practice.

Therapy is a way of engaging in an inner dialogue and transmuting that dialogue out. In play therapy, the play itself is the vehicle for that dialogue and healing can occur without my interpretation of the play. It is not the analysis that is imposed, but the surprise that the child comes upon within her/himself.

It is my purpose here simply to give a reminder that children's playing has everything in it, ...Also, this observation helps us to understand how it is that

psychotherapy of a deep-going kind may be done without interpretive work...the significant moment is that at which the child surprises himself or herself. It is not the moment of my clever interpretation that is significant.(Winnicott, 1971, p. 50-51)

Children come with what they need. It is not what I have given them but the facilitating and creating of opportunities to realize and experience their own healing capability (Axline, 1947). I see my role as the creation of a place and a space in which this process can unfold in ways that are directed by the child.

The general principle seems to me to be valid that psychotherapy is done in the overlap of the two play areas, that of the patient and that of the therapist. If the therapist cannot play, then he is not suitable for the work. If the patient cannot play, than something needs to be done to enable the patient to become able to play, after which psychotherapy may begin. The reason why playing is essential is that it is in playing that the patient is being creative. (Winnicott, 1971, p. 54)

Having talked about the influences on my understandings of what is important for me to bring to the therapeutic relationship and my sense of what the process will look like, I must also talk about what I see as the goal of therapy. How will I know when someone has been healed?

Barnes (1996) speaks to my understanding of healing.

When I speak of healing in these writings, I am referring to a restoration of integrity of mind, body, soul and culture... It is interesting that we so often leave out everything but the body in considerations of healing. In many seemingly holistic approaches, spirit and culture are ignored and so is the political realm. (p. 187)

While addressing the political aspects of health and healing is beyond the scope of this work, it forms an integral part of my practice. Recognizing the relative powerlessness of children necessarily means that I must work with them within the circumstances in which they are living, advocating for them when involvement with agencies is required. For example, when children are living in poverty, I may not be able to change those

circumstances. However, I can do all that is within my means to work with families to help them address or change what is within their power to change. As an advocate for youth, I come with the assumption that parents are doing the best that they can, and if I am able to support moving those positive intentions into healthier ways of relating, then this will define some of the work that I undertake.

Restoration implies that the person already has the inherent wholeness of which Barnes (1996) speaks. When I talk about my belief that people come with everything they need, I am speaking about finding ways to restore what was somehow forgotten or diminished by circumstances. One of the main assumptions I brought to this work is that each person has an deep-seated ability to access resources, including the ability to play.

Creativity and imagination are important ways through which to restore what has been forgotten. “A child’s creativity and spirituality are closely aligned” (Barnes, 1996, p. 84). Creativity allows me to live in the questions rather than to always strive for answers. In the dominant worldview experienced by most people, the quest for answers is at the forefront of their lives. When questions are no longer being asked, and people stop being curious, what is natural may be forgotten. Much of the experience of children reflects a valued conformity that does not allow for the expression of the creative. In order to grow,

The principles and contexts have to be chosen by living human beings against their lives with others, by persons able to call, to say, to sing, and using their imaginations, tapping their courage – to transform. (Greene, 1995, p. 198)

Imagination allows us to re-visit and re-tell the stories which, in turn, opens us to new connections. The new connections that are made change the story and the storyteller.

**PUT SOMETHING IN** by Shel Silverstien

Draw a crazy picture,  
Write a nutty poem,  
Sing a mumble-grumble song,  
Whistle through your comb.  
Do a loony-goony dance  
'Cross the kitchen floor,  
Put something silly in the world  
That ain't been there before.

In the spirit of play, I would like to put something in.

### A Way to Sew Connections

My journey to China approached; my process would continue en route. My playmates made sure I had all the materials I would need. In Vancouver, my sleeper was stitched closed, tying all my gifts together. I look for the magic in connecting threads to see my intention and know it. Hands made of little balls of wool, covered in the same material as my face, were sewn into place on the flight from Vancouver to China. I am noticed and admired by the flight attendant. The story of my intended is told. My arms extended around my ears. My sheer excitement and joy of meeting my intended playmate, I can hardly contain.

The method to promote my process held four main components: placing myself within two playgroups, conversation with my friend of 34 years and a chronicle of my lived experience of play. The two playgroups offered me the opportunity for a present focus of field, an assembly of those who come together to play, opening space for lived educational moments. Play is the meeting place of my counselling practice. I entered this field experience primarily as a student of play so I can construct a deeper understanding of its landscape, its heart, and so that I may be a better guide and playmate to collaboratively re-create play with others I meet there. With this sentiment, I recorded, by journalling, my experience in the field, creating one mode of field text.

The first playgroup was comprised of four children, aged four, five and six years old. Each child and parent had known me for at least one year and all the children were emotionally healthy. Over the course of six weeks, we met once a week for two hours. The first three weeks, we played at The Swallow's Nest, a house that was built into a hill. We had all played here before, and the setting was familiar. The room in which we

played was large and open. One end of the room had windows that looked out at ground level. The other side of the room had windows that looked out from the second story. It was warm, well-lit with a wooden floor, a piano, a folded futon, a chest and stacking drawers. This space was also used for yoga classes and, in one corner, was stacked blankets, bolsters, belts and yoga mats. Each week, I brought a bag of diaphanous scarves, paper, crayons and storybooks with me. It was a snowy, windy winter that became an icy winter, which kept our activity mainly indoors. After desperately trying to get my car out of the driveway, for the second time, we changed venues to destinations that were closer to all and much easier to get in and out of. The fourth week was at the home of one group member and the fifth and sixth weeks, we played at the home of another group member. Our objective was to have fun. There was an understanding between me and the children and their parents that I was trying to find out as much as I could about play. The children were my experts and I was their student. The process was not structured. However, sometimes I would introduce an activity, like when we made magic wands, and each week I would read or tell a story at some point, but largely it was the children who directed the play. I refer to this group as the Fairy Folk because of the story that emerged in our play together.

I came to the second playgroup as a volunteer. This play group was comprised of 13 children, aged four to eleven, and six to eight volunteers plus one parent of each child. Ten of the children had been identified as having special needs. The group met once a week for ten weeks. Each gathering was one hour and fifteen minutes of structured play with free play time at the beginning and in the middle. Our playgroup took place in a large church hall with hardwood floors and high ceilings. The windows climbed high on

the walls. The group developed out of one parent's vision of alternative educational and developmental opportunities, and the collaboration of a supportive, knowledgeable community. A number of the children were nonverbal communicators who presented various physical and developmental challenges. We were a group of children and adults of varying abilities physically, emotionally and intellectually. The thrust of this group was to create a social learning environment that communicated through story threads, embedded in the modalities of play. Each week, there was scaffolding of activities involving movement, art, music and storytelling. One story, "The Giant's Garden", evolved in its telling for the entire ten weeks. With each telling, a new board would be laid, supporting our rise to imagination and the interpersonal and intrapersonal connections it had to offer. I refer to this group as The Giant's Gang.

The parents of children participating in both groups were provided with a copy of the research text referring to their children, and no story was used that did not have the approval of each of the parents. The children who participated in the first group were told the "The Whacked Out Fairy" story that was generated by my experience. It had both their input and approval.

Personal experience generated a second mode of field text. I examined a 37-year history through a chronicle of my personal experience of play. I created this field text by following Connelly and Clandinin's (1988) suggestion of recording a thematic representation of significant moments. I re-visited the chronicle to probe my memory for the story generation. My friend, Jill, who has been there for most of my journey, even when we were not physically together, was a sounding board throughout this process. Jill and I have known each other since I was three years old. We have built a relationship



over a 16-year history of shared time and space that continued and continues to share time from a distance. I can always crack a smile when I look at life with her and she knows my philosophy as simple and sacred. She has always been present as the wise guide to share a kaleidoscope, making life's fragments a wondrous image. I have never been afraid to pose questions while we meander together, and she has always been my playmate. Because she is in the west and I am in the east, we probed memory, carrying it to the present, through a dialogue via e-mail and phone.

Journals, e-mail and stories that recorded the present and probed memory generated the field text. Reflecting on the field texts, I sought to recover meaning. As Clandinin and Connelly suggest:

Field texts are not, in general, constructed with a reflective intent, rather, they are close-to-experience, tend to be descriptive, and are shaped around particular events. They have a recording quality to them whether auditory or visual. Research texts are at a distance from field texts and grow out of repeatedly asking questions of meaning and significance (1994, p. 423).

In this document field texts are represented in *italics*.

I believe I am a storyteller at heart. I imagine I am in a variety of ways. I go into this thesis process as a beginner writer and researcher of stories. I will immerse myself in play to capture a voice in evolution. I have had a privileged life, and the opportunity to create the space to embark on this journey is yet another privilege I do not wish to take for granted.

From what voices and perspectives do I speak? I am a creative spirit, nature lover, partner, friend, daughter, sister, aunt, caregiver, storyteller, advocate, teacher, counsellor and play therapist-in-training. All of these voices inform the work I am undertaking and will find voice in the expression of this work.

THE BALLOON OF THE MIND by Yeats

Hands, do what you're bid;

Bring the balloon of the mind

That bellies and drags in the wind

Into its narrow shed.

## The Spirit of Playmates

### *The Whacked Out Fairy*

Do you know that place where you can be and do what ever you want? That place that is so close you can get there just like that (snap) yet, it's so far, far away you have to run and run and run to get there? Well, that is the land where this story falls.

One day, as the winter winds blew, a funnel of snow formed low in the sky, swirling and twirling, up and up, going faster and faster. Swoosh, swoosh! It got so high in the sky, you could barely see it. Just when you thought it would swirl out of sight, it hung for a brief moment, then came swirling and twirling - down, down, down - heading straight for trees and a white blanket of snow. During the funnel's plummet, you notice a tiny light shines from its center.

Plop! The funnel splashes out in a tree of many branches that extend in all directions, curving in and around each other - branches extending out like elegant arms, gracefully dancing in the wind. They curve down, then up. Its gentle sloping limbs form a cup, raised by its sturdy trunk. In one way, it looked like a hand and there, in the palm, lay a fairy.

"Wow! Wacky!" said the fairy, as she shook her head, dazed and confused. "Hmm!" she wondered. "Who am I? Where am I? And how did I get here?" She brushed herself off and decided to relax, nestling into the curvy branches of the tree in which she had landed. It was most fortunate that the fairy landed in this tree for it was comfortable, and comfort is important when there is wondering to be done. For, you see, the only thing the fairy knew for sure was that there was going to be some wondering. Bubbles of questions started to float above her head. With her hands behind her head and her knees crossed, she sat looking around, wondering away.

"Hmm, I wonder?" "You were wondering what?" said a voice. The fairy looked around to see who was talking and, there, sitting beside her, was a ladybug. "Well hello," said the fairy. "Glad to see a friendly face." "You were wondering what?" said the ladybug again. "I was wondering about a lot of things, like who I am, where I am and why I'm here," said the fairy. "Interesting! I was wondering the same. Shall we wonder together?" asked the ladybug. "Yes! Something in your eyes makes me think I will enjoy your company," said the fairy. "Hmm!" And, together, they wondered.

The spirit of playmates seems a good place to begin to do my wondering. To explore the spirit of play, I became a playmate. In the becoming, the present lay on a backdrop of experience, informing an evolution of meaning. It is a good place to begin because the spirit goes forward into everything else.

I contend that the spirit of playmates is that they meet with the strength of vulnerability. This may seem a contradiction in terms for some, but not for me. By vulnerability, I mean to be open, to be exposed, a suspension of beliefs, without judgment, without defense, to not know. To have strength in vulnerability, you need trust and a safe place that fosters imagination and creativity. Playmates give and receive

communication directly and indirectly. Playmates give and receive communication that goes beyond words and, in some direct or indirect way, they acknowledge that the communication has been received. Playmates make you feel like you belong, just as yourself. I story the construction of my meaning in the following examination of my experiences.

Each week, the Fairy Folk met with only one plan – to play. Open play was pertinent to my learning. The Fairy Folk gave me the opportunity to experience play's immediacy in the present. We arrived each week not knowing what we would do, only knowing we would create it together. We exposed each other to ideas, suspending our beliefs to imagine. I never felt judged on how or what I played. There was nothing to be defensive about. The Fairy Folk were great models of being conscious of play rather than self-conscious of play. Two of the children had difficulties playing together the first two weeks. There were moments of play and becoming playmates; however, they got distracted by an underlying competition. We did not become full-fledged playmates until the third week and it did not happen by intervention on my part. I believe it happened in play.

*Alice and Madeline have had moments of difficulty playing together. Alice has been trying to exclude Madeline and recruit Elvin and Rose in her efforts. At first, Madeline was gracious and would move on to other things. She was the first one who wanted to go home the first week. In the second week, Madeline would challenge and not need the others for her play, or she would try to persuade Elvin or Rose individually to play with her. Madeline's play took on defense organization. I have directly addressed Alice's actions, when they have been blatant, with a specific direction. I reflected through*

*the week on how to address the situation in a playful manner, rather than as a directive adult.*

*The second week was when I introduced the wonder mat, which was a piece of blue cardboard with the words "Wonder Mat" written with red marker in large lettering. The wonder mat was a space we could enter to wonder aloud and get everyone's input. I demonstrated with, "I wonder what being a playmate is all about?" "You play!" was a response. "Yeah, but how do you play?" was my second wonder. "You share stuff and build stuff." Then Elvin got on the mat. "I wonder what the stars are made of?" My planned playful intervention had no apparent effect on how Alice contested with Madeline.*

*The shift to becoming playmates came in our third week when we were playing what I call the castle raids. Earlier in the day, Alice and her older sister had made each of us a cardboard, decorative sword with our names on it, thinking the play group could have fun with them. After making beds and playing house for a while, Elvin suggested a new game - defending our castle from imaginary raiders, kidnappers and dragons that were coming to hurt us. Alice, Elvin and I became the protectors. Alice would take Rose and Madeline by the hand, helping them to flee, defending when needed, to protect them. Rose and Madeline willingly took Alice's lead, running from one safe zone to another. I ran behind. On top of the chest was a safe place and on the beds that were made earlier was a safe place. Running between places was where Alice and I took actions of defense. Rose and Madeline played the defenseless. Alice would secure Rose's and Madeline's well being by huddling them together and telling them it would be O.K. Elvin rarely went to a safe place - he was too busy defending and winning.*

*We all had spontaneous deaths during our play. It was decided when anyone died, we could carry them to the wonder mat and bring them back to life. It was a matter of putting them on the mat and saying, "Come back, come back!" and they would. There was a visible difference in how Madeline and Alice engaged each other during and after this play. Something seemed to have been resolved for each of them. There was no longer a need for defense, and they became open to each other's ideas, creating together. They were no longer in contest, which seemed to promote a bridge of trust. There was no question. We all belonged. We were playmates.*

In the moments of this story, and in the reflection of those moments, I felt hope had been accessed. I can only suggest, with the words of my language, that Alice and Madeline also accessed hope. The moments of this play where they were open to and did not judge each other, played without defense towards one another, rather, played defense against a common enemy, and suspended their beliefs to imagine and create together, exposed them to another possibility - a different way to engage each other. Merging views with that moment of imagination, they were able to give credence to an alternative. They met in the initial moments of the alternative reality and, then, created the alternative reality together. Alice and Madeline demonstrated this shift into the rest of our play sessions together.

The Giant's Gang met with purpose - to play and be creative. However, the structured design of the play was also intended as a tool to promote development. As a volunteer, I was assigned as a support person to help a child to participate in the activities. I concentrated on building playmate relationships. The Giant's Gang provided a safe place. It was not a place to judge each other or ourselves; it was a place to meet in

creativity, imagination and positive intent and to meet in the open immediacy it presented. We sang through each transition, from hello to story to movement to art to music to goodbye, and all activities were connected to the “Giant’s Garden” story line. Each activity was to experience an aspect of the story in some creative manner, such as painting wet on wet, moving like a giant or the north wind, making puppet children, playing our instruments and singing loud like the giant and soft like the birds.

To play with a child in these activities was a discovery in giving and receiving communication and trust. I was fortunate to have the opportunity to have a primary focus of playing with one particular child frequently, as we played with the group as a whole. I played with him with my eyes and ears wide open to any communication. At first it seemed to me, by his eyes searching the room for his parent, that he wanted to be with them. He seemed to have little interest in playing with the group or me, except when it came to playing with the instruments. A change came our second day together during story time. The teller was describing the garden with the spring breezes in the air and the birds singing and, in an attempt to connect with and through the story, I blew on his cheek. He paused, gazed up and looked my way. In the moment, his search for his parent ceased and I felt openly exposed to a connection.

In the weeks that followed, our relationship provided me with other experiences toward my meaning of the spirit of playmates. The following is one such experience where I felt that, within safety and belonging, you can also trust yourself.

*I arrived to play with the Giant’s Gang half an hour early. A number of people were already present, bustling about, preparing the landscape for our time of play together. One of the people already present was one of my playmates, a child who I*

*partnered with for activities a number of times. Each time we were partners, I learned something new. However, I was not sure if he liked to play with me, or if he just tolerated me. On this day, we were both waiting for the group to begin. He was just finishing a personal session with an art therapist in which they created together with paper, water, colours, humming rhythm and movement - a touching portrait, a moment in time set down with care to safely dry. His parent was next in line to have the opportunity to create with the same art therapist, entrusting us to watch over her son in her absence.*

*Together we waited. First, we just sat. I felt like my playmate was relaxed and happy. My playmate does not have words readily accessible to him. He relies on sound, posture and facial expressions, both voluntary and involuntary, to communicate. On this day, with his head tilted back and his gaze up, he was smiling, creating long soft sounds that floated in the air. I commented on how happy he looked and he laughed. Then I laughed. Then he laughed. Then I laughed and then we were both laughing. Our laughter would subside and we would move around, my playmate leading the way. Then he would stop, catch my eye and laugh. Then I would laugh and we both would be laughing again. We had numerous rounds of laughter together that day, both in and out of the structured activities, and it was infectious to those close by.*

*In the laughter, I felt light, accepted. I was reminded of its magic of shaking things up and letting them fall away, its gift of respite and brightness. My playmate extended a bridge that day, a source of connection. His invitation and openness gave me a new sense of ease and I no longer judged how I played with him but, rather, reflected on it.*



For me, once we finally did all the laughing together, I was looking for more opportunities like that. I entered with the strength of vulnerability of not knowing because there was no way that I could have known that we would make our connection that way. In our laughter, the judge was knocked off my shoulder and, with it, the need to evaluate for an answer. Instead, I started to reflect and trust myself to analyze within the question: “What are the possibilities to connect?”

The writing of this laughter experience led to reflecting on other laughter experiences which, in turn, led me to reflect on one of the privileges in my life, my shared friendship with Jill.

*I met Jill when I was three years old. My memory of our first meeting is of us standing behind our mothers, clinging to their knees. We were standing in my mother's kitchen. We would periodically peer out at one another. I do not know how long it took to actually go play together, beyond our mothers' knees I just know we eventually did and we have never gone venturing out without one another since. What I remember most is Jill's eyes and what I now describe as them being inviting.*

*Jill lived in a house that had quite a substantial hill, which we loved to roll down. It grounded out level for about 30 feet before it met the river's edge. We would get into position, push off and begin our descent, picking up speed as we went. We had various routes, some steeper than others; the steepest were for when we felt like more of a risk. I remember rolling as a wonderful adventure. I'm sure we must have gotten scrapes and bruises, but I don't rightly recall that. I remember laughter - rumble and tumble belly laughter. We laughed together at ourselves as we rolled over all the bumps.*

*Metaphorically, I continue to roll with Jill and, together, we can still laugh with ourselves. Having such a constant in my life is an extraordinary gift.*

Because the laughter Jill and I share has been a constant in my life, it can easily be taken for granted. In this recognition, I connect with the importance it has had for shaking things up, letting things fall away, even just for the moment, and making room for the light of possibilities. The child who is not afforded that space to laugh with themselves in the light of others has the potential to live in alienating judgment of themselves and their outcomes, instead of living in integrated reflection and process.

While laughter is acknowledged as an important part of development, it is in the development of spirit that I want to include it as important here. By development of spirit, I mean the ways in which laughter allows for the expression of experiences, in the moment, that are free of externally imposed values, judgments and expectations for outcome. This kind of "belly laughter" emerges from the inside out, from a sense of belonging and being connected. While no one can make it happen, we can allow for its spontaneity.

Judgments being waylaid can give freedom for tears to spill. Emotionally and physiologically, tears and laughter are very similar events. Both are the expression of an inner experience which opens the way to be present to what is happening deep inside. While the meanings often associated with tears and laughter seem contrary to one another, the experiences of each allow the person to de-stress and express their innermost being in the moment. I believe that the release that comes with expression of tears can create a space for possibilities.

I crossed paths with a little boy who exemplified this for me during a succession of story hours I was conducting at a public library. Each story time was based on a different theme, and included a story, movement and creating something. This story occurred after three or four such story hours.

*A young, preschool boy seemed so distant; his language was quite delayed. Capturing his attention was challenging; however, with each week, he became more actively involved with the group. One week, during the story portion of our time together, he crawled on my lap and I put my arm around him. He began to play with my fingers and cry while I read the story aloud. I did not ask him to put words to what was wrong, and he seemed content to just be and cry, which is what I let him do while I continued with the story. The group was incredibly respectful and allowed him to be. After the story, the older ones came to him in genuine concern and care, taking him under their wing, inviting him to play. Comforted, he continued to participate in good spirits. This little boy moved me, and the trust he put in us, as a group, was powerful. I felt honoured to be a part of this space.*

Sometimes my greatest learnings have resulted from the times in which what I expected did not happen as I had intended. Last year, I co-facilitated a group for elementary school children. From the perspective of the school, the children had been identified as "behaviour problems" and the school was looking for ways to help them learn to manage themselves in the classroom so they would be less disruptive to others and better able to learn. Because the activities were organized around play, rather than work, my co-facilitator and I referred to the sessions as Playshops. The first session of the

Playshops disintegrated, however, and became a very apt learning experience for the facilitators.

*We had neglected an essential piece of the process with the children, a step that was crucial not only to achieving some progress, but to getting the Playshop off the ground in the first place. When the children arrived, they did not know why they were there, what was going to happen, nor were they given a choice about being there. They were all angry and defensive. We, as facilitators, reflected quickly and pursued individual interviews with each child in which we set out what they could expect for our time together. Each was clearly asked if they wanted to be a part of the group and each was asked for contributions to what would make it a safe place for them. Before they were asked to commit to the group, we laid out what that commitment meant. This included that, first and foremost, we would all come with the intention to have fun. Second, because each of us was an important part of the group, if they were in school on the day of the Playshop, we expected them to attend the group. Finally, we each committed to contributing to and upholding the rights and responsibilities of the group.*

*There was a marked difference in how everyone entered the group on the subsequent weeks. They all decided to come to the Playshop, but we had to ask one child not to attend because his needs and the reasons why he wanted to attend were dramatically different from the other children. He was offered an opportunity for individual work which would be more suitable for him. Only one child did not fulfill our agreed upon commitment, but he was able to tell the group why he was leaving, hear how they felt about his leaving and he was open to their comments.*

If I do not attend to the need for safety, then, no matter how lofty my intentions, the people who are a part of the group I organize will be defensively organized. The defensiveness will lead to an experience of "us and them" rather than to an experience of "we". Until I acknowledge the importance of the participants' perceptions of the space and offer a genuine invitation to play with me, play for hope's sake is not possible.

To create safety and be present to the spirit of play, I must come with a presence, which allows certain qualities to emerge in the experience of the spirit of play. To be able to meet as playmates, I need to attend to each of these qualities with equal integrity. Openness to connections, a non-judgmental attitude, openness to communication, letting go of defensiveness and vulnerability are all equally important for the creation of a safe place in which to play for hope's sake.

If both my playmate and I embody the qualities, then it is most likely that we will be able to attain an experience of "we". However, it is not in my power to request that my playmate show up to play already bearing these qualities. People will be who they are and will show up as they are. I cannot control whether my playmate embodies these qualities, even if these are the qualities that will help us to find common ground as playmates - help us to experience a "we". I can, as the adult, the therapist, and the student of play who seeks to determine how to be a better playmate, make it my responsibility to come to embody these qualities myself. I can prepare myself, as a playmate, by being mindful of these qualities and by practicing them in my interactions with others so that they might become more habitual, more automatic, and more entrenched in my spontaneous behavior and manner. Then, maybe as we play together, I can help bring out these

qualities in my playmate, as well. Here, I develop a deeper meaning to my understanding of these qualities.

Openness to connections allows me to actively seek out opportunities to connect and to trust that connections can be made. As with the Giant's Gang, once the connection had occurred, I was then able to be present to the moment rather than looking ahead. This opens me to wonder about the connection, but it starts with allowing myself to become one with what is happening around me. I was honouring what was happening, as opposed to analyzing what was happening, by openly exposing myself to connection.

Judgment is the projection of my view on another's subjectivity. In judgment, there are expectations to be met and assumptions that are being made. Remin (1997) suggests that judgment includes, not only the negative judgments we make about others but, also, the ways in which we give approval to others and ourselves. By approving of some things, we still compartmentalize the acceptable from the unacceptable and approval, therefore, is a form of judgment. In contrast, non-judgment includes mystery because there is no assumption; there is no expectation of what something is or what something means.

In my experience, even though much communication can be explained and broken down into its component parts, still, a large measure of communication exists in the realm of mystery. To receive communication requires that I be open, without projecting my subjectivity on the experience of the communicator, and suspend my beliefs to the point of being able to hear what the other person is saying, in the way in which they are saying it. This requires living with the questions and engaging a curiosity to really listen, as

opposed to jumping to conclusions and providing analysis and answers to what they are saying.

Defensiveness is being organized to hold back. This interferes with being a playmate because I have to oppose and contest an alternative reality. It holds me back from growing and evolving. Not only am I organized to hold things back from coming in, but I am also holding back things from going out and learning to move beyond. Defensiveness holds me back from meeting my fears and from finding ways to alleviate them. Letting go of defensiveness creates possibilities by enabling me to move beyond and to actually experience and create something new. Letting go of defensiveness also allows me to share with other people where I am. Between playmates, there is a free-flow of connection. With defensiveness, I am not in a giving and receiving mode. I am not open to what is around me, nor able to accept it. Defensiveness also prevents me from being able to connect with the past in ways that will allow me to re-vision what has happened by re-telling the stories in new ways that support moving beyond what has happened.

Vulnerability is defined as being open or being exposed. Because of the negative connotation associated with vulnerability, it is often understood in connection with being hurt. However, that same openness and exposure that opens me to being hurt is the way in which new possibilities can emerge in my life. Vulnerability, as a quality of a playmate, can only lead to opportunity for emergent possibilities when it is experienced with trust and safety.

All of these, taken together, allow us to meet on common ground, where we can first meet ourselves and then meet others with the spirit of a playmate, creating a

connection to embark on our quest. I contend that these qualities are the keys to beginning to access hope through the experience of creative alternatives, new meanings and re-visioned stories of ourselves.



## The Quest

"So, how do you think we should wonder about things?" asked the fairy. "What if we were explorers?" said the ladybug. "Sounds good to me," said the fairy.

Just then, Brother Wind came barreling in, and the branches of the tree started to dance, jostling the fairy and the ladybug. They were afraid. "Wee, wee, weel!" cried Brother Wind as he flew around, up and down, all through the land, rustling everything up as he went on his merry way. "Hey!" shouted the fairy as her body went this way and that way. She and the ladybug were clinging to a branch, shaking in their boots as they watched Brother Wind spin around, tossing things out there. "I'm afraid," said the ladybug in a shaky voice. "Me too," said the fairy. Then she called out, "Brother Wind, what are you doing?"

"I'm playing!" he replied. "I wonder what would happen if we let go? My hands are slipping," said the ladybug. "I don't know, but I think we are going to find out because I can't hang on any longer either." And, together, they let go.

At first, they went this way and that way, with no rhyme or reason. The ladybug suddenly surprised herself and, for a moment, stopped struggling against Brother Wind. She was swept up into his play. Before you knew it, her fear started to fall away, and she began to giggle as they danced. "Wee, this is fun!" giggled the ladybug. "No, it's not!" cried the fairy anxiously. "Really! It's OK! Relax, Brother Wind will support you," assured the ladybug.

The fairy closed her eyes and, with fear and trepidation, she tried to relax. The ladybug was close at hand, encouraging her to find a place with no stress. She let go and relaxed. She, too, got swept up in Brother Wind's playing. Her fear started to fall away and she, too, began to giggle.

It has been said that if we as individuals are to determine what our relationship is to some idea of the good, "we must inescapably understand our lives in narrative form, as a quest" (Taylor 1989 p. 52). To me as well, despite or perhaps because of the fragmentation and relativism of our time, it appears that we must reach for conceptions of the good that will affect the directions of our lives (Greene, 1995, p. 1)

The *Webster's New World Dictionary* (1979) defines quest as a seeking or a journey for adventure, and adventure as an exciting and dangerous undertaking or an unusual, stirring, often romantic experience. By definition, the quest infers taking a risk. In this study, the quest - the risk taking, the opening to possibilities, and conceptions of good - has been distinguished by three vital qualities: living in the questions, attention to and manipulation of landscapes, and a sense of power.

The experience of living in the question is fundamental to the pursuit of any quest, including a research project. Research, in its simplest form, refers to the ways in which we systematically ask questions and look to find the answers to the questions that

we have asked. Any phenomenon can be researched from any number of perspectives, using any number of approaches. What defines the approaches that will be used is the nature of the question that is being asked.

As it relates to the quest of understanding the spirit of play, the importance of asking questions is central. Living in the question implies a way of being – an attitude of openness that does not look for some easy closure but, rather, engages curiosity and imagination. Living in the answers, by way of contrast, implies a way of doing. When the answers have been found, the questions are no longer being asked. I am not saying that living with the answers is a wrong thing; rather, I suggest that it may not always be the right thing for a given moment.

When I only seek answers, finding the answers usually closes me off to further exploration. Living in the questions opens me to continue seeking and sustains curiosity. Furthermore, while I am living in an early question, a surprise may present itself that promotes a change in the direction of my questioning. The question directs the quest. By continuing to ask and refine the questions, I remain open to finding different ways of moving toward new possibilities. The quest is about asking questions. This requires openness to questions in the same non-judgmental way in which we may be open to ourselves and to others who are asking questions. This means that, no matter how silly a question may seem, it is deserving of acknowledgement and consideration.

The wonder mat opened the possibility for the children in the Fairy Folk playgroup to indulge their enthusiasm for questioning. The wonder mat was created as a way of exploring one question, but became the means by which the children were able to create and explore new questions. The children manipulated it, changed it and they gave

it its power. They created the new possibilities for its use. Once they created it, they asked for it.

The time of questioning took on many forms. Sometimes it was a place of finding power in asking the question. Other times, it was a place of vulnerability because of not knowing. In the spirit of playmates, questions are acknowledged as a springboard to ideas and imagination. If a child asks a question that makes another person feel uncomfortable and the question is not acknowledged or is outrightly quashed, the child may quickly learn not to ask questions in order to avoid feeling stupid or responsible for something negative. For example, if a young child asks question about sexuality that make a parent uncomfortable, the child may feel wrong for having asked the question and not bring up the subject again.

Children who are afforded the opportunity to live in the questions will incorporate a way of being, a critical thinking. Critical thinking, by definition, relies on the ability to ask questions which may challenge, or even criticize, an external authority. Rather than simply accepting the answers that have been provided, critical questioning provides for a range of possible answers, imagining different possibilities brought about by various answers, and owning the results of the reflective process.

In my family, we were not allowed to question the doctrines of Catholicism; they were answers to be followed. In my teen years, an internal conflict arose between my own thought and the doctrines of my religion, and I felt the two could never meet. Fortunately, I met a priest who encouraged me to voice my questions and provided a space for dialogue to explore without giving me the answers. For me, it freed me to continue to be a part of something that was important to me. Through living in my

questions, I was able to find points of intersection and did not have to abandon either my religion or my developing sense of morality. This experience allowed me to spring forward with my questions and gave me a sense of feeling integrated.

By attending to the springboard rather than always or only looking for answers, children are able to continue to incorporate questioning, with themselves and with others, to open the way to new possibilities. Without being able to ask about new ways, we may become sedentary and let others answer for us. Perhaps, we might even come to *expect* them to answer for us. Such complacency denies one's agency and narrows the range of experiences in which one engages. The times in which some people experience moments of despair are when they are unable to see a way of changing difficult situations in their lives. While circumstances might not be readily changeable, being able to ask different questions can change an outlook from one of being powerless to a quest that brings hope.

The natural curiosity of children often leads them to ask lots of "What If" questions. Their transition from one question to another can happen immediately and without stress. Such questions are a way of throwing things out there to see what we can catch and trying on new things. Sometimes, this can lead to some quite silly imaginings and the creation of wonderfully silly possibilities. One such example spontaneously happened for me when I was invited to play by two of my Fairy Folk outside of our playgroup.

*Burrito night, our bellies were fed - time to hang out. Two of my Fairy Folk were present. They asked me to play school with them. I was to be the teacher. Each was pulling me into the living room, one on each arm, going in different directions. My suggestion was to enter in Elvin's way, then quickly run out, and enter through Rose's*

*way. So, we ran half way into the room through Elvin's entrance, which was the closest, stopped, turned around and ran out down the hall, into the dining room and through Rose's entrance.*

*I was directed to be the teacher. They placed me in the large, orange-gold, velvety high back armchair that faced out from windows which looked onto the street. Rose took the other armchair and Elvin the couch. Our seating arrangement formed a triangle. "So, what do you want to learn?" Rose answered, "I want to learn about shirts." Elvin answered, "I want to learn about underwear." "Well, they are both made of material," was my reply. Josephine, Rose's older sister, came in and joined us. We told Josephine what Elvin and Rose wanted to learn about, and Josephine added, "I want to learn about Elvis." "Well, I was just saying both shirts and underwear are made of materials, and Elvis he had some funky shirts and underwear, I imagine made of some really cool materials." We laughed.*

*Lisa had been near the entrance to the dining room, listening in, and decided, "I want to go to a school like that," and she joined us. We talked and giggled about Elvis, shirts and underwear for a minute or two, when Elvin shared, "I know him," referring to Elvis, and someone - I don't remember who - said, "No you don't. He's dead." Elvin said, "Yes I do, from before." I believe it was Lisa who asked, "You know him from before you were Elvin?" Elvin replied, "Yeah, from when I was an elf." Well, that opened up our imagination to the thought of elves, and we began asking Elvin questions and adding our own images. Elvin told us that elves peed in all colours and we surmised that people who have names that start with El were elves in past lives. I had much fun*

*widening my perspective and giving new meaning to my knowing elves. You never know what you might learn when you throw things out there.*

Part of the definition of a quest involves adventure. Creating landscapes, therefore, looks to the ways in which adventure is woven into the fabric of the play. We build landscapes to discover the way. There is no set way to reach the goal. Landscapes start as a seed and grow to allow for the incorporation of new possibilities as they emerge. When I am building the landscape, the landscape supports the question that is being asked, but also includes things that can be manipulated, which then leads to new questions.

*It was Rose who suggested that we build nests and be birds, and we did. Then she suggested I be a bear that tried to come and get them, and I did. Elvin helped me build a den that I was to sleep in and, when I woke up, I would come out with the intention to eat the birds. When the birds were all ready, I went to sleep and the birds chattered to one another, until I woke up and came out roaring. The birds screamed and flew around. Then I was caught, had a leash put on me and the birds attempted to tame and control me.*

*After the first time we played, Alice said what if we have blueberries because bears like blueberries. We decided to make some out of paper and crayons, tearing the paper into its blueberry bits. The second time we played the game, I was led around by my leash to eat the blueberries and became a friend of the birds. We repeated the game a number of times, each taking turns being the bear.*

The quest also engages with the recognition and demonstration of power. One of the children in the Giant's Gang said that play is a place where you can be and do

anything. He was the same child who, in another situation, was not able to sing his own name. However, when he created a child puppet that was to be introduced to the group by singing its name, he was the first one to sing the name of his puppet. While he could not, at first, experience a sense of his own power, when the play became outside of himself, he was then able to access the power and draw it in.

Similarly, the landscapes and the manipulation of things outside oneself provide opportunities for taking things that exist in reality, changing them for our own purpose, and making them what we want them to be or what we need in the moment. This gives us an exploratory sense of being able to change the environment. This is an experience of personal power that is not possible unless I can imagine myself as a creative agent of change. For example, the Fairy Folk often played with images of kidnappers. This can be understood as a way of facing a fundamental fear and experiencing the power that comes with overcoming the kidnappers and, hence, diminishing their fears of a reality over which they have no control. In play, they were able to experience a sense of control.

When I feel truly acknowledged in the questions that arise with my playmates, the landscapes that are created lead to an experience of power in being heard and in being able to direct the play in ways that meet my needs in the moment. Furthermore, I am able to draw upon the power of my past experiences and transmute them in play. Being able to hold onto what is safe and known allows me to explore outside of what I know. Sometimes, this will involve the strength of vulnerability because, in the openness that leads to vulnerability, there is the power to discover and express parts of myself that may otherwise be silenced.

Hitherto unrealized qualities of personal potential are the real rewards to Bilbo Baggins, the unlikely adventurer in J. R. R. Tolkien's quintessential quest tale *The Hobbit*, (Tolkien, 1979). Baggins was told that he came from a family line in which his ancestors engaged in various quests and in his own quest he discovered the courage and inventiveness of his ancestors, in himself. Through this, he was able to access his resources, which were not known to him in the beginning, but which helped him along his way. He did not part with his initial sense of himself but, rather, expanded on it throughout the quest. Because of the quest, he arrived at a new experience of his sense of himself.

The process of the quest exemplified in all of the "Great Stories", whether they are stories taken from First Nations traditions, parables from the Bible, or classic works of fiction, remain constant. In all of these, the starting place is "home". Leaving home is followed by a period of not knowing in which the answers emerge as part of a process. The "no's" emerge before the "yes's", and the stories conclude with a returning home. The return home celebrates what was learned during the quest. This knowledge then carries the subject of the quest into new possibilities once they have returned. The quest calls for movement, both large and small, inward and outward. It implies connections moving back and forth and presenting new lines of connection. Within the context of therapy, the same process can be seen. Play can be used to create the conditions of the quest so that, when I return home, I do so with a new sense of myself, and a wholeness that I did not previously experience.

When I was 17, I worked as a camp counsellor at the same camp that I had attended since I was ten. I was in charge of the youngest of the campers. Once a week,



we had a scheduled “Hike Day” on which we were to leave camp to give the support staff a day off. On this particular Hike Day, the rain was torrential and we could not leave the camp.

*I was in the cabin with my nine little campers. We had just had lunch - peanut butter and jam sandwiches and canned fruit salad - and we were lounging around on our bunks. Some were playing cards or reading; I think I was writing a letter, thankful for the quiet moments, when I heard a small whimper from one of the bunks. I went over to investigate and found a little girl crying. When I asked what was up, she said she was missing home. I tried to console her, to no avail. The next thing I knew, there was another whimper that had begun, and another, and another. Soon, the whole cabin was crying, each one homesick. Ehh Gad! What was I to do? I threw a blanket on the floor and told everyone to come over and sit in a circle. I told them that, when they were missing home, there was only one thing to do: tell a story about home. Within moments, the tears stopped and stories began. In a while, we were all laughing telling the funniest stories we could about home. The camper who lived on the pig farm had us in tears with laughter as she shared the pigs' escapades. We all decided that afternoon of story telling was going to be a good story to tell at home when we were missing camp.*

While this story talks about home as a physical place, the home to which I can return may also be metaphorical. In the metaphorical sense, home for me means being able to return to what is safe and known. When I embark on a quest which requires me to be vulnerable, this can only lead to possibilities for change when I know that I do not have to leave parts of myself behind but, rather, can use them in a renewed sense that

they are good. I do not have to abandon the comfort and safety of what I already know. I can remain connected.

## The Taming

Brother Wind carried the fairy and the ladybug to a beautiful meadow and gently grounded them. There were wild flowers popping up everywhere throughout the tall grasses of the meadow. The fairy and the ladybug skipped along through the meadow as Brother Wind danced with the wild flowers. Near the edge of the meadow, they came upon a clear sparkling pond. Around the pond, they found blueberries which they ate until they could eat no more. The group laid down for a rest beside the pond, gazing at the clouds as they floated by.

Just beyond the pond stood a house, nestled into a hill, with a stand of trees behind it. The door of the house opened and out walked a bear. The bear meandered over to the pond. His stomach was grumbling and he had his eyes set on the blueberries. As he neared the pond, he saw the fairy, the ladybug and Brother Wind resting. "Well, hello!" said the bear. "Have you come to play with me?" asked the bear, excitedly. The group was startled. The fairy put up her dukes, fearful the bear would hurt them. "I will eat some berries first because I am much friendlier once my belly is full. Then we can play." As the group hesitantly watched the bear eat, they realized he was not going to do anything to them and they relaxed.

"Ok, what if you be the babysitter?" said the bear, pointing to the fairy, "and we will be the young ones you watch over, but we can't go into the woods. It is not safe for us in there." They all agreed and they played the afternoon away, pretending to go to dances, to build houses, to go on trips, to run away from kidnappers, to go to school where the fairy became the teacher, and pretending to skate and make food. They even made magic wands, using their imaginations and materials that nature provided to create whatever they needed. All the while, the fairy paid loving attention to keeping the young ones safe as they played their roles. Brother Wind kept trying to sneak off to the woods, but the fairy always drew him back, reminding him that they all agreed not to go there. They all had much fun.

As the sun started to descend in the sky, the bear excused himself and went into his house. When he came back, he had a bag for each of them, thanking them for being such wonderful playmates, and they said their good-byes. Brother Wind then carried the fairy and the ladybug back to the tree where their adventure had begun.

"Come and play with me," suggested the little prince. "I am terribly sad." "I can't play with you," said the fox. "I am not tame." "What does tame mean?" "Something that is frequently neglected," said the fox. "It means to create ties?" ... One only ever understands what one tames. (De Saint-Exupery, p.66-67, 69)

If I embark on an adventure with vulnerability, I may get bumped, but a bump also indicates connection. Most bumps are a surprise, some even making me laugh those rumble-tumble belly laughs. Some hurt and make me stop for a minute. However, with a change of action, I can move on. Some bumps cause so much anxiety that play stops, but to be sure that there are no bumps which cause play to stop, I need to pay attention to boundaries, beginnings and endings and the signposts that allow for transitions which are not stressful. All of these provide predictability for playmates.

I have talked at length about the need to provide freedom within play and the importance of letting go of predicted outcomes from the engagement. The predictability that is important, however, relates to the process of play rather than to the results. To not know does *not* mean that I do not have some sense. When playmates meet, there is an aspect of predictability of what will happen, and that things will not be done to them which will make them have to become defensive or shut down. Rather, they have power within the play to create and move within the safe boundaries. There needs to be clear expectations about how we will be together, while letting go of expectations about what we will do together. The clarity of the boundaries removes the opportunity for contest.

We all need boundaries to provide us with safety and security. Children will often test the limits of the boundaries because they need to know the boundaries are still there. They feel safer in the knowing. I once heard a metaphor in conversation that captures what I feel about the importance of boundaries. A police officer walking down Main Street in the middle of the night may try all of the doors on the buildings as she walks by, hoping that she will find each one locked. If one is unlocked, she will have to go through it. This can be frightening because she does not know what is on the other side. For children, there is comfort in finding that the boundaries created for their safety are still in place, despite their testing. This, in turn, allows for a freedom of exploration and predictability within the safety of the caring space where they do not have to attend to the possible harms that can result from things that are frightening. Rather, they can focus on facing those fears with creativity and imagination.

In this respect, I think about the Playshops and the first meeting that was so unsuccessful. That situation exemplified the need for practice that is clear about what is

going on – the necessity of setting the context so that everyone connects and knows what is expected. As I observed in my journal at the time,

*The importance of sticking to the rights and responsibilities and meaning what I say and saying what I mean became very clear. I'm thinking of the time when one of the children would not choose a marker for the activity in which we were participating. I told him that, if he could not choose, I would choose for him. When the allotted time was up and he had still not picked out a marker, I passed him one. He tried to grab one of the others from my hands instead of accepting the one I gave him. I stayed with what I had told him would happen and did not relent on the boundary that I had set. He was quite different after that because, rather than being in a contesting mode, he came to play.*

The taming is partly about the ways in which safety is created by boundaries and a connection to those boundaries. The rights and responsibilities created by the Playshop group set the stage for how we would engage each other. A part of the taming and of making the connections involved in the taming is the recognition that we become responsible. Each of us was responsible for saying what we needed and for making sure that those things were provided so that everyone had what they needed to be safe. I believe there was a sense of power and agency in contributing to and upholding agreed upon rights and responsibilities, rather than adhering to dictated rules in which they were not invested.

Predictability can also be provided by the ways in which the engagement is signaled to the playmates. The Giant's Gang had a very clear routine, from the ways in which we said hello, the transitions in the middle and the ways in which we said good-bye. Our signals, for the most part, were songs. We began each transition singing "Let us

form a ring, dancing as we sing”, until all heard the signal and connected together, holding hands, and formed a circle that moved together. Once the circle was formed, we would sing, “Ring a, ring a, rea, now we stand together”. The ritual of song indicated for me our rite to come together and belong. Singing our names and having them sung back with “hello” indicated, for me, our rite of being recognized as an individual, within the group as a whole. Attention to beginnings, transitions and endings allowed us to move through our time with less stress and an ease that came with knowing a transition was about to occur. Paying attention to beginnings, transitions and endings, signposting and acknowledging them helps integrate and connect us with our various movements.

With the Fairy Folk, we would often end our time together with a book. That was our signpost that we were shifting gears; time to ready ourselves for home. With the Fairy Folk playgroup, to acknowledge closure and my appreciation for our times as playmates, I gave each of the children a bag, which I had decorated and which had their name on it. I had four surprise bags, each with a message and a symbolic gift to place in their own bag. In the first bag, the note said, “A balloon to celebrate the fun in life.” The next bag said, “A smile face to celebrate laughter.” The third bag said, “A star is a reminder to always reach for the stars.” The fourth bag said, “A teddy bear sticker to thank you for being such a special playmate who helps me reach for the stars by laughing and having fun.” The children were surprised and seemed to take this as a celebration. They sat forward, ready to receive. The children, in a very literal way, demonstrated the qualities that I had hoped to achieve in the larger sense of the concept of the spirit of play.

Where I connected and tried to use some of my connections in practice was in the development of a group for children of separation and divorce. The group was called

“Navigating the Waters”. A co-therapist and I designed the program based on a group Mark Barnes presented at The International Play Therapy Conference 1999, which we modified. The group design used child-centered expressive techniques involving art, movement and play to promote a safe environment for children to voice and share their stories. An integral aspect of this group was a mural that would be constructed and continued each week.

The initial background of the mural was water. The intention was to build a boat to place on the mural which could move from week to week. The children were intended to construct the landscapes they needed for expression – safe harbours, stormy seas, sandy beaches. The mural was to be an indicator of embarking on a quest and we were like pirates looking for a treasure. The mural was intended to develop from the stories the children came with, and we expected the mural to change in response to what was going on for individuals, within the group and with the group as a whole. The mural was to symbolize the beginning of the journey, and we felt it would have the potential to be a signpost for the challenges of the journey. The finished product provided an ending, but the mural itself would not define the process nor the outcome. The process of the group, and, therefore, the outcomes for the group and its members, was to be flexible throughout the journey.

In addition to creating connections with the process of play by allowing for a sense of predictability and safety in expectations, it is important to also provide for a sense of connection to the possibilities that arise within the play itself. Playful experiences can allow us to explore ways of being that may create connections between a former and new sense of self. I think of an example when a group of women were given

the opportunity to explore a traditional dance and connect differently with a sense of themselves.

*I organized a belly dancing workshop, thinking only that it would be fun and good for all around body image. It was set up so that youth could come for free because I wanted to give young women the opportunity to come and take away a different way of relating to their bodies. We arrived all fully clothed and shy, even though most of us knew each other. We had three young women who braved themselves and came. Our presenter, Christine, was a wonderful woman who gathered us in a circle and shared stories around the tradition, creating within minutes a very sacred place. The dance began. Gradually, Christine introduced us to various movements. As she did so, she danced around the room and interacted with each of us. There was a pull in her dance that we could not resist and that drew each of us out. Within an hour, pants were rolled down and shirts were rolled up, exposing our bellies. In this sacred space, we felt the safety to expose ourselves and play. In the afternoon, we dressed up and put on make up. There were transformations that no one ever imagined. Our gathering became a magical place where we shared, danced and drew each other out, each touching aspects of ourselves in this community of women who were willing to play and support each other.*

Sometimes, connections between playmates can be fostered by changing the usual ways of interacting in order to provide other ways of being together in the spirit of play. One of my playmates in the Giant's Gang stayed in his wheelchair for the first several times that we played together. By taking him out of the wheelchair and moving with him in a physically more intimate way, I was able to connect differently with him. Interestingly, his wheelchair is the means by which most people would see his ability to



be mobile. For me, though, it can also symbolize the autonomy and independence that is often more valued, and sometimes contrary, to the development of interdependence that can lead to experiences of connections within a spirit of play. When he was no longer in the wheelchair, our mobility, as playmates, was enhanced. For example, during the singing of “Row, Row, Row Your Boat”, we were able to move our whole bodies together in the motion of rowing, rather than my simply moving his arms in time to the music. This certainly gave me a different experience of play. While in his chair, I could more easily *do* things to or for him. Outside of his chair, we could *be* together.

One of the most important possibilities for connection in play arises from the ways in which play can create opportunities for the players to make their own connections that carry beyond the play. It is this type of connection that leads me to contend that the play *is* therapy, and that the child comes with the essential things that are needed to realize the connections that will carry through, once the playtime is over. My role, as a playmate in such situations, is to provide the safety and the space for the child to access these essential things. This space, and the safety to explore what is needed, begin with the spirit of each playmate and open engagement in the quest that puts things out there to try on.

The connections can occur when the basis of the play experience is established, but are only realized with the practice of the elements of the taming. Much of the language of the practice of therapy speaks to the application and implementation of strategies, techniques and interventions. These are the actions with which most of us are familiar. When I speak of the practice of the taming, I am referring to something larger

and different. The practice involves the ways in which I consciously attend to what is happening and allow the direction to emerge and evolve as the play continues.

*My nephew was eighteen months old when his alcoholic mother who was drunk at the time, took him and his three and a half-year-old sister to a park on a River. She passed out and the two children, left unsupervised, started to wander around the park. It was not long before my curious eighteen-month-old nephew fell into the river. Fortunately, the universe was on the lookout, and a man and woman who were out for a walk saw him fall in. The man jumped in and rescued the frightened child. Kindness allowed my nephew to go unharmed.*

*Two years later, my nephew and I were left to each other's company in the family home that was void of furniture. The house had been sold, my father having died five months earlier, and we were preparing for the final party this house would share with our family. The same house stood stately, across from the park where my nephew had fallen in the river. Everyone was off doing errands except for him and me. We were playing in the room I had known as the family room for 34 years when he wanted to play "make believe". He would be the baby and I was to push him into the river. I asked if I was allowed to save the baby, too. He directed the play. Sometimes I was directed to save and other times not. Then I was the baby and he would push me into the river. Sometimes he would save me and other times not. Sometimes when he was in the pusher's role, he was mad at me, calling me a bad baby. Other times, he would stagger around then push me. He played out the scenario in as many ways as he could think of, I figure. Sometimes he was the baby who pushed the mommy, sometimes saving her, sometimes not.*

*I offered no interpretation, I only asked questions about the play, he was making it up as we went along, he was just throwing things out there. I did not suggest he was acting out a previous experience. I simply played the parts he directed me in. I remember feeling honoured that he entrusted me with his play, the beginning of his story. He was not visibly upset in any way. He laughed, acted silly, and was rambunctious and gentle. He stopped the play by flopping on the couch with a sigh. In my perspective, he seemed relaxed and his eyes sparkled as they often do. Within a few minutes, my siblings started to return and we were on to other matters.*

*Prior to his falling into the river, my nephew would excitedly enter the lake by his maternal grandparents' cottage, the ocean by his paternal grandparents' cottage and any lake by which his family camped. This child had been a "water baby" since he was about six months old and with his family having a boat they continue to spend lots of time on open water. After the river incident he started to refuse going in open water, a pool was O.K., you had to pry him out of it, but open water was not. He had no words to explain the reason why he would not go in, he would just not go in. I do not know what changed for him that day but something in his play moved him and it was the beginning of a shift to risk venturing into open water again. He seemed to have a new sense of trust in himself and significant others. We simply played.*

Part of the taming for a child is the flexibility to use the pieces that are needed, mix them up and take away what remains important. When I was engaged as a playmate with my nephew, it was my conscious attention to the practice of the taming which allowed me to be with him, as a playmate, while he figured out what he needed from the encounter.

## Play's Magic Circle

Once they were back in the tree, Brother Wind said he was tired and that he was going home to rest. The ladybug also took her leave, yawning as she told the fairy, "It has been wonderful wondering with you, I feel different somehow. Let's venture out again sometime. By the way, you were a good babysitter. I wish we could live together." The fairy wished her friend well and settled back into the comfortable tree.

It was then she remembered the bag that the bear had given her. Slowly, she opened the bag, wanting to savor the excitement of her surprise as long as she could. Out of the bag, she pulled a piece of hard material. As she turned it over, a light cascaded out in all directions and she saw her reflection. It was a mirror. In her own light and reflection, she saw she was a fairy. And, from the reflection of her experience, she knew she was in the land where you can be and do anything. Comforted, she laid back thinking, "I am a fairy and fairies watch over and protect things. I will lovingly watch over young hearts, paying attention to keeping them safe. I now know I came to be here, in the spirit of play." And, with that, the fairy peacefully drifted off to sleep, feeling whole. She had come full circle.

Opening the invitation means being able to see beyond the surface, to hear beyond language... Answering the call to come out and play, "signifies that destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown." Here lies the persuasive power of play. It is the *second look that senses the greater life within life*. (Donaldson, 1993, p.10, emphasis mine)

I love the imagery of the circle and of magic as they relate to my ideas of play.

My image of a circle is that the outer edge is a line that connects the beginning and ending and the line of connection is what encompasses what the circle holds. What the circle holds is what gives it its shape and substance. It is what the circle holds that prevents the line of connection from collapsing. Mark Barnes (1996) states that the origin of the word magic comes from Greek and Persian sources that mean "wise". He goes on to say that "(w)isdom involves the use of information, turning it into knowledge" (p. 186) It is in this sense that I use the word magic in relation to the spirit of play. It is when the spirit of playmates weave together to quest for taming that the spirit of play's concentric circles provide magic and access hope. Such has been my experience as I have explored stories throughout this thesis, and as I draw together ideas and offer a final story of the magic and wisdom of play in my life.

The imagery of the circle and of magic take on particular significance for me in relation to my ideas of the spirit of play and therapeutic practice as I have explored this study. The concept of a circle speaks to the connection of beginnings and endings, such that every ending is also a beginning. Life, in all its expressions, flows naturally in cycles of ebb and flow, growth and rest. My sense of the holistic approaches fit well within this imagery. The cycles encompass all aspects of my self, including mind, body and spirit. The completeness of the circle cannot happen if I do not attend to all that is required to be a part of the circle. The magic speaks to wisdom and being present to use it for the benefit of something greater than myself.

Concentric circles, having a common center, share the same core. Within this work, I see myself at the core of a number of expanding circles. Within the first layer outside of myself, I count my family and closest friends. These are the people with whom I share emotionally intimate relationships. Beyond this lies the layer which is composed of the people with whom I come in regular contact, whether they are professionals, colleagues or acquaintances. At the outer edge of my circle lies the community at large. My sphere of influence radiates to all with whom I come in contact, but the nature of the engagements will necessarily depend on the level of involvement and commitment with individuals, depending on where they are in relation to my core.

Because of the approaches I chose for my exploration of the essence of hope and the spirit of play, this process began as a reflective, inner looking experience. This has been foundational to what I see as important. The process of change necessarily begins within each individual. Until I am clear about my understanding and own my

perspectives, I may not be able to be present to the understandings and perspectives of other individuals, most particularly, with the children with whom I engage. However, with this clarity and ownership, I am then able to engage with other people and to share with them how they experience their understandings and experiences. Being open to this allows for both of us to change. This, in and of itself, can be a wonderful personal experience, but it is only when these changes become grounded or embedded within a larger sense of community that they achieve the full measure of possibility and hope. It starts with me, but it will also end with me if I do not extend my self to others, individually and collectively.

As I carry this into my engagement with others, it has the potential to change how I respond to the many varied situations that arise. Perhaps it is important to talk here about responding to people. A response is something that arises from the ways in which I understand my world and the decisions I make about how to deal with my world in ways which are consistent with this understanding. On the other hand, reactions are what happen when I deal with situations from a place that is different from how I understand myself. The process of developing a responsive, or responsible, approach begins with self-reflection that is carried forward into all of my relationships and engagements with others.

With and for myself, my concentration is on the process rather than the outcome. This means that I attend to ways of *being* rather than ways of *doing*. It does not mean that the things that I do are unimportant but, rather, that if I have not attended to the essence of being, what I do will happen in a void. This void would be contrary to what I believe

about the possibilities for life in general and play in particular to be an engagement of spirit.

This is closely connected as well to my belief in the possibility of “no ordinary moments”. When I engage with people with all the qualities that are a part of my spiritual sense, each moment can then be seen as a possibility for surprise, for change, for connection and for magic. Practicing the responsibility and responsiveness that goes hand in hand with this belief defines, for me, how I approach every moment with every individual, no matter how mundane or routine it may seem to be to others.

Within the practice of therapy, I enter with a trust in the process and confidence in the inherent value in play for hope’s sake. When I attend to another person in a therapeutic setting, the elements of play for hope’s sake can lead to a free-flow of connection. By being present to the experiences and perspectives of another, I can demonstrate a respect for existing things and potentially provide an opportunity for the other to explore the possible.

My knowledge of growth and evolution and the cyclic nature of life allows for faith that what needs to happen, will happen. I liken this to planting seeds in a garden, watering them and keeping them free of weeds, and then receiving the harvest without ever actually creating the plants which provide their fruits. In therapy, the seeds that I plant are often simply opportunities to experience something differently. For example, the first time that some people experience being truly heard and accepted for who they are is in a therapeutic setting. As a therapist, my role is to create spaces for possibilities, establish safe boundaries, and help the other person attend to their priority concerns. I

cannot make the growth happen. Rather, I can provide the optimum conditions in which such growth can occur. This is the nature of cycles.

During my practicum placement, I encountered a nine-year-old boy who had a violent family history. He was withdrawn and unresponsive to any of my invitations to play. In desperation, I reached for a book to share with him. He willingly sat to read the book with me, and his eyes looked up from the floor for the first time. In consultation with my supervisor after the session, I asked her what I had done wrong. She shared some wise words, noting that sometimes a quiet space is what the client needs. If you had asked me at that time if there had been any moments of playfulness between this child and me, my answer would have been a resounding “no”. Now, however, I recognize that the story that what outside of him and me became the bridge for moments where the spirit of play emerged in the form of a connection. I would now respond differently to the same situation. Rather than being afraid because I was not “doing” enough, I would have accepted that “being” with him was enough because that is what he called for in our time together. I am now more comfortable with living in the questions, rather than having to have all the answers.

I feel I can best describe my understanding of play’s magic circle in a story of a journey with my father. It is a short story of my felt sense of our evolution towards playing for hope’s sake. It does not tell all the “no ordinary moments”, but I believe it provides a base from which to imagine. This evolution built a landscape to share and merge our views in a way that had been impossible any other way. Things fell away, hope seemed ever present, and there was opportunity for transitions to transmute into creation. My desire: to take care to play for hope’s sake.



### *Have Two-Fold Fun*

It was four days before the death of my father and I was preparing to go to Nova Scotia for five days. I sensed he was approaching death, but I had no assumptions of knowing when that might be. I was worn and weary and in need of taking care of myself. I had been my father's primary care giver for seven months of living with terminal cancer. There was a lot to prepare to take my leave, but I was then ready to go. I entered my father's study where he and my mother had been sleeping for the past four months. He had been on a morphine pump for about three weeks, allowing for moments of lucidity and relief. He slept longer and moved from pursuing a physical mobility to what I can only describe as a spiritual mobility. And, for me, it manifested in his willingness to play.

I had to wake him to say goodbye. Gently, I sat on the bed and called, "Dad." He woke with alert, somewhat surprised eyes, chuckled and told me of his dream. He was trying to resolve the conflict in Ireland. I asked how it went. He smiled and said, "Pretty well." He asked if I was leaving and I said, "Yes," and then proceeded to tell him about the plans of who would be around, doing what. My mother entered with some juice for him. He told me to go and have some fun; everything would be fine here. I gave him a kiss and made for the door. He called to me as I neared the door. I turned and, with a sparkle in his eyes and a big grin on his face, he said, "You have two fold fun." His words gave me comfort, and curiosity began to stir about their meaning.

Growing up, I would not have described my father as one of my playmates. I do now. I look at a picture of him and me when I believe I was four. I am standing on his red leather chair, that I have always known and which now sits in my home. He is sitting in

the chair and I am hugging him around the neck with my cheek pressed to his. Our smiles sparkle in our eyes. I once looked at this picture as how I use to love my Dad. I have a similar picture, in a sense, of Jill and me. It is a close up of our heads, and our cheeks are pressed together. Too, our smiles sparkle in our eyes. I have always looked at the picture of Jill and me and thought, "How I love my playmate. All is well." Now, too, I look at the picture of my father and me and think, "How I love my playmate. All is well."

I don't recall playing with my father growing up. I do recall lots of instruction, criticism and good intention. I do not remember any play for hope's sake. My father used to take me golfing as a kid, and I dreaded it. I may have been excited the first time, but I do not remember. How he enjoyed that game! It was truly one of his passions, but he wasn't able to get the playing for the sake of play part across to me. His passion did not translate to my view. To me, he focused on the playing for getting good part, which I wasn't, and a passion for me, it was not!

In September of '96, my father invited me to be his companion on a trip to Ireland. A journey for exploration and adventure came to mind for me. I assumed his was a journey to pay homage to a land and a passion, golf. Along the way, I also felt moments where too he was to pay homage to a daughter by discovering glimpses of her view. Our travels moved us to a place where sharing honestly got easier. My father played nine games of golf, on nine different links courses, in fourteen days. These link courses were usually bordered by ocean and, in my mind, magical communities. Most of our days were met with fair winds, blowing strong.

Without reservations, we stayed in bed and breakfasts along the way, planning one day at a time. I thought, then, that our plane's arrival and departure, in and out of

Ireland, would mark beginning and end to this journey. As the story continues, you will see this was not so.

Each morning, my father and I would share breakfast. I would drop him off at the golf course of the day, and I would go to the ocean's shore, walking on beaches of sand as well as gardens of stone. Early on, I decided I would collect stones from various shores to bring back as gifts to my friends. I would share with them stories of the shore where the stone they had picked came from. Generally, from the seaside, I would meander through town, taking in all the sights and sounds with which I crossed paths. I was a quiet observer who shared all her discoveries in a journal. I would meet Dad each late afternoon in the course's clubhouse. We would share a pint, go to dinner, then to our lodgings to sleep.

It was at the clubhouses that I gained a new appreciation for his game - golf. The clubhouses where we met in Ireland, except for one, were laid back and void of what I deemed the stuffiness of the clubs to which I had been back home. There, I was given a glimpse of my Dad playing for the sake of play; the glimpse came with watching my Dad enter the clubhouse as part of a foursome, the members only having met hours before and, having just walked a landscape together, they laughed as comrades while individually aiming to meet the landscape's challenges. I no longer begrudged golf, and I enjoyed, with a new sense, watching my dad play.

We traveled well together. He did his thing and I did mine, without judgment. At the end of the day, we would share our experiences, seemingly more open. I felt very considered. He was flexible, allowing diversions on the trek to the next course. We were challenged a few times. Surprising ourselves, we emerged unscathed and more aware.

One challenge we shared concerned this work. Over dinner one night, he wanted to know where I was with it. I had been finished my course work for about four months and my formulating thesis ideas were slow indeed. At this point, I was decided on the methodology, but could not explain it well. I had no burning question or phenomenon that I wanted to explore. He was frustrated and asked why I chose to do a thesis, wondering why didn't I do straight course work, which was one of my options. I told him that, even though I had obtained two university degrees, I would not feel academically successful if I did not do a thesis. I was terrified to do a thesis and I needed to meet that fear. He told me, in a sarcastic voice, that maybe I needed a psychiatrist. I said, "Maybe I do," and, in an equally sarcastic voice, thanked him for his support and walked away to the washroom to cry.

When I returned, he asked what I meant by my thanks for all the support. I had calmed myself and, with sincerity, truly thanked him for all his support financially. I explained to him what a gift it is to graduate without debt. Then I told him, however, that I took a chance and was vulnerable with him and I felt like I got shot down. He said that, maybe, I shouldn't be vulnerable with him. I agreed. I told him that I was fortunate because I did have a lot of people with whom I could be vulnerable, and it didn't have to be him but, for some reason, I kept testing it out. He told me it was not his intention to upset me when he brought up the topic. His manner in conversation made that clear, and I told him that I knew that. We decided that, until I was able to come to him about the thesis without vulnerability, it was not a topic for discussion. It felt good to say all that out loud.

Another challenge was about religion and spirituality. My father felt it was his duty to make all his children good Catholics. It was his job as patriarch and head of the family to make sure all the clan followed its religion. Being one who moved beyond the church, I was to be questioned. We were on our way to the shrine, The Lady of Knock, when he asked me about my religion and what I followed. I told him I preferred to talk about my spirituality and my sense of that, which we did. I felt a sense that he asked this question with openness to waylay judgment for respect. I knew very little of this way of being with me.

The movements of our travel were summed up, for me, on the last night before our departure out of Ireland. While we were packing our luggage, he approached me with something in his hand. He held out stones, saying he collected them for me. In their passing between us, I felt a new connection, and I received them with much thanks. His gesture made me feel like he viewed my view with new import and less frivolously. I certainly took with me a new sense of respect for his view.

Come skip with me. I'm skipping again. So, two months before my Dad told me to have two-fold fun, I felt a significant shift in the evolution of our coming together to play for hope's sake. I was making Christmas gifts with every free moment. I played with the things around me, as well as a few things I brought with me, to make jewelry, key chains, dream catchers and story sticks. I dried and used the neck bones of chickens I retrieved from the soup pot. I used buttons, found in my mother's kitchen, that were housed in the little red, three drawer, white knobbed, cardboard and fabric box that I can't ever remember not being in the house. I used geese feathers I collected while walking Dixie, my dog, in the park across the street. I used sinew I picked up on a weekend in

Toronto. I used driftwood I brought from Nova Scotia, and I used beads I have been collecting since I was a kid.

My father showed interest one day, asking to see and calling for my view of what I was making. I had been doing such crafts since I was a ten-year-old camper playing with my first piece of gimp. I always felt my father viewed my creations with little interest. My father had little time for the “frivolous”. He was a busy man of discipline in his passions, which included work, family, golf, tennis and hockey. I believe most who knew him would say my father loved to tell stories, assertively putting his view forward. Some may have described him as a good listener too. I was in the beginnings of being able to say that. The day he began to join me with interest, to listen to and play with my creations, I did say that. There was a felt absence of his usual critical view. He did not ask for purpose but, rather, for my meaning in its creation. He came without assumptions and with a willingness to imagine. I explained my symbols. The chicken bones symbolized celebration for the impermanence of life. Feathers represented wings on which to fly. The buttons symbolized lost treasures found.

A month later, on Christmas Eve, the coming together of my father and me to play for hope’s sake moved yet again. It was Dad’s last Christmas. I had made my father, mother, niece and nephews what I called story sticks, which were pieces of driftwood, each with a unique shape that had feathers, beads, chicken bones, buttons and bells, connected by sinew and fastened with macramé. I decided that I would present the story sticks with a story. I told my father I was going to have a story circle for the kids and invited I him and my mother to join us. I also suggested that, if there were a story he would like to tell, he might do it then.

It had been a challenging dinner for Dad. He was tiring and was nauseated, but he remained at the table, sharing a family dinner, one of his favorite traditions. Dad seemed to be fading. Upon finishing dinner, he left the table for the washroom. I began to prepare for the story time. After a long while, I went to check on Dad. He said he was fine and requested that I not start without him. I did not think he was going to be physically able to attend to the story time, and his lucid moments were fading, but he emerged from the washroom ready.

The children sat around in their pajamas, on blankets, on the floor of the foyer, some cuddling a stuffed animal. My mother and father sat on chairs, side by side, behind the children. They were holding hands and they had a blanket stretched across their knees. The first story was one I told I heard on C.B.C. one day. Like in the game, "Telephone", however, the story I told might be nothing like the story I first heard. I do not know whose story it was in the beginning. Its plot was about a young girl who would not share, with anyone else, the lovely stories her nanny told her. Nor did she listen to the story spirits' pleas to be told and set free. The story spirits became angry because they felt caged. The story spirits plotted to hurt the young girl and free themselves. The nanny, a good listener of story spirits, heard their plans and told her father, who did not believe and fired her. The nanny then took to disguise and saved the young girl. The father believed, hiring her back on and the young girl found new meaning in telling stories. I then gave my gifts of a story stick to each child and my parents.

It was then Dad's turn, and he told a story about his favorite Christmas. It was war time, and I believed he was stationed in England at the time, when he and his regiment decide to give a week's pay each to provide and serve a Christmas meal to the kids of a

nearby orphanage. By this time, my siblings began to gather sporadically on the fringes of our story circle.

It was my turn again. Before the second story, I told of the beginnings of its creation. The story started in collaboration with my nephew, Bill, when I once visited him and his family in Boston. Bill started the story by reading what I had on paper. It was about Keesh who learned, first by example from his aunt, then from experience, that we are never really alone. Keesh followed her one winter night and, from the shadows, watched as she walked in a circle while she gazed up. Then, he saw her move from a mountain posture into a warrior's pose (standing yoga positions) and then bow. As she started to walk back home, Keesh came out of the shadows and asked what she was doing. She told him she was sharing stories with the constellations of the winter night sky. She then proceeded to introduce him to her friends, and told him they love stories and hold them dear. She then pointed out who liked what kind of stories best. That was the point I had reached, on paper.

Orion had been identified as the constellation that liked resource stories. I then asked for help to continue the story with ideas from the kids about something they knew from inside that helped them in a hard time. The rest of the story circle emerged from a story I read in Rachel Naomi Remen's book, *Kitchen Table Wisdom*. I brought one of the stones I collected in Ireland. It was smooth, dark and cool. It fit comfortably in the palm of my hand and its weight, I found pleasing. I told the story of its collection.

In conversation with an Irish man, at breakfast one morning, came the suggestion that our heritage probably came from the North. The stone had been collected on a shore near Dunegal, which was on the west side of the island and the furthest point north we



went. I told of walking through an old graveyard in Dunegal and finding a number of tomb stones with the surname, Wilson. I told that I like to imagine the stone contains much wisdom. I then asked the children to rub their strengths into the rock. They did with great vigor. Then, the stone went around, through the siblings, and we each shared a personal strength, a resource, that has helped us and we each rubbed that into the rock. Then, my mother contributed in the same way and, lastly, it went to Dad. In the end, the stone of shared resources was given to Dad, to carry and hold, accessing its wisdom when he wished. He carried it in his shirt pocket, over his heart, or it lay at his bedside with a picture of his mother, his story stick and his rosary. After Dad's death, before we closed the coffin, a few things got placed around him - a Detroit Redwing Stanley Cup cap, an old favorite golf club, a set of pilot wings and we were going to put in the stone. Mysteriously, we could not find it. The stone of shared resources is among us somewhere, and its image continues to share its wisdom for me.

When the journey of care with my father began, I let him direct its course. He was task oriented. He was disciplined with exercise and always looked for improvement; he was weight conscious and regimented. He was a man who knew war; he experienced living for survival. Each morning, we had a routine of juice and medication, followed by coffee, and then to the small washroom for washing and dressing. The routine went from him recording and dispensing his own medication and washing himself with me giving him assistance to dress, to him trusting me to dispense his medication, wash him and dress him with care. I cherished this time together with each passing day.

In the beginning, we had to wing it as we threw out the 'what ifs?' out, until we found the dance that worked for us. As we moved through frustrations, we arrived at a

place where we could laugh at ourselves, shifting the notions of paramount concerns down in ranks, allowing the spirit of play to come in. Near the end, entering the three by five washroom was a signal, time to play. It was our shared little cubby where we could play with our own and each other's ideas, without judgment or purpose, rather, just for the sake of it. We laughed, made fun of ourselves, making difficult moments move with some ease, being conscious of play, rather than being self conscious of play. Our willingness to come together as playmates allowed us to meet in the strength of vulnerability. Playfulness with routine tore through the curtain of reality, allowing things to fall away, and we assumed nothing as we opened the door to play for hope's sake.

Shortly after my father's death, I read the novel, *By the Light of My Father's Smile*, written by Alice Walker (1998). A year later, the ideas generated by my reading played a part in the decision of the date I married my partner. In the spirit of play, I wanted to invite Dad, and her words helped me to imagine a way by getting married on a night with a crescent moon, inviting the light of my father's smile to come and play. The moments that led to my awareness that he would receive the invitation were magical to me, and they give new meaning to "have two fold fun".

The first fold of fun is when we experience the pleasure of playing with people who care about us and about whom we care in return. The second fold of fun speaks to the ways in which such experiences have the power to transform us, to surprise us and to complete us. My experiences and reflections lead me to contend that hope truly is at the heart of this second fold of play.

The bonus: I finally came to a way to share my thesis work with my Dad.

The last movements of this story are in threads of blue. Stitches, in the form of a bow, sewed the gatherings on my chest that drew my arms in, readied to concave into a hug. I would meet my playmate with the strength of vulnerability. I would meet her where we are not different. Outwardly, they are stitches of decoration but, to me, they are the stitches of my heart, gathered in as a vehicle for my message, "You are loved". The tale of my making comes to a close. Yet, I also know it as a beginning, for it was 30 hours after I was completed that I met Molly Ya Jing and began another journey that is another story. In the telling of my making, I know that my evolution was just beginning and there is strength in the foundations of my threads.

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## Appendix I: Fairy Folk Consent Form

Research Consent Form  
Probing Play: A Narrative Inquiry

Date:

Researcher: Jennine Wilson  
Master Student in the Department of Education in Counselling  
Phone #: 684-0061  
Supervisor: Miriam Cooley                      Phone #: 585-1190

The purpose of this research is to construct a deeper understanding of the nature of play so that I may be better able to honour the play of others. Play is the medium in which I join with children in my counselling practice and it is this medium I am looking to better understand. I believe there is something inherently magical about play that can help children deal with fears and provide a vehicle for learning and change. In this research inquiry I am a student of play. I will be examining a collection of stories of my lived experience of play that will give me information towards constructing deeper meaning. Children are one of the experts of play along with animals and nature. The opportunity to play with your children once a week for two hours over a course of six weeks is a precious one in which I can learn from the experts. The stories generated during this time will add to the collection of valuable information. It is my intention to loosely structure our two hours, taking direction from the children and letting them lead on how to proceed. The potential benefit of this research inquiry is towards a pervasive playful attitude.

I will journal my time playing with your children. This is my personal journal that is accessible only to me. I will write stories from the information in my journal that I will share with my supervisor and may become part of the research text. In no aspect of my writing will I use identifying features such as names of the children or place. Parents will be provided with a copy of the research text prior to its submission. No aspect of the research text that makes mention of our play group will be used until it has the approval of parents.

I consider the time with your children a privilege. Please understand your child has the freedom to withdraw from the playgroup at any time with guaranteed no ill will feelings on my part. If you have questions at any time please ask me.

Signing this consent form indicates that you understand the information provided and are freely consenting to your child's participation in my intended research work.

Signature:

## Appendix 2: The Giant's Gang Consent Form

Research Consent Form  
 Probing Play: A Narrative Inquiry

Date:

Researcher: Jennine Wilson  
 Master Student in the Department of Education in Counselling  
 Phone #: 684-0061  
 Supervisor: Miriam Cooley                      Phone #: 585-1190

The purpose of this research is to construct a deeper understanding of the nature of play so that I may be better able to honour the play of others. Play is the medium in which I join with children in my counselling practice and it is this medium I am looking to better understand. I believe there is something inherently magical about play that can help children deal with fears and provide a vehicle for learning and change. In this research inquiry I am a student of play. I will be examining a collection of stories of my lived experience of play that will give me information towards constructing deeper meaning. Children are one of the experts of play along with animals and nature. The opportunity to play with your children as a volunteer in this structured playgroup you have chosen to have them participate in, is a precious one in which I can learn from the experts. The stories generated during this time will add to the collection of valuable information. The potential benefit of this research inquiry is towards a pervasive playful attitude.

It is my intention to journal my volunteer experience playing with your children. This is my personal journal that is accessible only to me. I will write stories from the information in my journal that I will share with my supervisor and may become part of the research text. In no aspect of my writing will I use identifying features such as names of the children or place. Parents will be provided with a copy of the research text prior to its submission. No aspect of the research text that makes mention of my experience in this play group will be used until it has the approval of parents.

I consider the time with your children a privilege. If you have questions at any time please ask me.

Signing this consent form indicates that you understand the information provided and are freely consenting to the inclusion of my volunteer experience as part of my research work.

Signature: