

## My Creative Experience and Free Play in Life

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*"The free play of creativity is not that ability to arbitrarily manipulate life. It is the ability to experience life as it is." (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p.189)*

The creative process is an integral aspect of the development and role of therapy in a person's life. Through the use of improvisation and free play within us, we can use our creativity and thought processes to further enhance our lives and the lives of others. Creativity allows a therapist to think on the spot, use imagination to spark attention, alertness, and participation among her clients, and to bring her inner thoughts out and express them to the world through performance and movement. Through the experience of my creative expression in dance during my senior thesis and my present clinical work in the field, I came to realize how significant free play and this process of creativity are in my life and profession. "Inspiration, experienced as an instantaneous flash, can be delightful and invigorating and can generate a lifetime of work." (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p.18)

As I entered my final year of college, the dance department at my school encouraged me to think about my senior thesis and what I would contribute as my final message. This was my first real attempt at the creative process and essentially 'free play'. I immediately thought about my future goals and decided to perform a dance about Tourette's syndrome and how dance therapy can help people with this syndrome redirect their energy and control or maintain the outbursts and tics that occur. The creative process of this dance was very challenging to me because I had to change my focus from the standard dance technique and style to that of improvisation and play. I thought about the character that I was portraying and took myself through a journey from realization of the syndrome, the fear of the outside world, the uncontrollable movements, to the frantic stress and trauma. I then took these movements and led myself

on a free flow of erratic, extreme motions ending up in a focused, tired state, where my body movements were direct, sustained and absolutely controlled.

This process showed how dance therapy could help a person suffering from Tourette's syndrome. As I became immersed in this experience, I noticed my body and mind taking on a new form. I was truly uncovering a hidden identity of my character. I found myself, not unlike Michelangelo and his art, uncovering and revealing a dance that had been buried underneath the music and my mind. I had a kind of "Intellecto" a profound vision of my dance, something I had never felt, performed, or moved before, an inner thought and message to the audience. (Nachmanovitch, 1990) My experience of this dance showed me that I was able to be creative, use my imagination and play to perform and demonstrate something that I was truly passionate about. "Each piece of music we play, each dance, each drawing, each episode of life, reflects our own mind back at us, complete with all its imperfections, exactly as it is." (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p.25)

Through the creative process, I was able to work out the necessary movements, music, costumes, and lighting effects to emphasise the overall theme and message to the audience. The most difficult part of this process of creative movement and thought was my overwhelming indecision about what I was feeling and what I wanted to communicate to the audience and my teachers. I was so used to my strict dance regimen and technique, with set body movements and stature, whereas this new modern free style was much more abstract and chaotic in my mind. (Nachmanovitch, 1990) I wanted to express myself freely and allow this character to be revealed, but I had to refocus my attention away from my self-image and body figure to that of creativity and play. However, after completing the performance, I realized that this process was a lot more fulfilling and rewarding in the sense that I was able to use my creative mind, the freedom to make choices, and play within my body and my imagination to perform the best piece for my thesis.

A creative life is risky business. To follow your own course, not patterned on parents, peers, or institutions, involves a delicate balance of tradition and personal freedom, a delicate balance of sticking to your guns and remaining open to change. (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p.23)

From this process, I have developed a creative use of dance in my everyday work. I am now able to understand the free form body and the creativity of movement. In my working internship environment at Noah's Ark Family Resource and Toy Library for Children with Special Needs, I am able to add to the therapy sessions by engaging my own creative process. When I start in the sessions, I focus on

the direction that each child is making: viewing the activities, use of space, qualities of time, and weight of the various movements that the children are portraying. From these influences, I understand how my supervisor and myself direct the class in the most beneficial manner for the children's growth and development.

We begin our sessions with a starting activity mostly focusing on motor coordination and strength, while appealing to the children's focus and alertness. This activity ranges from pushing balls or feeling ribbons, which then progresses into body awareness and the emphasis of touch on each of the body parts. The children work with props using various effort qualities, changing the time, weight, and space of the activity. The parents in the therapy sessions watch their children laugh with joy, expand their movements further than they have ever done before, and use language and attention to show how enthusiastic they are about the therapy session of free play.

Next, we introduce a name song, which enables the children to become familiar with each other and with the environment. We use creative songs, which involve repetition and create anticipation as the children wait to hear their names. Also, by using a big round ball or a rectangular box, we can create a world of riding on a boat or floating on a bubble to give the children an atmosphere and an imaginary world to say good morning and become accustomed to the room. After this opening activity, the therapy session varies from sensory motor activities, balance, strengthening muscles, alertness and attention, as well as relaxation and massage. Our use of improvisation and a playful approach to movement activities expands the response through a range of movement possibilities providing practice in skills necessary for further development.

To be infinitely sensitive to the sound, sight, and feel of the work in front of us is to listen to our intuitive voice-our Muse...Our genius senses and reflects what is around us; we transform matter, time, and space through our own original being. (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p. 36)

Without being able to tap into the creative process, I would be unable to maintain my daily thought processes and key elements to implement therapy for the children I work with. While working with children with various disabilities, symptoms, and slow development, I am able to access the appropriate activities to work with building motor development, strength in muscles, focus, language, flexibility by being able to respond to the needs of each child in the moment.

From my beginning stages as a dance therapist in training, I have become aware of the substantial amount of explanation that I have to do in order to explain to people what my job consists of. From the use of the creative process and

the essential elements of play therapy, I have realized how much easier it is to explain how our therapy can make a difference. Since from the early stages of life, we express our every thought, action, and development through movement, it is necessary that movement therapy works with early intervention, where children can benefit and understand life through movement since they have yet to communicate through words. With the use of creativity, imagination and play, we can appeal at the simplest level to all ages and developmentally challenged clients in therapy. Everyone in life at one time or another has used their imagination to create another world, to laugh and play with movement, thoughts, and words, and at any stage in life we use creativity to get out of difficult life challenges, create the perfect school project, or present a proposal at work. "The most potent muse of all is our own inner child. The poet, musician, artist continues throughout life to contact this child, the self who still knows how to play." (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p. 47)

Creativity is an enormous emphasis within our day-to-day life. Dance therapy allows therapists to take their clients on a journey where they are not viewed as disabled or delayed, but rather as normal children having fun and focusing on playing and laughing to build the essential skills in life. "Play is the free spirit of exploration, doing and being for its own pure joy... Play is an attitude, a spirit, a way of doing things." (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p. 43)

At Noah's Ark, I have been fortunate to work with Dance therapists, Occupational therapists, and Physiotherapists together. I have come to realize that in the starting stages of therapy, children advance more readily when they are alert and having fun in our movement/music play therapy groups. The more structured style of, for instance, physiotherapy can in some ways aggravate the children and actually lead them to regress in their developmental process during the time of therapy. With the use of creativity, the children can add to their vocabulary, understand the goals and motives of the therapy, and become just like ordinary children at these ages having fun and growing together. With different disciplines of therapy there are many creative styles. No one type of therapy can illustrate and solve every given obstacle, therefore together I have seen how each therapist can aid in helping and teaching one another about the collaborative efforts for curing and treating a young child. From this we end up with a more resourceful and effective creativity and end product. (Nachmanovitch, 1990)

The creative process and play are effective tools of therapy and play a huge role in my development as a therapist. With further work in the field, I will strive to enhance my creative mind, develop the appropriate use of my skills as a therapist and, above all, look to play and improvisation to assess my clients and provide the most effective therapeutic environment. I am continuously finding my inner voice, the one from inside my heart, which will allow me to speak

for myself and enable my own natural creativity to release and help many people in the world. (Nachmanovitch, 1990) Life can cast many obstacles and irritations into our world, which can be turned into magnificent challenges and lessons. As we come across these difficult circumstances we are allowed to make choices, try to do the right things, and really make a difference in the world. These opportunities allow us to hone our skills, concentrate on our objectives, and move towards our innermost thoughts. "We become, then, no longer victims of circumstance, but able to use circumstance as the vehicle of creativity." (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p. 92) With this the creative process must be embedded into our hearts, and used in our everyday words and movements. With these simplistic actions, we can truly enhance our lives and the lives of many others.

## References

Nachmanovitch, S. (1990). *Free play: Improvisation in life and art*. New York: Penguin Putnam Inc.

*We thank Lori for this second article and for sharing more of her learning process with us. And we would also like to remind readers that we are always happy to receive articles, long or short. Whether you are an experienced dance therapist or still a student, just embarking on a new area of practice, or an "old hand", consider sharing your thoughts on dance therapy. As an editorial team we are committed to supporting and encouraging people's efforts to describe and conceptualise their work as an ongoing part of their own learning and as means to dialogue with others and enrich our shared understanding. Eds*

***Further to this, we include part of an ADTA listserve message from Heather Hill on the value of writing:***

*I would like to encourage even the most new of dance therapists to write about their work. Not all of us have a natural flair for writing, but all of us can develop some competence by practising. This writing can start with writing an information sheet on dance therapy or an article for the newsletter at one's place of work, or writing for other newsletters in related fields (in my case, in aged care) and on and on. The more you write, the better you get.*

*I have often thought how this "non-verbal" profession I'm in has required me to be more verbal, more articulate than ever I was before. Talking constantly, and especially writing, allows us to make the connections between what we do and the contexts (ie institutions etc) we work in. Translating what we do so that others can understand is part of this, but I believe that, as well, people are most struck by the conviction and knowledge which shine through a well crafted piece of writing. The word is powerful!*

*Practising the articulation of one's work therefore spreads the word about our profession. However, it also enables us to clarify our work for ourselves. Flannery O'Connor (1) writes: "I have to write to discover what I am doing. I don't know as well what I think until I see what I say; then I have to say it over again".*

*I say to students "Even when I knew nothing, I wrote about it !" So start writing whatever stage you're at!  
(HH)*

#### **Reference**

(1) Ely, M., Anzul, M., Friedman, T., Garner, D. & Steinmetz, A. (1991). Doing qualitative research: Circles with circles. London: Falmer Press.

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