

Healing the Inner City Child

Creative Arts Therapies with At-risk Youth

Edited by **Vanessa A. Camilleri**



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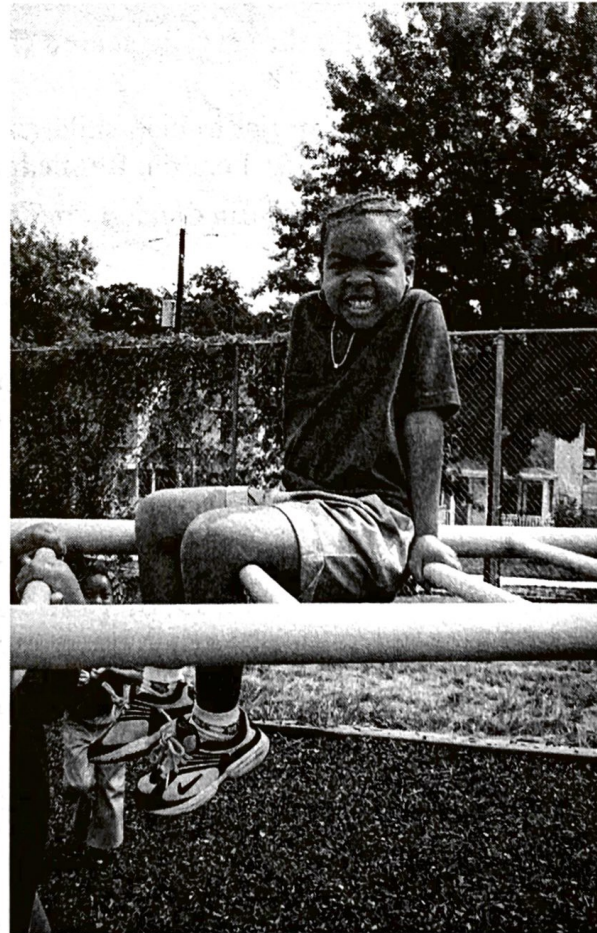
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CHAPTER 21

A Safe Distance

An Intermodal Approach to Creating a Country Retreat for City Girls who have been Abused

Julie Lacy, Reina Michaelson and Carla van Laar



This chapter presents an intermodal approach of working with 10–18-year-old urban girls, within the setting of a country retreat. The girls have either been abused or are at risk of abuse, and some have learning disabilities. The retreat is a house set in ten acres of bushland, 160kms from Melbourne, Australia. The aim of the retreat is to provide a space where the girls can heal from traumatic life experiences and build self-esteem, resilience, and trust in others. It offers a safe environment where the girls can be themselves, and provides recreational, creative, and therapeutic activities. The modalities used include visual arts, narrative, play, drama therapy, playback theatre,

and psychodrama. The experiences of three girls during the retreat illustrate therapeutic principles and processes. While the voices of the girls are their own, names and identifying details have been changed. Therapist voices are also present to explain therapist insights and process.

Introduction

As practitioners we have arrived at a place of shared understanding by travelling different roads. In this chapter we author some sections in the first person, and co-author other sections collaboratively. Rather than “case studies”, we present stories about our work with the girls.

Our literary style choice reflects our creative therapeutic practice. By using the first person voice we acknowledge and utilize the subjectivity of the therapist in forming authentic therapeutic relationships. From this perspective, authors are not conceived of as detached scientific observers of situations, but rather acknowledged as subjective, present and active co-participants in therapeutic encounters (Grainger 1999; Hyland Moon 2002; McNiff 1998). We have chosen a storying style in order to reflect the inherently arts-based nature of our work. Hyland Moon describes her style choice as “creative non-fiction, rather than clinical case histories” (p.15). Grainger argues that in researching and presenting the arts therapies, “art should be used to interpret art” (p.128). McNiff calls for discourses in arts therapies literature that more accurately reflect the creative processes and products utilized by arts therapists working creatively with clients. This is exemplified by our use of italics for dialogue, which mirrors dramatic interplay as a core element in our work.

As a facilitation and caregiving team, we share core values, the most central of which is “keeping children safe”. Based on shared knowledge, we value thinking, talking, art-making, storytelling, playing, and acting as they relate to safety, self and body image, relationships, bullying, and emotional, physical and sexual abuse.

When utilizing education, visual arts, narrative, play, drama and role we continuously balance our interventions and responses along continuums of distance and closeness, as well as safety and challenge. This balancing involves planned and spontaneous decisions that are informed by our educational, caregiving, artistic and therapeutic sensibilities. This chapter highlights the creation of safety and distance, both physical and metaphorical, and how these translate into therapeutic interventions for the girls.

Background to the retreat and authors' approaches

Julie Lacy

As a psychodrama psychotherapist I use role theory and role dynamics as the underlying philosophy for retreat activities. Drama, play and role are shared elements in the fields of psychodrama, drama therapy and playback theatre.

While these modalities are distinctly different (Bannister 1997, 2003; Chesner 1995; Jennings 1990; Salas 1993), the combining of theory and practice from each can produce wonderfully creative and therapeutic processes for group participants (Blatner 2000).

Role theory relates to the body of knowledge associated with the interactive functioning of human beings (Clayton 1994). Roles encompass consistent patterns of thoughts, beliefs, feelings, behaviours, and interactions that can be developed and modified (Remer 2000). Role dynamics describes a methodology used to investigate, examine, negotiate, develop, change and create roles as they exist in relation to and/or in response to the self, other people, or objects (Blatner and Blatner 2000). Roles are "the actual and tangible forms which the self takes" (Moreno 1964, p.153).

The purpose of using drama, play, and role at the retreat is to offer experiences that enable the girls to express themselves through roles that enhance their safety and well-being and to develop their role repertoire – the range of roles from which they can express and relate. Role training is my method of choice to work with this group.

Role training aims to bring about the development of specific, limited aspects of human functioning... it does not focus on a total personality reorganisation which is a major intent in a classical psychodrama session. (Clayton 1994, p.142)

Given that we are not engaging the girls in continuous regular retreats, it is essential that their therapeutic process be contained within the time boundaries of the weekend. Role training as opposed to classic psychodrama (where typically they would be revealing personal material in more depth) provides a safe and manageable process for the girls.

It is important, then, in this context, to distinguish my role as a role trainer from that of a psychodrama psychotherapist, and it is important that, as facilitators, we express ourselves through many roles such as supportive advocate, trusted co-creator, creative facilitator, caring teacher, excited motivator, safe boundary maker, interested listener, and inspiring leader. We also need to be spontaneous and develop new roles, should they emerge while relating to the girls.

Spontaneity is defined in psychodrama as an adequate response to a new situation or a new response to an old situation (Fox 1987). My aim is to enable the girls' spontaneity by providing safe activities using dramatic or role distancing (Blatner and Blatner 2000; Jennings 1990). The distance serves as a boundary between the girls and people, objects, or other parts of themselves, and provides safety for the girls as they engage and express. The intended therapeutic effect is to develop spontaneity by expanding their role system. This contributes to the development of their creativity, self-esteem, resilience, and appropriate interpersonal functioning.

Reina Michaelson

In 1995 I founded the Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Program (CSAPP) with the intention of reducing the prevalence and impact of child sexual abuse in Australia. Research available at that time increasingly acknowledged sexual abuse of children as a major social problem (Goldman and Goldman 1987). Furthermore, research indicated that there was a paucity of child sexual abuse prevention initiatives available in Australia, despite the potential effectiveness of education-based programs.

CSAPP provides a variety of workshops that seek to inform and empower children and young people ages 10 to 18. Topics include healthy body image, assertiveness, self-esteem, resilience, positive relationships, and bullying prevention. CSAPP's school-based "Staying Safe With People" program provides young people with information and skills that they can use to identify, avoid, or safely respond to unsafe or potentially abusive situations. All workshops are interactive and use a variety of teaching and therapeutic modalities, including didactic methods, theatre performance, visual arts, music, games, drama and action methods (Bannister 2003; Williams 1989). The workshops are implemented in schools by a team of experienced facilitators. Schools may request that the program be implemented as a preventative approach to personal safety, or to address a particular problem, such as a recent disclosure by a student.

The CSAPP retreat was created in response to the needs of children, as identified through CSAPP's school program, for a safe and rejuvenating environment that could encourage nurturing and supportive relationships with peers and adults (Michaelson 2001). Children who have participated in CSAPP's school-based program and who have been identified by their teachers as requiring further support are referred to the retreat. Retreats are typically run over a weekend or up to five days during school holidays. Up to eight children and six adults can attend a retreat program. Some children may attend the retreat once, while others may attend the retreat numerous times throughout the year, depending on their availability. The regular facilitators include a psychologist with expertise in child sexual abuse, a creative arts therapist, and a psychodrama psychotherapist. Other specialist facilitators may also attend, such as a self-defence instructor, storyteller, and bush gardener. Staff members from the participating school may also attend the retreat, such as the school psychologist, welfare coordinator, or classroom teacher.

Safety is a crucial element of the retreat program, and is achieved at a number of levels. The first is having the retreat physically located at a safe distance from the girls' everyday life – removed enough that they feel safe to explore issues that cause them discomfort, fear or pain, but close enough that they can return home if they need or want to. Another important factor is being surrounded by trusted adults with whom they feel safe or have an established relationship (Ambridge 2001).

Safety is also achieved by the adoption of "safety rules". These include general safety rules, such as the safe use of electrical appliances, fire safety and personal safety, as well as interpersonal safety rules. Disclosures of traumatic and/or abusive experiences in group settings are avoided by introducing an interpersonal safety rule. If a child has experienced unsafe touching of private parts it is safest if they share it privately with an adult they trust rather than with the whole group. We would say, for example, "You may feel like telling the whole group about your experience, especially if we are talking about the topic. However, after sharing such a personal experience with the whole group, you may wake up tomorrow morning and wish you hadn't told *everyone*. So, in order to help you feel safe, if you have a personal experience to do with unsafe touching of private parts that you wish to share with someone, it is safest to talk privately about that experience with an adult you trust in the group, rather than share it with the whole group." These safety rules are articulated and agreed upon by the girls at the beginning of the retreat. All adults model safe boundaries and appropriate touching, both with the children and with each other. For example, "Giving hugs can be good for saying hello or good-bye, or when someone is upset, but not all the time." It is important for girls who have had their personal boundaries violated and who have difficulty forming appropriate boundaries with others to experience this appropriate adult modelling.

Other principles from the "Staying Safe With People" program are interwoven in all retreat activities. Topics such as safe and unsafe touching, recognising early warning signs, the "No-Go-Tell" rule (if someone is making you feel unsafe, say no, run away and tell someone you trust, and keep telling until someone helps you), building a personal safety network, talking to someone you trust, persistence in telling, and remembering that the offender is always responsible in cases of abuse, are ever-present themes throughout the retreat experience.

Another important factor in the development of a safe environment is being prepared for, and responding appropriately to, disclosures of abuse. Girls who disclose are given the opportunity to share their experiences and feelings privately with one or more adults providing support. For example, "I'm glad you told me this. It can be difficult to share such experiences with others. You have been very brave, and I will work with you and help you to stay safe from now on." If a report to Protective Services is required, or ongoing counselling is necessary, this is sensitively explained (Palmer 2001).

Carla van Laar

My experience working in the field of creative arts therapy and my practice as a visual artist informs how I engage with the girls during the retreats. My philosophical approach is built on the arts, play, and narrative. The arts are integral to human experience. More than merely metaphor or rehearsal, the arts are ways

of communicating, exploring, understanding, choosing, destroying, creating, transforming, knowing, and being (Bannister 2003; Hyland Moon 2002; McNiff 1998). When people are supported and secure, they can play within the arts, experimenting and taking reasonable risks. People safely experience ways of knowing, acting, and being that are transferable to many situations, through the therapeutic distance offered by creative play within the arts (Cattanach 1997). People can author their own life stories through their actions and interactions (Freeman, Epston and Lobovits 1997; White and Epston 1990).

I am aware that the girls have been referred to the retreat because they have been, or are at risk of being, emotionally, physically, and/or sexually abused. This general awareness persists until individuals choose to disclose more. Things that children should ideally take for granted, such as having a stable and caring home life, knowing what is appropriate behaviour, having strong social networks, or feeling safe, cannot be assumed in this context. In planning and facilitating activities I aim to create opportunities for the girls to feel safe, and to experience themselves as creative, valuable, active and contributing individuals in the world. My role as a therapist is to encourage, support, witness and celebrate the girls as they bravely engage in these opportunities.

The retreat in action

After the two-hour drive watching the scenery change from city roads and power poles to dirt tracks and gum trees, we all piled out of the dusty van. Rain was drizzling but spirits were far from dampened. Even before the van was unloaded, the girls went straight to the dormitory bedroom, chose their beds for the night, and were settling in. Many hugs of greeting were exchanged between girls from different schools who hadn't seen each other since the last retreat. Within half-an-hour everyone was seated at the table (which was covered with a familiar patchwork tablecloth that the girls had created at a previous retreat), eating pizza and salad with the potbelly wood-burning stove blazing, and catching up on news. Hilde (12) accidentally spilled her juice on the tablecloth. Her reaction gave voice to the unspoken pain that the girls brought with them:

Hilde: *If anybody is going to spill something, spill it on my patch, because mine is the only one with a stain on it. Nobody else's has got a stain on it.*

Session One: "Totems" with Carla

After lunch I gathered the girls in the lounge for the first activity. Before I had figured out how to introduce the idea, I was offered the perfect lead.

Mia: *Is it something scary?*

Carla: *No – it's the opposite of scary! What would that be?*

The girls responded – “brave”, “courageous”, “unfearful”, and, with prompting, “safe”. Hilde demonstrated how difficult it was for her to feel safe by snuggling up on a dining chair before falling on the floor.

Hilde: *You're all nice and cosy...and then suddenly, someone rips the chair out from under you!*

As a group, we acknowledged that having the chair pulled out from under you would definitely make us feel unsafe, and used this opportunity to agree on how to behave towards each other during the retreat: with respect for safety and privacy.

The opening activity invited the girls to make totems about safety. This offered an opportunity to explore and create a protected environment for the rest of the weekend. We started by going for a walk through the grounds of the retreat, finding out how far it extended, and physicalizing the concept of safe boundaries by discovering the exact perimeters of the property. We walked through the long grass, discussing how to keep safe from snakes by making lots of noise, and how to keep safe from being lost by always staying together. We collected natural materials such as rocks, sticks, and grasses. Everyone was invited to find a place out-of-doors, close to the house, and to each use what she had found to create a totem as a guardian of the house for the weekend. Some of the girls worked together, and some worked individually.

They became engrossed in their constructions, some talking about meaning, others working silently. Zoe (17) and Mia (14) made an altar on a tree stump. They explained the significance of the different elements they had used.

Zoe and Mia: *Flowers for welcoming and love. Pretty, when you see flowers you are happy because they're beautiful. Straw for calmness and gentle because they're so frail. A stick for strength. Rocks for togetherness, we'll all be here for each other, solid. An altar for remembrance, like a temple, it's yours only.*

In contrast, Hilde chose to revisit a grave she had made the year before for three dead mice. She told us about it.

Hilde: *I dug them up [the dead mice] and put them all back together again. It doesn't sound very pleasant but it was. The flowers represent the mice's souls blossoming in heaven. The dry grass represents the retreat, the outback. The green sticks represent the mice's lifelines. Did you notice that when I told you about the third mouse that died it was raining, but after I explained it all [the totem] the sun came out. I wonder why that was?*

In choosing to offer totems as a starting point, I made use of solid external objects, with the intention of providing aesthetic distance through which the girls could engage in an active meditation on the theme of safety. The different ways they engaged in this activity and expressed themselves within it enabled

us, as facilitators, to have an understanding of where each girl “was at” at the beginning of the retreat. In particular, I was struck by Zoe and Mia’s “altar”, which seemed like a perfect formula for safety. Reina and I later reflected that it was like laying the foundations for a safe environment so that more difficult aspects of the girls’ experiences could be creatively explored. We also reflected that Hilde’s fascination with attending to the graves of three long-dead mice was in keeping with her frequent comments about death and dying.

Session Two: “Animal Planet” with Julie

The second activity the girls engaged in was drama-based. “Animal Planet” uses animal roles as a means of creating distance to explore reparative relating and role training in staying safe. Children who have been abused may have difficulties with maintaining appropriate physical and emotional boundaries (Bannister 1991, 1997, 2003). Animal Planet allows for the giving and receiving of safe physical touching including shaking hands, patting backs, and the occasional hug. This relating enables the girls to find safe ways to connect, interact, and give and receive care.

The girls made themselves comfortable on the lounge floor, closed their eyes and prepared for a journey to Animal Planet. They imagined themselves as their favourite animal and were asked to make a safe habitat for themselves. I prompted them to come out and play with the other animals, using their animal sounds and movements to communicate with each other. I asked half of them to pretend that they were wounded animals. The others were invited to find a way to care for the wounded ones. Hilde, in role as a lion, went to Zoe, who was in role as a wounded tiger, and pretended to scratch her across the face. Hilde then tried to care for another animal and tripped, yelling “Ouch!” It appeared to be difficult for her to be in the carer role and more natural for her to be wounded and attacking. When the roles of wounded and caring animals were reversed, Zoe moved immediately to Hilde to care for her, and Hilde was able to receive her empathic attention.

Carla entered Animal Planet in role as a threatening animal. In response, Hilde followed the animal to attack it. Mia, in role as a kangaroo, jumped away. The animals were given the power of language so they could discuss what to do about the threatening animal.

Zoe: *How do we get rid of it?*

Hilde: *You attack it.*

Zoe: *Maybe we should go up to it and see how it reacts. Maybe it’s shy or territorial, or just scared and acting tough to hide its fear. If we are friendly and welcoming, it might see that we are not threatening.*

Mia: *I think we should step back in case it tries to attack us. We could run off if it attacks, or all of us could surround it and let it know it's on our territory. It can come in if it's not going to act dangerously.*

Hilde: *We could give him [the animal had become a "him" now] a warning first. If he's not going to agree to what we are trying to do, we should attack it ourselves.*

Zoe: *We should have a welcoming approach. If it doesn't work we can use self-defence and say "back off".*

Zoe was empathetic to the animal's feelings, and willing to be "trusting acceptor", while also wary as "cautious planner". Hilde became "destructive attacker". She was keen to take control of the situation, but her suggestions to attack would have meant putting herself at risk, given the animal was much bigger and stronger than she. Mia's response as "careful organiser" reflected a safer and more boundaried approach. I asked the "animals" to look closely at the face of the threatening animal to help them decide whether they were safe having it near them.

Hilde: *It looks angry and disturbed.*

Zoe: *It needs to be helped.*

Hilde: *It's evil.*

Mia: *I'm scared of it, but the other part of me wants to help it.*

Hilde: *It's not scary but I'm worried it's going to hurt the other animals like the cats and dogs. I'm not scared of it because I'm a lion!*

Hilde saw a disturbed inner state in the threatening animal and a propensity to attack. Zoe interpreted that it needed help. These observations could be compared to assessments of an abuser. Mia, despite her fear, wanted to help the animal. We are reminded that children in abusive situations can experience conflicted role responses, causing extreme confusion, especially when the abuser is someone the child loves or trusts (Ambridge 2001).

Pam, the school counsellor, now entered Animal Planet in role as Queen of the Animals to role-model a safe approach. She chose to be an albatross because they always steer people in ships to safe places.

Pam: *I'm not seeing kind eyes. I'm seeing cold eyes and a hard mouth. I'm steering you all to a safe place now. Come with me. [The animals happily followed her as she swept her wings up high and enfolded them in her giant wingspan. She turned to the threatening animal.] I'm now banishing you from Animal Planet forever!*

I told the animals they were free to play safely again, which they did. Hilde ran to the couch, which the threatening animal had moved, and pushed it back to where it had been, thus re-establishing the safe boundary. We completed the session with everyone de-roling and sharing.

Zoe: *I liked the way we worked together and shared care and respect towards each other.*

Hilde: *The really mean animal treated me like I wasn't worth anything.*

Carla: *That's a good way to tell if you are unsafe.*

Hilde: *Its like you've been stabbed when people say, "You're nothing." You shouldn't even be in this world. Sometimes they don't even have to say anything. It's body language.*

Again, Hilde returned to her ever-present theme of non-existence. In previous retreats Hilde had found it difficult to play with the others, often sitting by herself and crying. In this sharing she was able to shed the distance of the animal role and speak about her own feelings. By expressing herself from the role of "worthless nothing" she was developing the progressive role of "courageous truth speaker".

Session Three: "Talent Show"

There are always unplanned, unfacilitated, but very significant moments during retreats. After dinner in front of the fire, we – Julie and Carla – had one such moment with Zoe. She confided that she had been crying six out of seven days a week, that she was feeling isolated and emotionally at the end of her tether, and that she wanted to move out of her home and care for herself. We discussed these things at length and in detail. We talked about how brave, strong and beautiful Zoe is, and also about people she can trust and turn to when she needs to talk. Through the act of talking and being heard, Zoe told us, she felt a lot better already.

When the conversation was finished we all gathered in the lounge room for the "Talent Show", a traditional feature of each retreat, which provides an opportunity for the celebration of the girls' strengths and talents. A red velvet curtain was hung as a backdrop, creating a sense of theatre. Traditionally, each girl performs an act for the group, such as dancing, singing, reciting poetry, or stand-up comedy. The atmosphere was celebratory and encouraging. Zoe opted to take a leadership role as "MC". She introduced the other girls' acts with encouragement and appreciation for their uniqueness, talents and courage. Her ability to make others feel good about themselves reflected the earlier conversation and illustrated her attempts to treat others in the way she wants to be treated.

At the end of the performances the girls were invited to visit the "Magical Toy Room", a toy-filled room painted with rainbows, trees, and waterfalls, to

choose a toy to take home. We explained that each toy is a keepsake from this happy time, and serves as a tangible connection with their talents, strengths, and personal courage. Some girls have taken their toys with them to help them feel secure in exceptionally challenging situations, such as testifying in court.

Session Four: "Magic Shop" with Julie

The final session of the day was "Fantastic Magic Shop" an adaptation of the traditional warm-up activity, Magic Shop (Blatner 1997; Starr 1977). In this context we used it as a grand finale to the evening, co-facilitated by Carla as the shopkeeper in role as "beautiful Fairy Godmother", spinning a pink parasol. The shop became a therapeutic container in which the girls could spontaneously create what they needed through the distancing of fantasy (Bannister 2003). My role was "curious, supportive director", while Reina's was "excited, appreciative witness". The Fairy Godmother's task was to trade something the girls no longer wanted or needed for something they did want or need. I supported the girls to step up and start negotiating with the Fairy Godmother. Unwanted items were stored in an imaginary "safe" under the shop counter, and the new items were dramatically mimed and presented to the girls.

Zoe: *I'd like to get rid of some of my tears. I cry six days out of seven. If I could get rid of three-quarters of that it would be good. Everyone needs to cry every now and then so I'll keep a quarter for regular, normal times to cry...*

Zoe used an imaginary vacuum-cleaner to draw out her river of tears, and used the reverse cycle to deposit them into the Fairy Godmother's upturned parasol.

Fairy

Godmother: *Would you like me to use some of these tears to water the daffodils?*

Zoe: *Yes, please, and then put the rest in the safe... I also need a fresh start.*

Fairy

Godmother: *Would you like one fresh from the fridge or the oven?*

Zoe: *A vanilla fresh start with sprinkles on top. Plus some extra happiness. I really need one ASAP. In a colorful sparkly take-away bag made of satin with daffodils.*

After building a solid foundation through her totem, expressing the caring part of herself in Animal Planet, and chatting privately about her problems by the fire, Zoe chose to use the distance of the Magic Shop to reveal her vulnerability, with the whole group as the audience. The group witnessed her in the role of "truthful self-nurturer" as she expressed her needs to those she trusted.

Having witnessed Zoe's exchange, Mia confidently stepped up to the shop.

Mia: *Can I trade in all my anger? Can I give you my life's worth of anger?*

Julie: *Do you want to give her all your anger?*

Mia: *I think I'll keep a bit for myself, but I don't want to be angry all the time anymore. I'll keep some just to protect myself.*

In expressing her request for something new, Mia spontaneously engaged in the creation of her own internal “fantastic” safe place.

Mia: *I would like my own secret garden so that no-one can bother me when I need time out and so nobody can come into it.*

Fairy

Godmother: *What kind of garden would you like?*

Mia: *Like the Garden of Eden. No walls. No people. But with animals like Pegasus, plus a waterfall, with two trees and a hammock. Blue sky, no clouds, sun, fruit, but no forbidden fruit, and where the animals are playing with each other.*

Fairy

Godmother: *How would you like to have this garden?*

Mia: *I'll have it compressed and put it in my heart so no one knows that I have it.*

Mia's expression of safety through her totem, and her warm-up in Animal Planet, appear to have enabled her to develop her spontaneity. By creating a safe garden into which she could retreat, and by placing it in her heart, she created the role of “protective self-carer”. Her request that there be no forbidden fruit and no people seemed to free her from “scared carer” of others to “loving carer” of self.

Hilde stepped up to the shop.

Hilde: *I don't know what I want to get rid of. Oh yeah – my cough. And my back pain. The pain is in my whole back. It's white, dead pain. Deadly pain. I'll just rip it out of my back. I'm just weird.*

Eighteen months earlier, at a similar retreat during Magic Shop, Hilde had asked for a new body because she felt her body was dead. In the interim she had spoken of wanting to kill herself. Throughout the retreat she suffered from a chronic cough and made frequent complaints about various bodily ailments, a common sign of embodiment of the trauma of sexual abuse (Bannister 2003). Hilde coughed into the parasol, then reached over her shoulder, wrenched the “pain” out of her back, and deposited both into the safe.

Hilde: *I don't know what to get [she spent some minutes deciding]... a unicorn. A white unicorn. Life size. Big enough for me to ride on. It would give me fun.*

Fairy

Godmother: *Can you think of the name of the unicorn? The unicorn will come when its name is called.*

Hilde: *I can't think of a name. [She spent more minutes trying.]*

Fairy

Godmother: *What does the unicorn look like?*

Hilde: *It's white with blue eyes... a pink horn... loves to eat salad and chips... Its name... is... Reina!*

Reina became the unicorn and Hilde rode on her back around the room, with the rest of us waving and calling up to her as she flew past us. When Reina put her down she was crying and laughing at once.

Hilde: *I'm just too happy! I'm too happy! [She gradually stopped laughing and smiled through her tears.] I really am alive!!*

I am aware that one of the medieval myths surrounding the unicorn is that it symbolises purity and innocence. I saw Hilde's choice as a beautiful act of claiming back her childhood. By naming the unicorn Reina, Hilde allowed herself to acknowledge and receive Reina's care, as her emerging role of "happy, alive child" was born.

All the girls' unwanted pain was left under the table in the "safe" overnight, and the next morning Carla brought the "safe" outside to the campfire. The girls, one by one, opened it and ceremoniously threw their pain into the flames.

Session Five: "Choose your own Adventure" with Carla

For Sunday morning we planned a breakfast barbeque and "choose your own adventure" outing to a local park, with the intention of giving the girls the opportunity to have experiences outside of the contained space of the retreat. The adventure outing is a regular event, and a common feature of these excursions is the inclusion of a portable CD player, with the girls' own choice of music providing a soundtrack for our wacky adventures. As we boarded the minibus, I spontaneously adopted the role of a kooky flight attendant named "Cabina Crew". Ms Crew explained the safety features of the craft, including the option of bells, whistles, flare guns, and our team of rescue helicopters if we were to land in crocodile-infested waters. Ms Crew then invited the girls to think about their adventure.

Cabina

Crew: *It's your choice what we do when we get there... Some ideas might be something you have done before that you enjoy or something new.*

Mia: Can we play games?

Zoe: Can it be Chick Footy?

All: Yeah! Wow! Let's!

“Chick Footy” is a game invented at a previous retreat. It involves turning up the volume of the girls’ favourite pop songs, kicking the football to each other, running, wrestling, yelling, screaming, cheering, and generally being noisy and taking up public space!

On disembarking from our “craft” after “landing”, Julie started cooking breakfast and it was my job to have a Chick Footy adventure with the girls. We discovered that the football had been left at home! As Cabina Crew, I officially sent an SOS message to Reina via my mobile phone, and loudly announced that there was no need to panic because our backup team was bringing the football to the park. This meant we had to fill time and try to keep warm on the bitterly cold morning. Zoe offered to lead us in some stretching exercises. Hilde sat to the side, shivering and complaining. I walked over to her and took her hands, gently pulling her to a standing position, propelling her forward with my hands on her hips.

Cabina

Crew: Where are we going, Hildeena Crew? It's up to you. Come on everybody, all aboard, Hildeena is taking us on an adventure.

The other girls obligingly joined the “train”. Hilde started at a slow shuffle around the outskirts of the park, then, declaring it was boring, headed for the adventure playground and proceeded to dazzle us with a marvellous exhibition of her physical prowess, leading us through tunnels, around sharp corners, under low-lying obstacles, jumping from platforms with dizzying precision to the flying fox – all of which we had to follow! When Reina arrived with the football we were warmed up for a good game of Chick Footy.

In Australia the game of football is a very male sport, with women generally taking spectator roles. Chick Footy is definitely not a spectator sport! I found the sights and sounds of the girls claiming their rights to be seen and heard and actively enjoying their physicality very moving, not least because of my awareness of the traumas they have been through. Playing Chick Footy seemed to embody the exact opposite of Hilde’s comment from the previous day, “you shouldn’t even be in this world”.

On our way back, after breakfast, Hilde happily adopted the role of fellow crew member Hildeena Crew, reminding passengers of safety requirements, helping to cross-check cabin doors, and navigating us back to the house.

Session Six: Assessing the Retreat – “Playback Moments”

In order to provide enjoyable and rewarding experiences that are relevant to the girls’ needs, an evaluation is conducted at the end of each retreat. Different

formats are used, including anonymous written feedback, or a playback theatre session (Salas 1993). The evaluation seeks to discover what aspects of the retreat the girls found most and least enjoyable, rewarding, useful and challenging.

We chose playback theatre. Playback is a theatre form where audience members tell personal stories that are real events from their lives and watch them immediately “played back” by actors and musicians. The performers may be brought in as a professional team, or they may be a part of the group. The storyteller is known as the “teller” and the facilitator of the playback theatre performance is called the “conductor”. There are specific techniques or forms that the performers use to convey short moments, and a range of improvisatory styles to illustrate and interpret longer stories. This very flexible model is used throughout the world in a broad range of contexts, from clinical, to community, to corporate. It has been adapted for the retreat program to maximize teller and performer participation in a safe and playful manner, and to minimize concern for theatre aesthetic.

Sitting around the campfire, the girls reflected on challenging and important moments from the weekend. Julie conducted each girl in role as the “teller” to express their moments. Reina and the other girls were the audience. Carla role-modelled acting in every story moment, and was joined by two different girls from the audience who became actors in each story. As conductor, Julie directed the actors to sculpt with their bodies a “frozen moment” or “photograph” to show the story moment. The teller was invited to comment on how she felt after witnessing her moment played back.

Julie interpreted the girls’ story moments, using role descriptions as a component of the evaluation. We contrasted the girls’ commentaries about their most challenging moments with their responses to their most rewarding moments. We thus observed the girls’ transition. They began the retreat in a “place” where they were relating through roles that isolate and inhibit. They travelled to a “new place” by exploring, discovering, developing and strengthening progressive, functional roles (Clayton 1994). Expressing themselves in these roles enabled them to experience connection and spontaneity. In practical terms, for the girls in their everyday lives, connection promotes their ability to form mutually respectful and caring relationships, while spontaneity enables them to adapt and respond creatively to challenges in their lives. This is best illustrated by their own voices, which we present with the closing thoughts.

Closing thoughts

Zoe:

I found it hard to push out the negative stuff from home and school and to focus on the good things happening. I was worried how my behaviour would affect other people.

Zoe: *I had a deep and meaningful conversation with Carla and Julie. I felt important and cared for and good about myself. I felt like dancing! It was really good.*

Zoe's story moments reveal her retreat journey from "depressed daughter", "isolated student", and "anxious acceptance seeker" to "truthful revealer", "trusting teller", "nurtured self-appreciator" and "joyful dancer".

Mia: *Trying to remember who everybody is. I felt embarrassed that I should have known who you [Julie and others] were.*

Mia: *Being here with all my friends and getting to know people even more.*

Mia's retreat story changes from casting herself as "forgetful, embarrassed retreat member" to being "comfortable retreat member", "accepted friend", and "happy socialiser".

Hilde: *When I had to see the mice that had died, again, I was angry that nature had ruined their home, so I made a decision that I would fix it up and create a new mouse home. I buried the mice next to each other and made the new home nice and solid.*

Hilde: *My most important moment was meeting everyone and spending time with my lovely friend Zoe and with Reina. I was very, very happy. [The actors played back the moment.] It's making me happy just looking at the photo of happiness!*

Hilde's retreat journey shows her being "angry mouse carer", "decisive creator", and "determined re-constructor", and seeing herself as "happy socialiser", "loving friend" and "happy self-appreciator".

Creating safety and distance for ourselves

Julie

A shared emotional debrief in the bus en-route home with Carla, a bath and lighting a candle to honour the courage of the girls and writing in my journal was how I created some distance for myself immediately after the retreat. The following day I dealt with the moments that had a profound impact on me in my personal therapy and supervision session, using psychodramatic methods. The effects of these processes both sustain a safe distance and deepen and enrich the privileged journey of working with these beautiful girls.

Reina

Enjoyable and fulfilling as the retreats are, they are also quite exhausting! In celebration of a wonderful retreat, I rewarded myself with a scented bubblebath, flickering candles and soft music. I reminded myself of the joy that is found in witnessing others transform pain and grief into joy and strength... And then I fell asleep!

Carla

My personal time to create safety and distance for myself comes when I go for a jog in the park, do yoga, and when I write or paint. After this retreat I was running in the winter sun around a local inner city park, when these words came to me:

Dear Zoe,

Thank you

for leaving your river of tears

in the vase

with the daffodils

It seems that they have been

magically transformed

by the colour

of the flowers

Because today, when I was jogging

I felt an amazing sensation

a buoyancy

an energy

carrying me onward

A golden river in full stream

flowing through

my heart and

washing away my doubts and fears

It was your tears

that you don't need so many of

Thank you

for leaving some

for me.

EPILOGUE: E-MAIL FROM ZOE TO CARLA TWO WEEKS AFTER THE RETREAT

Zoe:

Hey Carla, great to hear back from you... Yes the tears have lessened immensely!! How have things been for you?

Note

Julie Lacy, Reina Michaelson and Carla van Laar have worked as a team in the Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Program (CSAPP) since 2000. Together they have recently co-designed and facilitate “Chill Skills”, an anxiety prevention program for adolescents, with Anxiety Disorders Association of Victoria (ADAVIC).

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