

USING COLLABORATIVE POETRY IN CHILD PSYCHOTHERAPY:  
THE TALE OF THE TERRIBLE RABBIT  
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*Abstract*

*In recent papers (Seiden, 2004a, 2004b), I've examined parallels between poetry and psychoanalysis in the way language is used to create, extend, transform and give voice to meaning. What follows is a presentation of work with a child therapy patient of mine which made use of these parallels in employing collaborative poetry as a means to a psychoanalytic end. The parallels suggest several lessons for psychoanalysts. One among them is that interpretation may be less important than we've been taught to think for the working through which is essential in enduring change. A second--as Winnicott (1971b) famously pointed out-- is that joy in the process is an important part of the child therapy experience.*

*Key words: psychoanalysis, poetry, play therapy*

It has always been the challenge of child psychotherapy to find ways around the fact that most children are not able to talk to their therapists directly about their life and their problems. Early practitioners as diverse in theoretical orientation as Anna Freud (1928,1955), Melanie Klein(1961), Carl Rogers (1939), Virginia Axline (1947) and, more recently and notably, D. W. Winnicott (1971, 1971b, 1977) all stressed their reliance on symbolic play. The history of work in this field (see for example, Drisko, 2000) has done nothing to change this reliance. For one example among a great many, Ginott (1961) remarks "the play of a child is talk with toys as words." The work I present here, which depended on the use of playful symbolic language, is no exception. Especially at first, this child could not and did not want to talk to me directly about her experience. She was, however, interested in word play--and in drawing, and in her therapist. She enjoyed making collaborative poems with me. These poems were important in helping her to achieve a capacity for directness, clearer self-understanding and clearer

communication with important others in her life. Taken together, the poems (and her stories and drawings and letters) make a compelling record of her progress.

## Athena

Athena (not her real name) is a round-face, chunky, athletic, curly haired child of mixed white and African-American biological parents and similarly mixed (white mother and African American father) adoptive parents. She was seven and a half when I first met her and was brought by her adoptive parents for treatment. (Athena never knew her biological parents and it is her adoptive parents I refer to in what follows.) Her parents were concerned with Athena's oppositional and defiant behavior problems at home and with her bed-wetting and withholding of stool. No school problems were reported: indeed, she was in a Gifted and Talented program at school and doing well there.

Significantly with regard to Athena's symptoms, her mother was both hysterical and obsessively driven, bathing the child frequently especially following use of the toilet, compulsively cleaning up spills, nagging Athena about weight and diet, screaming at her to buckle her seat-belt. I understood her mother's often out of control behavior to be an overcompensatory effort to assuage deep and anxious self-doubt.

It was apparent to me that Athena's behavior problems grew in large measure out of a frightened, angry, resistant and ashamed struggle with her mother, and, also, out of her disappointment in her loving but exhausted father. She was also regularly a witness to and sometimes a not so innocent factor in raging fights between her parents. (I counseled the parents directly on these matters both before and after their adoption of Athena.)

There was an ameliorating condition: Athena spent much of her time with a grandmotherly Hispanic baby-sitter--who cared for her after school, often brought her to her therapy sessions and provided her with much steady and common sense mothering.

The work that I describe here took place over a two and a half year period between October 2001 and June 2004, from the time Athena was 7 and in 2nd

Grade until she was 10 and in 4th Grade. In the last six months--and by Athena's preference--many of our sessions were conducted jointly with her mother. I count it as the significant achievement of our work that by the end of two years of treatment (Jan 04) she was indeed able and willing to address things in her life directly--which she did in her poems and we did in the joint sessions with her mother. Throughout and to the last, however, she preferred writing to talking.

A playful, collaborative writing exchange between us was what carried the treatment forward. When therapy was discontinued, in June of 2004, she was considerably less defiant and oppositional. Unhappily, occasional bed-wetting was still a problem. (I will say more about this below.)

### The Treatment Process

From the outset, and like most children, Athena knew why she was in therapy and was interested in me and in our visits, but she responded to any attempt at direct conversation about troubles with a shrug and a giggle. Indeed, in a characteristic gesture that I did not understand fully until some time later, Athena would often start her initial sessions by taking off her shoes, lying on the floor and hiding her face in her coat. Of course, I remarked on this, asking if she felt shy, wanted to hide, wished she was a baby, didn't want to talk and so forth. She was never able to say. But I did come to understand the obvious: that this hiding was expressive of the shame dynamics that were at the center of her difficulties.

While child psychotherapy depends on symbolic play, children differ greatly in the way they play (see for example, P. Kernberg's, 2000, overview of "forms of play"). The challenge for every therapist is to establish the specific play-discourse in which significant and problematic feelings can be expressed and worked through. To start with, I had to get us away from the games Athena would select from the toy-chest--the Connect-Four, the tiddlywinks, the basketball game--which she was good at but which I quickly came to feel were being used as a resistance. I presented her with an unlined notebook and a new set of magic markers and said that we were going to spend at least the beginning of each weekly session and writing and drawing in it. I said she could do drawings, and stories if she wanted to. Athena found writing easy and natural and she came to

expect and to enjoy starting each session writing and drawing in her notebook. But she preferred, or didn't know anything but, stories lifted from books and television; her characters were often "scared" but her endings were insistently and unconvincingly happy and formulaic.

We needed a kind of writing which would take her away from defensive formulas, something more associative, more surprising. I decided to try collaborative poems following contemporary American poet Kenneth Koch's model (see his "Wishes Lies and Dreams: teaching children to write poetry", 1970). Koch in his teaching would provide simple, repetitive structures and ask the child to come up with the content. He would encourage looseness, wackiness, silliness, playfulness--all as a way of getting away from the formulaic.

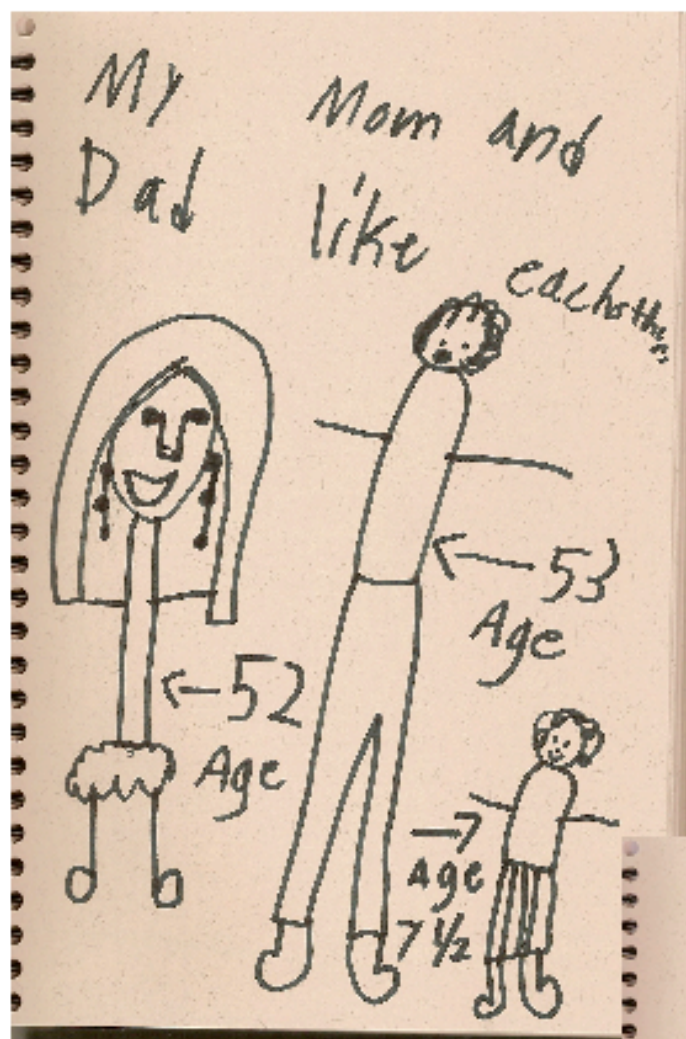
For Athena and me, this exchange became a kind of verbal version of Winnicott's famous "squiggle game" (1971b). I would suggest what I thought would be interesting four line repetitive structures: four crazy lies, four wishes, four wishes with colors in them, four times "I used to be, but now...", four comparisons--each member of my family "is just like" an animal, or a noise, or a thing. It would be her job to fill in the blanks (so to speak). I explained that poems didn't have to rhyme. The repetition and the variation within and the ideas conveyed would make the poem. (Koch is eloquent on the matter of rhyming--when language is chosen for the purpose of rhyme, meaning tends to be sacrificed.) I found myself inventing new four line structures as we went along--trying to pick up on and extend what cues Athena was giving me as to what was on her mind.

I was pleased to find that our poems did allow us to move away from conventional and defensive narratives and into more meaningful expression. I'm sure I communicated some of my own sense of pleasure in inventive writing, poetry and imaginative play. I wanted to make it clear that I very much respected this mode of experiencing even if it meant leaving content uninterpreted (at least for the time being) to speak for itself.

We wrote in every session, but I tried to be sensitive to when she'd had enough--we tended to finish our hour with a game of tiddlywinks. We kept the scores of our games in the notebook too. I didn't want things to feel too precious--which could be another kind of inhibition on expression.

To look closely now at some of her writings and drawings (I regret that space requires limiting my discussion to just a few selected examples from more than two and a half years worth of work): In her first notebook entries (Fall 01, age 7-6) Athena responded to the challenge of the empty page as if she were in school. She drew a (somewhat idiosyncratic) “tooth map” for example, a diagram of her own teeth, like something she had done or seen in class. She drew dimes and quarters and counted them, as in a math lesson.

When I suggested that she might want to tell some stories, she did begin to speak a little in her own voice. In a variant telling (Spring 02, age 8-0) of Alice in Wonderland, her charmingly and literally drawn Queen had a “big butt”, there was a man with “his teeth sticking out of his mouth” and Alice was “really, really, really scared and crieng (sic)”. The rabbit which led Alice through this “bad dream”, as you will see, was to reappear later in poems. Her characters did have scary adventures, but these anxieties were bound up in happy endings, conventional acceptability and denial. She did a significantly wishful drawing of her family under the title “My Mom and Dad like each other”. See figure 1



Collaborative Poetry, Figure 1. My Mom and Dad, My Heart

I tried to get her to think about families which were not (consciously) her own. And I encouraged and applauded her growing playfulness. She did a “snowman family” riding their bicycles to winter wonderland in order to avoid melting. She drew a bird family--the father a blue jay, the mother a cardinal, the baby looking

like the father.

Here's a story that tells her story. (Transcribed with her spelling and syntax but without her colorful illustrations.)

*Once there was a boy who always cried. His mouth looked so big and wide. All you could see was a big hole like a cave. His friends thought he looked weird. So he gave the boy some of his favorite candies. His favorite candies was candy necklaces. But he was still crying because his neck was to to big to fit a necklace around him. So his mouth grew bigger and bigger. They wouldn't play with him because he had orange and polkadot skin. He was sad because his friends wouldn't play with him. When the boy grew up he was a clown. His mouth grew happy. The end.*

Now some poems (Fall 02, age 8-6). The first ones involved teaching the method--but her concerns are not far from the surface. (In all the transcriptions which follow, the spelling and syntax are Athena's.)

A wish poem:

*I wish I wish I was a fish.  
I wish I was in kindergarden again.  
I wish I had a unicorn.  
I wish the moon was a big cookie.*

A comparison poem:

*My mom is like a lion when she screams.  
My dad is like a dinosaur when he walks.  
My babysitter is like a lamb when she's happy.  
I'm like a chimpanzee when I jump around.*

A color poem:

*My dad is blue because I put blue ink in the pool.*



*My mom is green because she stepped on the grass.  
My gerbil is black because he rolls around in the mud.  
I am yellow because I shine like the sun.*

Another comparison poem:

*My leg is like a rubberband because it is stretchy.  
My head is like a lollipop because it is fat.  
My belly is like a trampoline because it is scuishy.  
My heart is like a happy person because it is happy.*

She still wants to make happy endings. See figure 1. "My Heart". Note that in this drawing, while the heart is anatomically correct, she's blond and white. (Although she does have brown arms.) Her happiness is unpersuasive.

We found a central and organizing metaphor (March and April of 2003, age 9-0) in the "Terrible Rabbit".

*The terrible rabbit used to be sad but now he is happy.  
The terrible rabbit used to be mad but now he is angry.  
The terrible rabbit used to be sleepy but now he is grumpy.  
The terrible rabbit used to be fat but now he is skinny.*

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*Once there was a rabbit. But he wasn't ordinary. He went to school. He was the smartest. He answers all the questions in the whole school. Even better than the fifth grade. He always gets candy and stickers for being a great student. One night he smiled at the mirror so much that his smile got stuck on him. Even when he was sad. So they all laughed at him forever and ever. But now it's back to normal and his friends are to.*

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*The terrible rabbit said no because he hates carrots.*

*The terrible rabbit said no because he is fat.*  
*The terrible rabbit said no because he's not skinny.*  
*The terrible rabbit said no because he can't eat candy.*

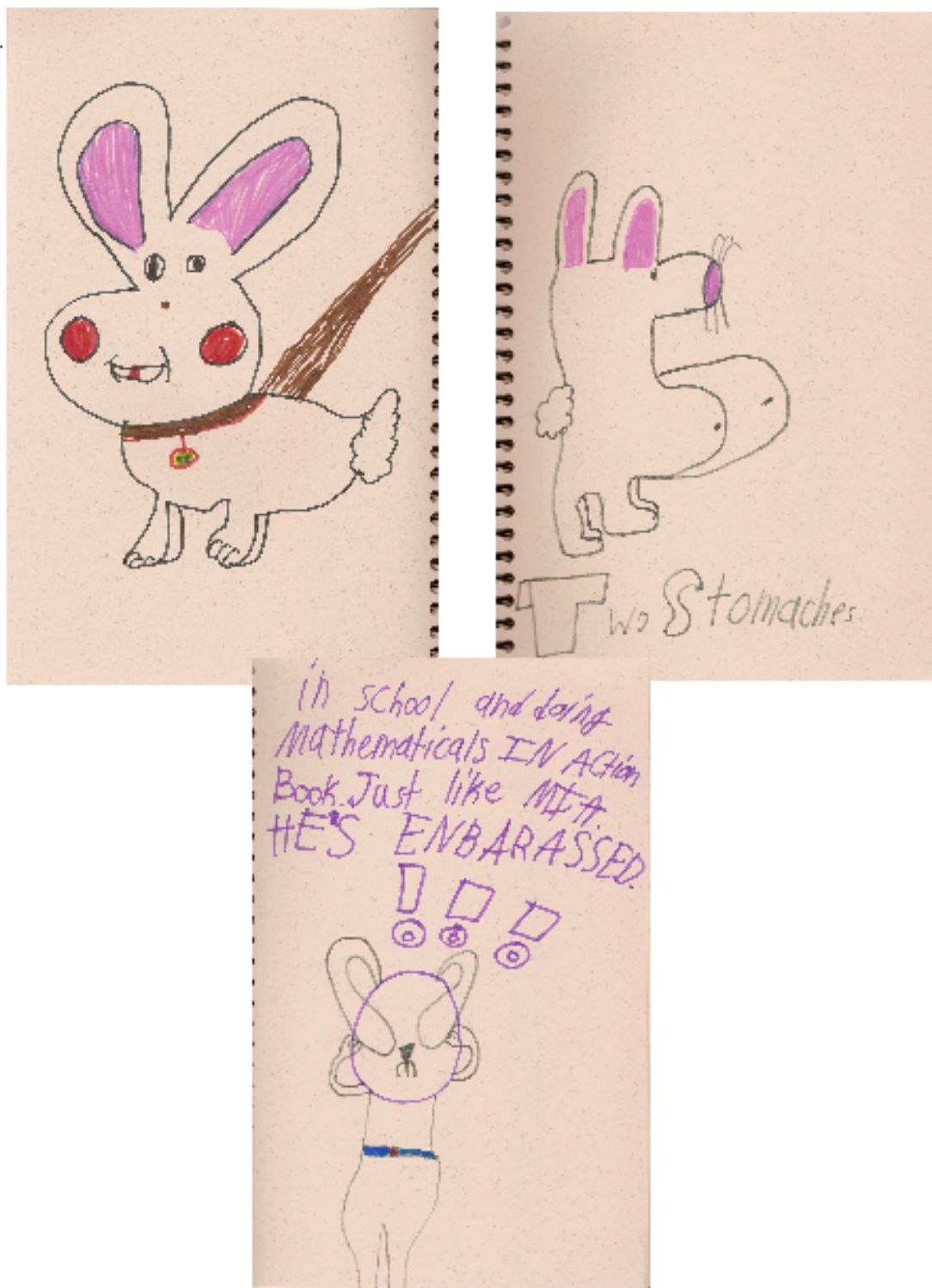
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*The terrible rabbit feels sad because his friends laugh at him.*  
*The terrible rabbit feels mean because he is bossy.*  
*The terrible rabbit feels happy because his friends don't laugh.*  
*The terrible rabbit feels weird because his ears hang in his face.*  
*The terrible rabbit also feels weird because he has two stomachs.*

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*The terrible rabbit feels embarrassed because he is fat.*  
*The terrible rabbit feels embarrassed because he has no friends.*  
*The terrible rabbit feels embarrassed because he eats too much.*  
*The terrible rabbit feels embarrassed because his ears hang in his face*  
*when he is in school doing Mathematics In Action book. Just like MIA.*  
*He's embarrassed!!!*

Note the freely expressed bad feelings here--some lifting of the denial; her concern with being fat (her mother was in high gear at this point on the matter of Athena's diet.); her shame ("embarrassment"). The "Terrible Rabbit" pictures that go with the writing are in Figure 2.



Collaborative Poetry, Figure 2. The Terrible Rabbit

Now, some sessions later, a further lifting of denial, a picture of her embarrassed.  
(And I must say a pretty good cartoon likeness of herself! See Figure 3.



Collaborative Poetry, Figure 3. Me embarrassed about my math test

After the “embarrassed” picture, June 03-Fall 03, (age 9+) Athena began to be able express her feelings about things quite directly in a series of “What bothers me” poems.

*My mom screaming bothers me.*

*My dad roaring bothers me.*

*Me not looking like my mom bothers me.*

*My mom not liking Ben bothers me.*

The poem is accompanied by illustrations--two color swatches made with magic marker: yellow, labeled “My Mom, light skin” and “Me. My color is dark skin” in black and brown marker. Ben is her best friend--and considered a bad influence by her mother.

In Jan 04, age 9-8) we began to have joint sessions with Athena’s mother--at first at her mother’s request and then by Athena’s.

Athena’s would lie on the floor listening and sometimes interjecting a whispered comment while her mother sat on my couch and talked to me, mostly complaining about Athena. I hit on the idea of having Athena continue to write while we were in joint sessions. I gave her paper and makers and told her she could write and draw while we were all talking. I opened a drawer on my desk and said it would be my mail box and any time she wanted to she could send me a letter. She liked the idea and began to send letters. I would stop and say to her mother, “Excuse me, I think I have mail.” Sometimes I wrote back. And I would ask Athena if I could share my mail with her mother--to which she always assented. Everybody enjoyed the game, including her mother who, to her credit, did have a sense of humor. I also think the game and my presence provided her mother with a sense of control over her own often out of control feelings of rage and shame.

Here’s a sample three way conversation (April 04, age 9-11). Athena’s mother is complaining about the relationship with Ben. Athena and I are exchanging “letters” about it--writing responses and “mailing” them to each other; I’m reading these aloud to her mother.

*H: Why did you call Ben when your Mother said you shouldn't?*

*A: Because I want him to come over.*

*H: But your Mom gets very mad! Doesn't that upset you?*

*A: A little*

*H: So what should we do about that?*

*A: Have playdates only on Saturdays.*

*H: How do we get a mom and daughter working together?*

*A: Work together by talking and being calm not screaming and being MEAN!!!!*

And at about this time too, (age 10-0) Athena (with her baby sitter's help--you can hear her voice here) brought this letter along to her session--and "sent" it to me to give to her mother! I regard this as Athena's magna carta.

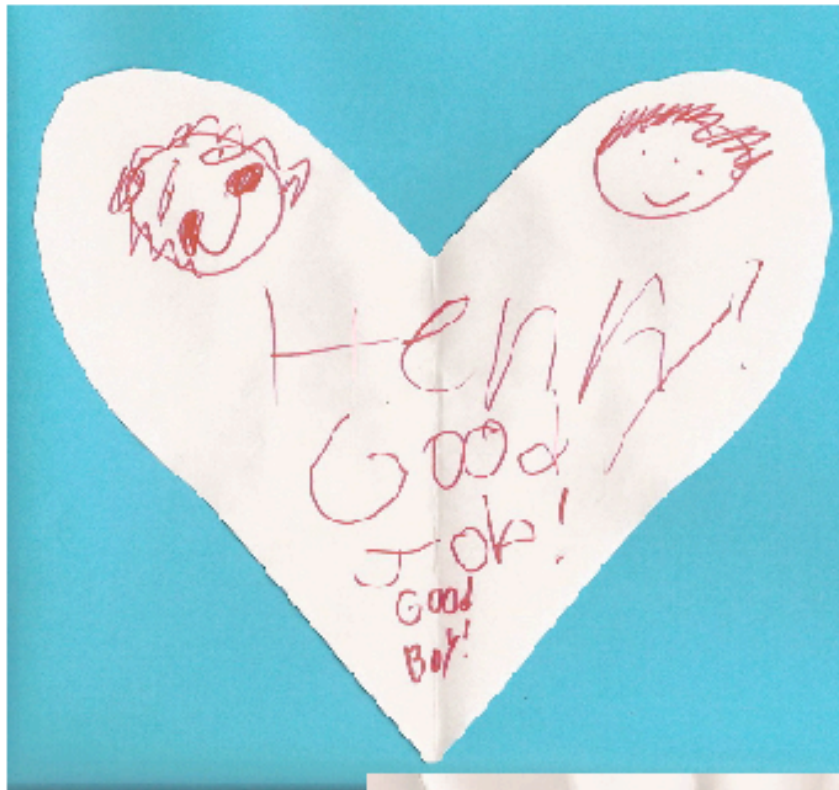
*I don't like it when you scream and fight so please mommy let daddy be. And daddy please love mommy more because she love you and she cry a lot for you and I get upset when I see her crying a lot. Please love mommy a lot. It hurt my ears and it hurt me a lot and hide under my blanket and pee in my bed because I am upset when you and daddy are fighting a lot. Mommy I don't like when you rip out the pages of daddys books. Mommy I get very upset when you hit daddy and give him a buby and daddy I don't like it when you tell my moma the F\_\_\_ word and throw things at my mommy and you said bad words to daddy and I want to stop now all your fighting is making me to have nightmares and the next day I feel angry and upset in school. I don't feel happy. Mommy when daddy close the door and you start banging at the door as you want to break it. Daddy I hate when you pull mommy hair. She cry a lot for days. I want you to be happy so I could be happy. Love, Athena.*

The letter is illustrated on the bottom with two hearts labeled "Mom" and "Dad" and a small heart, labeled "Athena", suspended, like a balloon on a string, between them.

Athena also sent "airmail" expressions of her gratitude (and love) for me and for the process. ("Airmail" because these were folded up and made into paper

airplanes.) Two of them are in Figure 4.





Collaborative Poetry, Figure 4. Good Job and God Bless Henry

In the sessions which followed the delivery of her letter, Athena's capacity to express things directly grew measurably. Here's a written, "air mail" answer to a

direct question about the “pee pee problem”.

*Dear Dr,*

*Its okay but sometimes I still do it. Its like a pattern kind of. Like 1 week I do it and the other I don't. Also for the whole week my mom and dad did not fight probably because they had some time alone.*

Here are some last poems. In this one, she says she wants to write her own poem--and writes this:

*My dad screams.*

*My moms mean.*

*I am none of those silly rhymes.*

When Athena doesn't quite know where to go with this poem, I suggest she might want to exaggerate--or that sometimes it's interesting to turn things inside out and say the opposite. She does both.

*My mom is the screaming queen.*

*My dad is the laughing joker.*

*I'm the princess of pranks--and more.*

*My gerbil is the sleeping pet.*

*My mom is the quiet mouse.*

*My dad is the crying monkey.*

*I'm the meanie of meanness and frowning.*

*My gerbil is the awake and alive pet and he is as loud  
as a dragon waking the neighbors.*

I'm sure I demonstrated my pleasure at her growing capacity to express complex perceptions of her mother and father and of herself: a dawning knowledge that people can be both one thing and it's opposite. And that she seems to know she's got some responsibility in the family struggle. Her pet gerbil I take to be an alter-ego; he's figured repeatedly in her notebooks. In one poem she refers to him as her “scratchative pet”.

Here's a last poem--constructed from two word lists: good words on the left and bad words on the right. (She picked the words, of course.) I reproduce the whole exercise as she wrote it (the underlinings in the poem are hers):

|                    |                      |
|--------------------|----------------------|
| <i>Mom</i>         | <i>hurt</i>          |
| <i>animals</i>     | <i>angry</i>         |
| <i>candy</i>       | <i>scared</i>        |
| <i>kindness</i>    | <i>mean</i>          |
| <i>coolness</i>    | <i>bad</i>           |
| <i>interesting</i> | <i>uncool</i>        |
| <i>feelings</i>    | <i>hate</i>          |
| <i>myself</i>      | <i>embarrassment</i> |

*I love my mom and dad but sometimes they get angry.*

*I hate my mom when she has coolness.*

*Animals get mean if you hurt them or scare them.*

*I hate myself when I get scared.*

*When my mom gives me love I am not scared.*

So, the mean feeling and the scared feeling--the "terrible rabbit" metaphor unpacked.

## Outcome

I think psychoanalytic clinicians will agree that this was successful interweaving of two arts and a successful psychotherapy. Among the important accomplishments were her growing capacity for the frank expression of concern--and shame--about body issues (her skin color, her weight); a capacity to express her anxiety about being liked (and, of course, loved); and most impressively, a capacity to acknowledge and make connections between difficult feelings and to tolerate them within herself (scaredness and meanness, and self-hatred in the absence of reassuring love.)

And there were changes in the way she interacted with her mother and father. She was able to find a way through writing and, of course, through the agency of her therapist, to express to her mother and father the effect on her of the fraught

family dynamics.

As for the symptoms, I was told that she had become more tractable in family disputes and more cooperative in family routines. Her mother no longer reported bowel problems. Unfortunately, her (arguably less consciously controlled) middle of the night bed-wetting while diminished had not ended entirely by the time therapy was discontinued in June of 2004 (age 10-3). Therapy was discontinued for a summer vacation with the promise from her mother that they would be resuming treatment in the Fall. That promise was not kept, unfortunately--and my attempts at outreach were unavailing.

But this disappointment comes with an interesting addendum: I did get a phone call from her mother subsequently, telling me that during a visit to her pediatrician Athena raised the bed-wetting problem with him! And Athena said she thought she needed some help. He referred them to a medical specialist who has given her medication to reduce her need to urinate at night. While I have my doubts about this approach, I do hope it will help her change her nighttime habits. But in any case I regard it as a significant accomplishment of our work together that Athena was able to ask directly for the help.

I think that between poetry and psychotherapy I have given Athena some tools for going forward in what, I'm afraid, promises to be a difficult life. And I think she'll be ready for psychoanalysis as an adult when she gets there.

Concluding Comments:

While I have argued in previous papers (Seiden 2004a, 2004b) that there is much that is same in the art of psychoanalysis and the art of poetry, there are differences that are instructive for our work as analysts. A major difference in emphasis is this: Art creates experience. Interpretation is not required--or is secondary. The poet Wallace Stevens says:

"When we find in poetry that which gives us a momentary existence on an exquisite plane, is it necessary to ask the meaning of the poem? If the poem had a meaning and if its explanation destroyed the illusion, should we have gained or lost?" (1990, p. 228)

I think psychoanalysts might have something to learn here. A consideration of psychotherapy from the perspective of the poet suggests that perhaps interpretation is less important than we've been taught to think. Perhaps *creating* experience--collaboratively, whether in conversation, symbolic play or in this case in co-authored poetry--can allow for a working through with very little interpretation. Athena and I were able to get from the "terrible rabbit embarrassed" to "me embarrassed", to "I hate myself when I get scared", I think, because I chose not to interpret the symbol but let it speak, at least for the time being, for itself. I never said the things a therapist might be expected to say: e.g., "you're the terrible rabbit" or "you must feel like the terrible rabbit sometimes". I thought I didn't have to--and I didn't, at least not yet, want to stifle her expressiveness.

A second lesson: joy in the process is an important part of the artistic experience. It is for the psychoanalytic experience too. Winnicott in The Piggie (1971b) remarked famously on the importance of his child patient's *enjoyment* of their play. But joy is more than a tactical requirement. It's well to remember that psychoanalysis offers something more than symptom relief. When our work is at its best we communicate an enthusiasm for self-understanding, a curiosity, a meaningful playfulness (as Winnicott would have said), and a zest for imaginative introspection, which the patient can take forward into the rest of his or her life -- and which is not unlike the pleasure both Athena and I took in her stories, drawings and poems.

Finally, I think this case does illustrate still another parallel between the poetry process and the psychoanalytic one. Writing, like speaking, is dialogical. There is no writer without a reader. And although the product might be seen to exist by itself on a page, a condition of the writer's process--whether that writing is collaborative or not--is the expectation and the anticipation of being heard.

So, for our patients in every clinical exchange: there is the expectation (which we are at pains to nurture) of being heard. So for Athena's magna carta--her letter to her parents formulated with the help of her baby sitter and delivered by, through

and to her therapist. In treatment she had come to expect and to believe that she could be heard by those who should hear her.

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