

Abling the Disabled through the Expressive Arts
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The Cedars of Marin is a residential community for developmentally disabled adults. It also provides a nationally recognized continuum of day programs to enhance the quality of its residents' life experience. At the Victory Center the expressive arts program director chose to revive a drama class and asked me to be its teacher/director. The clients named the revival "The Surprise Theater Company."

We are a group of actors growing, and welcoming others to grow with us, in our ambitious search for personal expression through the arts. We look to ourselves and each other to acknowledge what the needs of the day are and how these needs can best be served through dramatic presentation.

Classes begin with a movement exercise, followed sometimes by a meditation and then a discussion of what is happening in each person's life: a favorite staff person has died of cancer; one house manager is leaving with a new one soon to arrive; a client has just had a disagreement with his dad on the way to class; someone is grieving the loss of a parent or a privilege. Whatever is in the present tense for a client is what the script becomes. My interest is to expand the range of feelings and explore how the participants know themselves through their expressed emotions. I use the work of Tamalpa to facilitate the process. We move, draw, creatively write, and then dramatically improvise with each other our real life experience.

I give permission and encourage everyone to express feelings honestly within the group. We share a mutual trust, and we respect and care for each other. We create what I believe to be the safe environment for expression by reminding everyone that we are in community with each other, an ensemble of actors brought together to help each other do our very best work.

I have witnessed unusual generosity, kindness, and compassion among these people. They bravely pursue new terrain through the expressive arts. I continue to be surprised by the quality of inquiry that is so integral to our work. Searching for the feeling factor, I direct Lindy to encounter another actor on our stage and build the relationship through dialogue. She is a marvel—her insight is so clear and forthcoming. She also knows when to quit questioning and listen. Tony is gentle and does unusual work in assisting others in the improvisation—he gently encourages his peers to consider options; he is committed to the process and rather persuasive. Gretta loves the work, but I don't always understand why. She is an enigma—quiet and shy. But when given the opportunity to move or dance, she takes off. Together we work on her body posture so that her "dancer" is confident and proud. Inspired by a fable we've read together, Gretta discovers a character befitting her new self-identity. Both the movement and the imagining of herself in a new role clear her thinking, and her verbal skills are markedly improved. Grace, a great talent in the ensemble, makes a tremendous contribution, always putting her true feelings on the line, showing up in the midst of sadness—a genuine inspiration. She has a particular penchant for animal characters; the mother bear with her cubs are staples in her repertoire.

We live intimately with each other although we meet just twice a week. The intermodal activities keep the group interested—there's always work to be done in the name of the theater. Courageously, the group encounters troubled behaviors, identifies the issue, and determines if and how behavior may need to change. Through our art, our life together improves.

Here are a few abstracts from class sessions—my way of introducing the theater company's work to you.

Session 1: *Kindness*

Grace has a story that she needs to tell. An anniversary card she gave her parents upset them. Her relationship becomes our script. It generates active imagination and drama. Feelings are evoked. Everyone contributes to a poem that the group entitles "Kindness."

While loving and angry
I feel hurt
About
The not knowing.
I'm upset.
The card is marvelous
But
Unappreciated.
I need kindness.

The actors choose their roles. Betty is Mom, Tony is the wounded daughter, and Lindy is Dad. Using the poem, we now create a dramatic scene in which the parents and child develop the incident with a confrontation and change. Bridget introduces forgiveness as a new possibility: to ask for forgiveness = the apology = the turning point. A calm settles on the family.

Upon completion of the improv the actors become drummers and introduce Grace as the solo dance performer. The poem, "Kindness," is read to accompany the performance. Grace embodies the initial feelings toward her parents, demonstrates the conflict in movement, and creates a new dance. I am so touched by the way Grace works through her emotions, finishing with a gentle touch for each of us in the circle. In silence, she circles around the room and rests her fingertips on each person's shoulders. A gesture of forgiveness—ah, such beautiful work! Her face expresses a clearing. Witnessing the improv, I imagine Grace is able to consider options for the family upset. Her face is soft, relieved of tension. When we finish for the day and create a closing circle, we do the "Unstuck" dance. Everyone goes around the circle and calls out in voice and movement what he/she wants to be unstuck from.

Session 2: *The Dance of My Hands*

With music playing, each person takes a turn directing the morning warm-up—we call it "pass the baton." People seem to focus exclusively on the hands, so we call this "The

Dance of My Hands.” As we go around the circle, I ask each person, “What’s the story of my dancing hands?” Each person develops her (or his) dance story into a solo performance for her peer audience. She names the dance, moves the dance, and then we create a group mural depicting the dance through another medium. I then interview each artist and write the story of the Dance of My Hands. We hang the mural up to serve as our set for improv. It’s such a perfect example of creative learning through the expressive arts—these stories are dormant if not invited onto the stage of movement, poetry, and play. I say thank you, God.

Planning for the next session, I think it is time to bring the whole Victory Center together to celebrate our diversity within the expressive arts collaborative. After researching café societies, I realize that forum speaks to what I am searching for—a project to promote community wellness, demonstrating the inter-being of our expressive arts curriculum. With everyone’s cooperation, the Victory Center Café Society opens one afternoon in March. The theater company, scheduled for the p.m. demonstration, begins the day with the following encounter.

Session 3: *Feeling Up and Down, In and Out*

Grace’s got a case of the blues. Her dad passed away last week. “He was ill. He’s in heaven, but, boy, I miss him.” I hear you, Grace. And so our day begins. Grace says she’s feeling up and down. The dance begins. In our circle, each person moves to the feeling of up and down. The movement changes to feeling in and out. Each person, with a single hand gesture, tells a story. This is a powerful session. Grief is real for everyone in the company. Here are a few shared experiences:

- Terry’s fists are clenched. He says he’s angry, feels mad about the danger inside, feels hurt. We explore what it feels like to breathe through the clenched fists—they relax, he lets go. The new posture seems to reveal the hidden hurt and provide some relief.
- Lindy’s in and out dance is about restlessness. What does she do when this feeling comes over her? She sits separate but still in the group. It comes and it goes—later she asks that we keep her walking with us so she doesn’t disappear.
- Grace shakes her head—she’s in grief and uncertain what out of grief will feel like. She is our prophet, “I’ve been up and down and I’m not going to isolate myself. I mean, I’m doing things, I’m here.”

When our café society at the Cedars opens, the reviews from our guests are quite thrilling. The commitment to the creative collaboration from staff and Victory Center clients is stellar. We are of one mind, heart, and soul—our mission: to serve ourselves, our community, and our guests. All that we’ve dreamed becomes a reality. Working with each other and all of our *abilities* brings the extended Cedars community together: administration, staff and clients from other programs, families, and friends. We read poetry and creative writing, showcase artwork and theater performances. We dance and eat fruit and cookies. It is more than sweet; it bridges separation—from ourselves and those we love. In the name and practice of expressive arts, all this is accomplished.