

Chapter: Jon Blend 24/06/23

Lava-Man and Witch Lady: Engaging the imagination in arts-based child psychotherapy

‘Innate gifts for playful companionship are the foundation for school learning, and also for therapy when life has betrayed childish optimism ’
(Trevarthen,2017, p28)

In January 2020 client Francis (name changed), aged 8 and his parents, visited my private practice for a consultation. Two years previously Francis had developed a rare form of epilepsy requiring a lengthy series of investigations in hospital. Francis’s epilepsy was unpredictable with sudden onset; these experiences had left him feeling terrified of losing control. Francis continued to suffer fits and fainting several times daily at home and at school; during these episodes he would clutch at peers, family and teachers for support. Gripped by crippling anxiety, his experiences indicated an internal collapse : he seemed to be retreating developmentally on several levels- emotionally, academically and socially.

This was not the usual tale I heard from families citing early trauma, relational difficulties or developmental delay. Rather, Francis ‘s anxiety and difficulties with finding self support had arisen as his epilepsy developed. I found it heart-breaking to hear his story and momentarily experienced a shakiness in my body, doubting my suitability to take on such daunting work. Could I really help Francis withstand such strong bodily impulses? At the same time his plight touched me deeply. The parents were keen to support their son and all seemed eager to see if therapy might help.

In the course of my work with Francis I would draw deeply on my own memories of surviving ill-health, as well as twenty -five years ‘experience of working as a therapist with children and young people using creative arts as a support. Defining support as ‘that which enables’ (Jacobs ,2016) the arts offer a broad palette to work with:

‘Support is everything that facilitates the on-going assimilation and integration of a person’ (Wollants, 2012,p185). I also draw on my experience as an improvising musician (Blend, 2004) and will expand on this later.

Approaching the work...

Francis needed help in retrieving his sense of relational competence and developing his ability to become self -supporting despite the exhausting effect

of coping with seizures. I decided on a projective- arts based approach with an emphasis on externalising fears and frustrations using a variety of modalities- including drawing, working with clay, movement , the sand tray and musicking. Typically, dialogic gestalt therapy with young people involves a mix of here- and- now experiencing and experiment. As therapist I am more interested in our 'journey' than in specific outcomes. This journey includes reflecting on what arises during our talking and playing, also experiences of flow and stuck-ness in our contacting.

Joining the dance

I have written about the creative arts approach to therapy, based on Violet Oaklander's gestalt model of child and adolescent therapy (Blend, 2011) and about incorporating musicking (sic) in therapy (Blend, 2004; 2009; 2019). My focus is on building a trusting relationship with the client from the outset, one that pays attention to the pitch, rhythm and pace of our interacting (Gregory, 2009). As Oaklander suggests: 'Without the thread of a trusting relationship little of significance is likely to happen in therapy'. This requires a willingness for child and therapist to trust the other with their vulnerability. As Bion famously observed: ' In every consulting-room, there ought to be two rather frightened people: the patient and the psychoanalyst. If they are not both frightened, one wonders why they are bothering to find out what everyone knows.' (Bion,1990).

Therapy with young people can be likened to a folk dance: sometimes this requires me to lead, at other times to follow. Its an unfolding, emergent dance without predetermined rhythm or pattern.. Considering the dance analogy, Spagnuolo Lobb notes: ' Each step is per se a co-creation ,a play of the one who leads and the one who is led, of risking physical closeness and staying at safe distance, of sharing the rhythm of the music'(Spagnuolo Lobb, 2003: 40.) Indeed. Accordingly, if the young person balks at a suggested 'dance move', their resistance is acknowledged and honoured: I want to allow space and respect defences. The dictum 'resistance is assistance' often applies here : a reluctance to proceed may indicate the young client is encountering overwhelm and so unable to process more at this moment. At the same time I remain curious about what just happened between us and may ask as much, in the hope that we can gain further awareness and clarity.

Feeling into my fear

Back in the room with Francis and his parents I supported myself by breathing deeper, taking in the situation. My anxiety about not feeling equal to the task began to dissipate. I resonated with Francis's situation, recalling experiences of

feeling faint and helpless on encountering pneumonia , in hospital many years before. Those frightening bouts had confounded my recovery, haunting my convalescence. I had survived by utilising my knowledge that singing encourages regular breathing. Vibrations generated through making sound may help release internal tension and foster self -support (Pestano, personal conversation, 2011). This memory helped me remain present as the family consultation continued, whilst an atmosphere of silent fear and grief hung heavy in the room. As parents and Francis recounted their experiences of witnessing and managing his fits, all three looked tense.

As a gestalt practitioner I pay attention not just to what is present before me in the room but also on what is missing in the client's relationship with the environment and himself. Here, an arts-based approach may allow the therapist to note areas of sensorial, intellectual or embodied deficit as well as low-confidence, and seek to remedy these. In today's world of touchscreens and remote-control devices, experiences that involve using the senses provide an embodied counter- balance. Opportunities to discover personal competence and mastery are offered, that develop the young client's capacity to navigate their Lifespace creatively and effectively. Harnessing expressive arts may help with capturing present embodied experience- the 'now 'of the situation.

During this consultation I asked parents about Francis's early years, to get a sense of his developmental history before his epilepsy manifested. Nothing seemed obviously awry, there was no record of illness or trauma. I set Francis a simple task - the House ,Tree, Person (HTP) drawing, a challenge he eagerly accepted.

This former personality test devised by Buck (1948), was adapted into a playful exercise by Oaklander (Mortola, 2014). In similar vein to Winnicott's 'Squiggle', it aims to ease the child 'over the threshold 'into the therapeutic space. The rules are simple: the client is invited to draw three things freestyle on the same side of the paper - a house, tree and a person. Next the therapist makes a few guesses about the client's life and invites the client to respond by saying which guesses are correct and which are wrong. The idea that the therapist – an adult- can admit to getting things wrong is often novel; it may bring relief to a child or adolescent used to capitulating to authority figures. Moreover, the way the therapist shows genuine interest in the client, helps build mutual trust and models the dialogic attitude.

While parents looked on, I made some guesses about Francis, based on my perceptions of his drawing. The HTP serves as an 'icebreaker', enabling the beginning of a relational dialogue. Through unpicking my incorrect guess about an aspect of his drawing I showed Francis my willingness to own mistakes without becoming reactive. I sought to explore aspects of his drawing a little further by asking supplementary questions, adding: 'just say what you feel comfortable saying' to demonstrate respect for defences. By the end of the consultation Francis expressed his willingness to continue this mixture of talking and drawing, whilst parents seemed relieved to have found an ally.

Getting Started.

Whilst glad that Francis wanted to engage in therapy I felt some concern should he collapse while we were working. Accordingly I asked parents initially to join his sessions and for all to show me what to do in the event of him fitting or losing consciousness. Initially parents took turns at attending sessions, acting as chaperones. Thankfully this proved largely unnecessary once our work got under way.

Initially I noted how tightly Francis held his body, shallow breathing as though bracing himself. I found myself sitting forward, straining to hear his quiet clipped responses. He became more fidgety, pulling away rapidly from contact to scan the room '–is it time to stop yet?' I imagined a surfeit of overwhelming encounters with terror had eradicated trust in his own agency - his capacity to contact and withdraw from experience. I felt compassion for his plight and wondered how I might offer him embodied experiences that would engage and stretch him beyond his current repertoire? Experiences, that might enrich his vitality and sense of personhood?

Over successive meetings we established a warm, trusting relationship within which Francis began to relax, enjoying the opportunity to express himself creatively. I experienced myself similarly relaxing whilst also keen to explore what lay ahead of us. Recalling Buber's dictum that 'meeting is healing' I perceived my initial task as needing to meet Francis energetically where he was. I sought to provide a contained space within which he could begin to explore aspects of himself through relational dialogue, experiment and arts- informed play.

Visualisation

Early on I began by asking Francis to imagine a safe place, real or imaginary, where he felt contained and relaxed. When people are new to using arts in therapy it helps to metaphorically dip one's toe in water before delving deeper.

There are three components to this exercise: first the therapist offers a visualisation (Stevens,1989) that ends with an additional embedded suggestion: 'Know that you can find your way back to your safe place whenever you are troubled or upset'. Next the client draws their 'Safe place 'freestyle, and finally the client's experience is discussed. The safe place can be recalled to mind later as a support should the client become ungrounded. The rationale here being that it can help the novice child client to know how to return to a familiar, calm place rather than venturing too quickly into personal vulnerability, risking becoming emotionally overwhelmed.

Drawing in, drawing out....

Francis drew his Safe place, using simple shapes, lines and colours. This gave rise to a conversation concerning his anger about having epilepsy. He spoke of the terrifying way in which it suddenly overcame him, leaching away his strength, leaving him feeling helpless as though about to die. I felt moved at his disclosure and saddened at his difficulty in finding solid ground. As his voice tailed off he gazed at me expectantly, shrugged and looked dejectedly away. I sensed his acute vulnerability and need for greater support. In response I shared something of my own experience, drawing on Zahm's notion of 'Judicious Therapist Self Disclosure' (Zahm,1988). I recalled fearing collapsing in hospital having unfortunately acquired an infection after surgery. The doctor had suggested I walk around the ward to help my body absorb excess fluid that had built up inside me. The less attractive alternative was another operation, to drain the liquid. I felt too dizzy to walk much. However I was aware that singing, an embodied activity, also involves internal movement and helps discharge of held- back energy (Gregory, 2009). I reached for my guitar and by playing and singing vigorously, absorbed the fluid satisfactorily, enabling my discharge from hospital without further intervention.

Francis took this information in wide eyed; my sharing seemed to strengthen our connection. I sensed this was helping him become less terrified of falling apart. Moment- to - moment experiences of trust continued to develop in our relationship. For a while we traded memories of our respective in-patient experiences – feeling bored, fed up, scared of pain, unsure what was being 'decided' on our behalf, of loneliness and the seeming endless passage of time. For Francis, this form of engaging in interactive expression, rather than oblique communication was reparative.

He described having to lay still for ages whilst a mass of wires, fed through an uncomfortable cap placed on his head measured his brain functioning. 'How did wearing that feel?' I asked. 'Dreadful!' came his response, looking away. I was

curious to know more and wondered if he might retain contact longer if I encouraged him to stay awhile with this image. 'Can you draw the cap?' I asked.

Francis did so, drawing faintly with the oil pastels and sighing at the memory. As he showed me his drawing he recalled suffering a succession of fits following changes to his medication. He began to look very uncomfortable, breathing heavily, seemingly overwhelmed. I felt my anxiety rise and a wish to head off a possible fainting episode. Accordingly I encouraged him to visualise his 'safe place' again, reminding him that he could conjure this place up in his imagination any time he felt stressed or worried. As he did so I invited him to further relax his body and focus on his outbreath. We explored a sequence together, both of us breathing in for four seconds, holding for a count of six, then exhaling slowly for seven seconds. In so doing, and to mutual relief, this crisis moment passed.

Comfort and co-regulation: Coco as 'relational third'.

Francis drew much comfort from the warm presence of my friendly Cocker-Poo dog. Coco acts as my co-therapist (Ruckert, 1988) and is present in most sessions. She allowed Francis to stroke her whenever he was feeling scared or overwhelmed; in reaching for her support F was helping himself reduce his hyper-arousal.

At times Coco would engage us both in a playful kind of 'hit and run' game. We speculated as to whose chair she might jump on before landing in one of our laps. Sometimes when Francis was less communicative I wondered aloud with Coco as to how he might be feeling. As Francis buried his face in her fur I encouraged him to talk directly to Coco, as if confiding in a puppet. This 'three-way communication' option sometimes helped rekindle a conversation between us both. It was touching to see their friendship develop and at times amusing: Coco would methodically lick Francis's fingers, prompting him to giggle. It was as if she was saying to him - 'there, there, it's all going to be OK.'

Arts-based work and choice-making

Francis loved to draw; it swiftly became clear that this was an important means of self-expression for him. Drawing is one of the most 'experience near' ways of communicating from the outset: baby draws on mother's cheek with fingers, later in his food and whatever he touches. Children (and indeed adults) may exist on a survival footing when experiencing panic or terror; after such experiences it can be hard to retain a sense of capability. I encouraged Francis to regain his experience of competence by creating images on paper. Drawing enabled him to explore different self-states: feeling strong or weak, mentally 'sharp' or fuzzy, energetic or exhausted. To further encourage his sense of

agency I invited Francis to make simple choices: 'do you want the coloured or the plain paper? Which kitchen timer shall we use: the coffee pot or the owl?' And so on. I asked Francis if it was OK to watch him draw to which he consented. I regard it as a courtesy to ask permission and not assume consent. Sometimes I played music on a guitar or ukulele to accompany Francis's drawing process: I find that many children like this. I add my improvised accompaniment subtly, providing variations of tempo, pitch and rhythm.

Musicking : Refinding the 'hum 'in human...

Playing music in rock and jazz often involves improvisatory dialogues (Dolgin,2003). This includes 'call and response' playing whereby musician B listens to A's solo offering and replies, thereby 'answering the call'. Moreover, in syncopated music like jazz, musicians often accentuate or experiment with the beat, anticipating notes or hanging back at times. In therapy, childrens' sense of time is often different from that of adults. The therapist's ability to be flexible, titrating tempi and responses in real time is an important skill, acquired through experience, though perhaps less commonly considered in relation to contact- withdrawal (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2003). Improvising in therapy, as in music, involves feeling into the dialogue and following one's instinct (Crocker, 2001; Dolgin ibid). Conversations emerge, meld and develop from curiosity about the other.

Alternating major and minor keys can provide an interesting ground to support whatever figures emerge as the child engages with a sensory task. Adding such accompaniment is never imposed- I ask beforehand if musical accompaniment is wanted or not. Usually Francis preferred to have this; I noted it helped sustain his ability to stay in contact. On other occasions he explored many percussion instruments in my room, joining me in impromptu duets and soloing.

Smoke On the Water

Like many a 'tweenager' moving towards adolescence, Francis was developing an interest in pop stars and sought to emulate their singing and movements. On one occasion, drawn to my electric guitar, he sought to demonstrate his prowess in playing the brash opening bars of rock band Deep Purple's 'Smoke on the Water', swinging his hips as he strummed. I was familiar with trying to master this iconic riff in my youth and noticed Francis's persistence: though a challenging task for his small hands he persevered, showing an ability to focus and a desire to 'get it right'.

Improvising

As mentioned, improvisation plays an important part in my therapy work with clients of any age. Tracking a figure of interest that arises between us in the session is an unscripted, novel process: it may lead down a blind alley or open a new rich portal. Whether or not we risk exploring the area under question – there are few rules and fewer predictable outcomes. As an improvising musician this feels similar to taking a jazz solo. It requires a leap of faith to enter and see where my /our interest takes this: there are no prearranged ‘correct’ or ‘wrong’ notes in what or how the soloist plays, nor how the accompanist / ensemble responds (Dolgin,1998). At moments when the ‘call and response’ of our playing is fully ‘in synch’ this evokes what Porges describes as ‘the fullness of reciprocal communication’ (Porges, 2016).

Whilst improvisation is associated with jazz in particular, psychotherapy can similarly be considered an extempore art form: it also involves entering into an attuned dialogue that pays attention to the client’s rhythm, ‘melody etc. In both cases the relationship is oriented towards an Other as well as to the Self; there is a transmission of what Schore calls ‘The Transformative Power of Pleasure’:

“In play episodes of emotional synchrony, the pair are in emotional resonance...which creates states of positive arousal and interactive repair.... which modulates negative arousal... These are the fundamental building blocks of attachment and resilience in the face of stress.” (Schore, 2003, cited in Resnick, 2019, p54.)

Experimenting with clay

Later Francis and I switched to working with clay, a wonderful expressive medium capable of supporting exploration of creativity and destruction. By now I had a sense that he was energetically robust enough to enjoy using this visceral, tactile material. I began by giving him a lump of clay the size of a small orange. When working with materials I usually take a piece for myself- it helps me stay closer to process and enables me to pace the work. It also gives me a ‘task’ so that the client doesn’t sense they are being scrutinised– which could feel off-putting. Francis and I explored the clay – its texture, temperature etc with eyes closed, reporting to each other our discoveries. I became a willing accomplice, sometimes copying his actions, sometimes matching his efforts, taking my turn. At moments when he seemed hesitant I acted as a cheerleader encouraging him to engage fully with the material.

Next I introduced him to an exercise advocated by Oaklander (Oaklander 2000),a sequence involving patting, slapping, pinching, punching , pushing through and ripping apart the soft clay before finally throwing it down on to a board with an accompanying yell or cry.

Something satisfyingly visceral is often experienced through moulding clay; the effort involved puts us in touch with our capacity for mastery, to bend the substance to our will. Watching Francis manipulate his clay deftly I sat back, sensing that I only needed to provide a containing presence. He began constructing clay models portraying aspects of his epilepsy, confronting them in a manner analogous to 'Two- Chair work'. Tentatively at first he expressed his annoyance, shooting me a sidelong glance as he tapped gently then more forcefully against the objects of his fury using a wooden mallet. 'Who are you most angry with?' I asked. Initially Francis deflected, blaming himself; with some encouragement he was able to directly express his anger towards the hospital, the doctors, his medication and to epilepsy itself.

On other occasions with great satisfaction, he pulled off lumps of the clay (the offenders'), pushing them into a garlic press. He squeezed hard with his hands until the extruded clay reappeared in the form of long wiggly lines, resembling spaghetti. I enjoyed watching him discover his ability to use his muscles, putting effort into the task and smiling his satisfaction. He became curious as to how long he could make the spaghetti-like strips without breaking them, holding them high aloft. 'What else could these be?' I asked, seeking to expand his ability to think laterally: "...Could be someone's intestines" he responded, with grim relish...". 'Right! Anything else?' I ventured. "Yes- the brains of all the epilepsy monsters! Let's chop them and mash them up!" he said. Which we duly did.

At other times Francis eagerly rolled the clay out flat and cut it into portions using a pizza cutter, offering me a slice of one of his 'pizza enemies'. On one occasion when I asked who the objects of his annoyance were in actuality he hung his head, saying he didn't want to identify them. I acknowledged this and felt a reluctance to push him further, surmising that his hesitance at saying more at this point might indicate anxiety about owning his anger more openly.

PACE

To me, this acronym coined by psychologist Daniel Hughes is an essential part of the dialogic attitude in therapy with young persons. It behoves us as therapists to work with Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy (Hughes, 2007). So far, so unremarkable. The novice therapist may however feel tempted to 'play it safe', downplaying her curiosity. I grew up with the old English adage 'curiosity killed the cat' -which discourages asking many

questions. However, in my experience, withholding one's natural inquisitiveness tends to be unhelpful and obfuscatory. It is said that in order to fully understand a process, the physicist Richard Feynman repeatedly asked 'what's the point?' (Gleick, 1994). Similarly, therapy benefits from therapist and client seeking clarity and mutual understanding.

Pacing the work

As well as providing an acronym for therapeutic endeavour, how we pace the work with young clients can be important. As mentioned before, children's sense of time passing tends to differ from that of adults; a long, silent pause experienced during a period of vulnerability can seem like a lifetime for many young people. Keeping some vestige of conversation going at such moments, with a soft voice, helps convey the therapist's continued steady presence (Oaklander, personal conversation 2018.) To give a musical parallel- the 'call' of the child needs the therapist's timely 'response'. So when to speak and when remain silent? This is a matter of judgement for which it helps to observe the child's embodied, sensorial and relational responses. Improvising musicians are familiar with adapting different tones and emphasis, playing on or off the beat, lagging behind or leading in front. There were times when Francis introduced his 'melody' and times when my utterances sought to encourage him to expand on his ideas as we continued a dialogue. Whenever Francis seemed freer in his expression I stepped back, offering an accompanying role slightly behind his 'beat', as it were.

At other times. Francis seemed anxious not to dwell on his worries nor to express an opinion. Exploring his anxiety directly was not always productive. Sometimes indirectness is more helpful than asking 'How are you feeling?' Accordingly at times I drew on the practice of 'circular questioning' advocated by the Milan School of Family Therapy (Brown, 2016). Thus asking empathically 'Who is most likely to notice that you're feeling anxious? How would they know?' enabled Felix to remain in contact with his troublesome concerns for longer.

Life under lockdown

As the pandemic took hold, lockdown measures were introduced in UK prompting me to move my practice online. Francis was joined by one of his parents at the beginning and end of these sessions. This eased his adjustment to the new medium despite various technical glitches and 'drop outs' we experienced while getting acquainted with Zoom, distractions which could be frustrating and anxiety provoking for us both.

On one occasion Francis reported feeling pressured by new home -schooling regulations which involved a plethora of online protocols. He expressed a fear of not doing well though seemed to shut down, disconnecting from his feelings, looking away whilst repeatedly saying 'Fine!' when I asked some exploratory questions. When I commented on not knowing if these one-word statements were intended to fob me off, he grimaced and said testily he was merely focussing on remaining calm. I asked what he was experiencing that he considered needed 'calming'? Might it help to let some of that pressure out, perhaps by making some sound? At this he became very agitated, screaming repeatedly before retreating to mother's arms for comfort. I felt puzzled and shocked by this episode. As he settled I asked how he was feeling. Again Francis declared he was 'fine' though appeared slightly dazed. He hadn't experienced a fit, he confirmed- but an overwhelming feeling of fear nonetheless, rising from his stomach to his throat. What had triggered this? Francis shook his head 'I'm not sure'. I felt relieved to note his relaxed stance as he let go of mother and returned to his chair.

I don't often give 'homework' to clients though I suggested Francis and his parents look into the possible efficacy of EFT (Emotional Freedom Technique), an embodied approach that employs 'tapping' to relax the nervous system when stressed (Moreland, 2014). I hoped this might help Francis become more familiar with his body, better able to monitor and control his fears. The following week mother and son confirmed they had been practicing together: Francis was finding tapping fun and helpful.

I also encouraged Francis to write affirmations to stick on his bedroom mirror. To help him build self -support I invited him to recite a mantra when feeling fearful: 'Even though I'm feeling scared I know I 'm safe, alive, and will feel better again soon ...'

As the pandemic wore on, a relaxation in UK regulations allowed therapists to resume face -to-face working under socially distanced conditions. Accordingly, escorted by his father, Francis began meeting me in my living room from where we could adjourn to a garden table on the patio. Francis was clearly happy to return and quickly bonded again with Coco who licked his nose- her ultimate seal of approval!

Sounding and silence

In supervision I explored my puzzlement over Francis's struggle with silence whenever there was a lull in conversation. This raised questions for me- what might he be experiencing and what needing from me at such moments?

Sometimes child clients need the therapist to 'carry' the conversation, providing a bridge between action and rest, between the void of completing a gestalt and the emergence of the next figure (Oaklander, 2000). I speculated that, for Francis, life operated on a see -saw basis; either he was up in the air or down on the earth. What was missing was his ability to live on a more even keel.

In the sessions Francis seemed to show little emotionality at this point, other than a tendency to berate himself for not achieving highly. I felt troubled by his perfectionist stance- could he explore the polarity to this – find some compassion and kindness to 'befriend himself 'more? I wondered if he could recognise some of his competencies and enjoy his hobbies? Francis liked to explore his 'treasure chest' of coins, fossils and keepsakes though tended to do so on his own. How might it be for him to bring this into his play with others, to explore togetherness as well as solitude?

Whatever arts medium we worked with I encouraged Francis to find words or sounds that best described his experience. By becoming familiar with and communicating these he became better able to own his agency. As with adult clients, repetition can be a useful tool, helping young people, stretch their 'emotional muscles 'and sharpen their cognitions and notions of self. Exploring alternative ways of being and belonging helps with construction of new neural pathways, extending the client's repertoire beyond creative adjustment. Francis enjoyed finding phrases that 'spoke' to his experience: voicing these aloud helped him let go of bodily tension and relax, releasing retroflected anger in the process, as the following example shows:

Outing the demons...

On one occasion Francis came in breathless ,blurting a description of two demonic figures inhabiting his nightmares and day dreams. One person he called 'Lava-Man', describing him as a scary tormenting demon. Lava-Man sprayed vile, scalding volcanic anger (lava) everywhere, using a scattergun approach that kept fearful others at bay. The other demon he termed 'Witch Lady'. Witch Lady was a powerful fiend who could spit deadly poison with laser accuracy through jets in her teeth. Both of these figures seemed to pop up just before a seizure, leaving Francis feeling helpless and vulnerable.

I felt a chill hearing of these monsters and relief that he was able to share them with me. I encouraged him to find his own meaning of these visitations, and

suggested he explore them from a range of different perspectives, as one might investigate the parts of a dream. When I encouraged him to make Lava-Man out of clay he did so tentatively I mirrored his efforts and then sought to match his construction, adding exaggerated mouthparts of Lava-Man from which I noisily sprayed imaginary lava in the air. Francis relaxed and began copying my movements, engaging my Lava-Man in a duel with another figure he made of himself, a battle which he 'won'.

'How do you feel about Lava-Man? I asked.

'I'd like to kill him!' Francis replied, flushing.

'It sounds like he really frightens you and you're furious with him' I suggested, empathically. 'When he gets into your dreams what would you most want to say to him, if you could find your voice?'

'Get lost- just leave me alone!' Francis muttered, looking away.

What's that like to say?'

'Dunno- not sure..'

'Hmmn- sounds like he's still scary ... Hold on-what's happening with your other hand? Looks like you're squeezing? I'm remembering that great snake you made with the clay last time- a boa constrictor? Imagine you're a powerful snake like that now ...how would it be to be to wrap your coils round Lava-Man and really squeeze the life out of him?'

'Mm- that feels good! Next Francis reached for the pizza cutter, chopping at Lava-Man's legs..

'He's crushed – hah! – He can't stand up now..' Francis took the mallet and flattened his opponent.

He doesn't look so big now! 'I observed, whereupon Francis chuckled and with a jubilant flourish reached for the rolling pin- 'Shall we try Lava-Man pizza now?'

'Oh yes! 'I encouraged- 'What topping shall we have?!'

Finally I encouraged Francis to become Lava-Man himself whereupon he moved around the room lurching in ungainly fashion, scowling, hissing and 'spraying' whilst turning up his nose in mock horror - 'he smells so awful too!'

Next he cast Lava-Man aside and deftly constructed Witch Lady from another piece of clay, focussing on her pointy teeth dispensing poison – its deadly! 'I invited him to speak, move and gesture as Witch Lady, to become the fearsome protagonist himself. Francis took great satisfaction from this; in actively taking on their roles his sense of personal mastery seemed to grow. He returned to this

work repeatedly in successive weeks, confronting Lava-Man and Witch Lady with gusto, glee and scorn, using the clay tools to cut them down with relish. Quickly their apparent power over him began to wane and his nightmares and epilepsy attacks faded.

Timelines and making changes

After an epileptic fit Francis often experienced memory loss. I suggested he draw a personal timeline to record key moments in his life. He highlighted several challenging events : a difficult start at primary school; distressing epilepsy investigations aged six; missing a talent show due to clashing hospital appointments. Francis recalled entering a scanner- 'a sort of coffin', -where he had to lie still for an hour while images were taken of his brain. I felt deeply moved to hear his recollection – it must have taken considerable fortitude to lie motionless there so long. He recalled feeling dizzy on the medication and the discomfort of wearing a special cap with electrodes for three days. 'I have to do this again - for a whole week, in hospital soon' ..he recalled, sounding dismal.

I asked if he wanted to say any more, or add anything to his timeline?

Chewing his pen thoughtfully Francis wrote 'LOCKDOWN 'in capitals. He spoke sadly about how isolating this period had been, in particular missing seeing friends in person.

. As we concluded I suggested he name something he had liked about the session and something he had disliked. Francis looked blank and suggested a modification: 'How about one thing I can improve on?'

I commented that this sounded self -critical rather than self-accepting. Seeing Francis's puzzled look I suggested it could be important for him to be aware of and able to communicate freely his experience. Francis took the point, saying he had liked most of our session though would have preferred to work with clay. I said it was good to hear his response, adding that we could use clay next time. He smiled at this, recalling how he had enjoyed "flattening Lava-Man and Witch lady last time!". He seemed more aware of his agency and ready to explore further his aggressive energy. As Hughes observes: 'The ability to safely transition dangerous states of disconnection- breaks in flow of emotional containment-is crucial to the development and internalisation of a child's robust sense of relief.' (Hughes,2006)

Striving to Catch up

Francis shared guilty feelings about getting into tussles with family members at home and shame at not being able to keep up with his peers: a succession of epilepsy episodes had previously left him feeling exhausted and forgetful. I felt compassion for him and pointed out that it wasn't his fault that he had epilepsy, nor was it fair to blame himself for struggling to keep up; anyone faced with such difficulties might feel shattered.

Francis's eyes opened wide on hearing this. The psychologist Piaget coined the term egocentricity to describe a process whereby a young child wrongly assumes that s/he is responsible for whatever is experienced within the family, including ills or difficulties in the family field (Piaget, 1951; Phillips, 1969). Francis felt bad about having underachieved due to his epilepsy: I thought it helpful to point out this could be a faulty belief he was holding on to, one that didn't serve him well. Francis seemed relieved to hear this and acknowledged that in the past he had become 'extra cross with people', usually when feeling stressed.

During a review parents expressed relief and gratitude that Francis's epilepsy had remained in remission, enabling the doctors to reduce his medication. Francis took the opportunity to tell his parents that he felt guilty about how he had fallen behind academically and socially; that due to many school absences, he had produced less work than others when he was ill and feeling vulnerable. Parents took the point. We agreed to continue to work together.

The family emigrates

Weeks later parents decided to return to their European homeland. This move overseas presented a major challenge for Francis, involving changes of language, neighbourhood, schooling, and culture. Our sessions continued online. The work shifted to mourning the loss of friends left behind in London, through a mixture of drawing and talking whilst helping Francis reflect on and adjust to his new continental environment. I sought to bring Coco back into our online sessions, encouraging her to sit on my lap for a few minutes whenever possible. In return Francis introduced me to Penne, the family's cat. Penne had clearly managed the transition to the new family home; she provided a source of comfort for Francis, to cuddle and confide in when feeling troubled.

We often used the Zoom whiteboard for drawing together, often in a manner reminiscent of Winnicott's Squiggle (Berger, 1980): one of us drew a doodle and asked the other to complete and identify it. Using different shapes, lines and colours this could morph into an improvised 'call and response' dialogue. Meanwhile Karen Fried, a colleague in the Oaklander Foundation had kindly made several resources available for online working (2021). Francis constructed

various scenes about his life using the sand-tray and puppetry apps though found these hard to stay absorbed in, preferring instead the physicality of working with materials. At times he wanted to take charge, switching his camera off suddenly or changing the angle of view on the laptop. I took these deflections as indications that he was either full of feeling or bored; in gently exploring what has transpired it became clear that he didn't want to delve deeply into his experience and was keen instead to 'move on'.

At other times Francis wanted to play and sought me to join him in a kind of 'computer peekaboo – 'which I was happy to do, alternately turning our screens off and experimenting with moving closer and further away from the camera. As sessions continued I noticed his capacity to concentrate was increasing and he seemed to need to distract himself from our discourse less frequently.

Embodied and -in-bodied

Francis began to discover new ways of externalising his aggressive energy, engaging more in physical activity on his bike and learning to perform tricks on his scooter, in pursuit of the elusive 'tailwhip' manoeuvre (Rost, 2021). This involved crouching low, then jumping high whilst rotating the handlebars, flicking the scooter's 'deck' away before landing on it. Just as sailors must anticipate the sudden swing of the boom spar across the boat's centre -line when tacking, so the tailwhip similarly requires dexterity, anticipation and overcoming of fear in order to avoid the scooter's deck rebounding and hitting one's shins. Repeating these intriguing yet challenging manoeuvres alongside other youngsters in the skateboard park contributed to Francis finding mastery and potency: it was glorious to witness this transition in his self-belief.

His preparedness to own his power became evident, raising for discussion who should be first to switch off Zoom, thereby ending the session. Hitherto I had done so: might we take turns or do this together? We subsequently explored scrambling to reach the off button first, a playful move that also confirmed Francis's increasing sense of confidence.

Francis's body shape was changing, becoming more boyishly defined, catching up on the growth escalator with increases in height and muscle. He was becoming more clothes conscious and showing an increasing interest in fashion and looking 'cool'.

Ending therapy

Following the summer break in 2021 Francis and his parents met me online for review. Recent medical tests had confirmed his symptom -free status, with his

epilepsy judged to be in remission. We acknowledged the progress he had made and his growing ability to express himself. His increasing competence and self-belief was evident in a new-found ability to travel into town independently, an increasing flair for team games and his enjoyment of learning the guitar. It felt timely for us to stop working at this point. Following a final family meeting Francis and I reviewed our work together, and, with assistance from Coco and Penne, wished each other a fond farewell.

What helped Francis rediscover his agency? Looking back, I think the improvisational nature of our mixture of dialogue and play was key, requiring from therapist and client alike an ability to listen and respond flexibly in the moment. Use of the senses, contact functions, body and intellect are vital to developing and experiencing vitality and a sense of growing mastery- that which is required to navigate our environment with confidence, finding our flow. The embodied, relational work we embarked on together helped him develop greater capacity to manage change and become more self-supporting, coping better with life's vicissitudes, including those brought about by the challenge of epilepsy.

Judith Herman notes:

'Recovery can take place only within the context of relationships, it cannot occur in isolation. In her renewed connection with other people the survivor re-creates the psychological facilities that were damaged or deformed by the traumatic experience. These faculties include the basic operations of trust, autonomy, competence, identity and intimacy. '(Herman,1997).

Nor should one overlook the importance of exploratory play in recovery. As the celebrated writer Phillip Pullman observes:

"It is when we do this foolish, time-consuming, romantic, quixotic, childlike thing called play that we are most practical, most useful, and most firmly grounded in reality, because the world itself is the most unlikely of places, and it works in the oddest of ways, and we won't make any sense of it by doing what everybody else has done before us. It's when we fool about with the stuff the world is made of that we make the most valuable discoveries, we create the most lasting beauty, we discover the most profound truths. The youngest children can do it, and the greatest artists, the greatest scientists do it all the time. " (Pullman,2005).

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