**Stories that Need to Be Told:**

**Using Playback Theatre as a Way to Explore Loss and Grief and Build Resilience**

(This Chapter is included in the book *Using The Creative Arts Therapies for Coping with Loss and Grief,* edited by Dr. Dorothy Miraglia and Stephanie Brooke, published by Charles Thomas Press, USA 2015)

“We all grieve throughout our lifetimes. We grieve because we love. We grieve because we lost. We grieve because we won. Grief is the normal result of change-any change, because every change involves a loss, some greater and felt more intensely, some lesser and barely realized.” (Graves, 1994 p. 1)

Issues of grief and loss imbue many aspects of our lives. Grief, as defined by Doka (2007), is a reaction to loss. For many, it feels viscerally as if a door has swung shut. Life has changed, and often, is not in our control. From the death of loved ones (human and pets) as children, to changing and shifting opportunities, friendships and intimate relationships, loss of physical abilities; to job loss or shifts in our careers, our world is often shaped by loss. Grief can begin as a process when one considers a loss that may or will happen. Fearing the loss of a loved one, or job, and reacting emotionally to the reality of the threat of “It can’t be, there must be some mistake,” or “This isn’t right!” can begin a roller coaster of emotional experiences from hope to despair. These feelings may start even before an actual loss has occurred.

The fear of a loss can be strong, and the feelings that come with it, are that of grief. “Grief is experienced throughout our lives as a normal reaction to major changes. Grief readies us for a new way of life or a new identity” (Graves, 1994 p.15) Loss itself might not impact a person in a particular or linear way depending on the closeness of a particular relationship or situation, while at other times we might seemingly over react to a loss in our present life, from unresolved grief of other losses. “Loss is defined by the meaning we give it.” (Fiorini & Mullen 2006, p.19). Loss can build up and develop like a ‘ripple’ effect’ (Graves, 1994) if not processed, and over time, one may incorporate loss as a part of their worldview. As well, not all grief is equal or the same. Sizook and Shear (2009 p.2) note that, “uncomplicated grief, often are written off as “normal” with the faulty assumption that the natural support system will heal.”

Often times, these losses are minimized by cultural or societal expectations. Sizook and Shear (2009, p.2) continue, “the intensity and duration of grief is highly variable, not only in the same individual over time or after different losses, but also in different people dealing with ostensibly similar losses.” (p.4). In our attempts to start afresh we might inadvertently not grieve in the way that is necessary to be able to fully move on and process the loss. Expressions and feelings of grief are different for every person and loss and it can be damaging to judge, label, or compare a person’s grief. Graves, (1994, pp.3-4) discusses the four faces of grief, which includes the physical, psychological, spiritual, and social aspects. All of it involves the overriding aspect that grief is about transition. These faces include feelings of denial, anger, sadness, guilt and in which one might experience challenging dreams, or insomnia, and a sense of hopelessness. A person might experience chronic or sudden physical inflammations or illnesses. Lifestyles may change and not necessarily for the better- especially if a person’s finances take a negative turn. Activities we may have had before a loss might change dramatically. And for many people, grief becomes a spiritual process in attempts to find meaning in what is happening, and simply in the ‘what is.’ For many, grief begins or deepens a spiritual process and a person feeling grief may experience a spiritual or emotional crisis- that needs a way to become unblocked. Often people may isolate themselves during their grief process. Each face or stage varies in degrees of intensity and time, but in grief all are touched on. To not allow ourselves to experience these stages could cause a person to isolate themselves and become mentally and emotionally “numb’ which can, over time, shape our world view. It would be important to understand that there are multiple ways to grieve that are firstly, personally, influenced, and then culturally and societal influenced (Doka; 2007; Worden; 2009).

The uses of the expressive arts as a way to support people who are going through transitions such as this is well documented. “The language of art and creative expression can speak to us in ways that words cannot speak” (Rogers, 2007 p. 4). Supporting people through grief issues through a group therapy model is ideal as it is “an efficient and effective way to offer emotional support” (Worden as cited in Rogers, 2007 p. 7) For these reasons, the use of Playback theatre as a model to support people who have experienced loss, grief and to develop a basis for resiliency fits.

**Setting the Stage**

Imagine a stage in a small theatre, or room that might be in a home, a hotel, or a work setting. On the left are two chairs looking out to the audience- These are for the facilitator of the evening, also known as the “Conductor” and those who tell stories during the performance, known as the “Teller.” To the left above the tellers chair toward the back of the stage are colorful arrays of fabrics that are neatly hung. To the right of the fabric at the back of the stage there are four boxes, for the actors to sit on, and to use as props while enacting the stories that will be told that evening. To the right facing in from stage left, there is a small table with percussive instruments such as drums, rattles, bells, whistles and guitar or banjo. Musicians will sit here ready to respond to stories using their voices and instruments to support and guide the story from a musical, non verbal perspective. The stage is set for a unique form of theatre improvisation called Playback Theatre. At this performance, as in many others that occur around the world, performers will enact personal life stories told by audience members, playing the stories back using sound, movement, dance, poetry, and theatre improvisation. None of the stories are chosen beforehand but organically brought forth by the audience during the performance. Through this spontaneous and creative process, a community is built to bring and weave together the stories of birth, love, death, of growing up, relationships, and life, including funny, curious, sad, stressful, and grief filled moments.

**Finding a Path Toward Resiliency**

In this chapter, Playback Theatre will be explored as both an art and a place of healing that can support individuals and communities to respond to and heal from loss. Playback Theatre provides a way to support individuals and communities by being a witness to their story of loss in order to be able to effectively grieve. What are they experiencing? What is the story that they wish to tell and to remember? The concept that grief touches us spiritually, physically, psychologically, and socially, as Graves (1994) writes about, makes sense as inherently Playback Theatre strives to touch on these areas as a way of pure expression of one’s inner core life story.

Drama has long been recognized as a method for recording history, a way of exploring currents and tensions in human experiences, as a healing and therapeutic tool. It is important as a method to build empathy through taking on roles of the other, to alter our state of consciousness and to explore our very human nature through metaphor and symbols. (Rousseau, Gauthier, Lacroix, Alain, Benoit, Moran, Viger Rojas, & Bourassa, 2005) Playback Theatre has been known to be being healing, simply by the process of story sharing and to be in a community in which their stories are heard, taken seriously by actors who bring shape and perspective to the story.

**What is Playback Theatre?**

The teller, a woman in her early forties, has come to the stage from the audience and is sitting with the conductor. The actors are sitting across from her on the boxes, the musician directly across. There is an air of expectancy, as they and the audience wait for the story to emerge. It is a story of the teller going through a difficult divorce, and coming to terms about what it means to be single, a single parent, suddenly going from being financially secure, to having to manage everything on her own, and feeling very alone.

*“Feeling grief is like having the fabric of my life torn apart- the threads are hanging and ripped. I know that it is up to me to find the resources within. At first I didn’t know what this meant, but I think I’m getting it now- I feel like I am weaving a new life- full of color, texture and metaphor -My life!”*

These are the words from a “teller” (an audience member that comes to the stage to share a story) during a Playback Theatre performance who has experienced a deep crises during what was a very painful divorce. The experience of feeling pulled apart was a visceral experience for her. In the ensuing Playback enactment, without discussion or planning, the performers used a Playback short for called “Tableau”. Tableaus are stories that are created in a series of ‘frozen’ silent sculptures with “titles” presented by the Conductor or narrator. In this case, the actors physicalized the experience of being pulled apart, and then a frozen sculpture using their bodies, scarves, and music, a sense of finding much needed inner resources. At the end of the enactment, the actors froze, and then made eye contact with the teller. There was a shared sense of deep connection through this story with the teller. As I looked at the teller, there were tears in her eyes. *“Did this capture your story? I asked “Yes, and more than that. Thank you for seeing me.”* The teller moves back to her seat in the audience, as the actors moved back to their places to hear the next story. In anticipation, we await the next story to arise from the audience. One that will most likely come from a thread of the story just told.

Playback Theatre was founded by Jonathan Fox and Jo Salas in 1975 and further developed with the original Playback Theatre troupe in New York. Now 40 years later, Playback is performed in more than 60 countries. Playback Theatre, an interactive and improvisational theatre is inspired by a variety of theatrical threads, including Psychodrama (Moreno), Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal), Experimental theatre and the work of Jerzi Grotowski, and the non-scripted oral tradition of traditional cultures. In discussing the origins of Playback Theatre, Jonathan Fox states, that they strived to “act out stories in the community itself, and we would have the courage to act out any story, even those normally too hot to be told.”(Fox, 2014 p. 2) In this quote, Fox states that no story should go untold, whether one that is funny, or one that comes from a well of grief, trauma or loss.

Playback Theatre offers a method in which a ‘world within worlds’ is created through an intention, shared by actors and audience, to create community. Each company, made of “citizen actors,” (actors not necessarily professional outside of Playback Theatre) in every country does Playback in slightly different ways, accommodating for local cultural, artistic, and focus needs. Yet, the ritual of Playback remains the same and is recognizable in its artistic form, as well as to support individuals and communities to come together and tell stories of their lives.

An improvisational theater, Playback aims to achieve personal and social transformation through sharing a theater experience within a ritual space (Salas; 2013). In this form of theatre, the main facilitator, known as the Conductor, has the task of warming up the audience and putting them at ease to tell a personal story, and remain in deep connection with the actors and musician(s).

**The Three Circles and the Zone of Good Playback**

The process of Playback is deceivingly simple. It is not therapy, but can be therapeutic. On the face of it, we are simply playing back a person’s story from his/her life. As Playback practitioners, we have a desire to be able to tell any story from the audience. Based on values that include respect, equality and acceptance, the actors work toward modeling this, both in workshops and performances (Salas, 2011). The act of creating the safe container allowing anyone to tell a story is central, as is the ability to listen deeply, not so much with our ears, but from a deeper well of compassion to the teller’s story. In this improvisational form, the actors synthesize the story heard through their own filters of their lives. Nick Rowe describes this as an “*encounter with one’s own story through the teller’s”* (Rowe, 2007 p. 105) which bears witness to the story and feelings that enliven it.

The balance of “Three Circles” incorporates the theoretical underpinnings in Playback Theatre. The Three Circles includes ritual, social awareness, and art which need to be present for a Playback performance to encompass the needs of the story, the teller and the audience in which there is a 'shared identity'(Fox, 2014 ). The circles overlap and in the center there is the ‘Zone of Good Playback Theatre’ an even balance that holds the ritual, the art and the social awareness that requires understanding of the deeper interpersonal and interpsychic levels. This presence of ritual means the repeated structures in space and time that provide stability and familiarity, within which can be contained the unpredictable. “Ritual also helps to summon the heightened perception of experience that can transform life into theatre” (Salas, 2013 p. 104).

Playback is inherently ritualized; it is useful in contexts, and countries, where the rituals of performance, and everyday life, may be missing due to war, natural disaster, and other forms of social upheaval. Also inherent within these three circles is an 'atmosphere of acceptance' (Salas, 2013) that is necessary for the audience to be comfortable with the process of self-disclosure in the process of telling personal stories. “Thus while the framework of playback theatre is broader than psychotherapy and does not conform to some of its definitional guidelines, its effectiveness at ego-building, resolving conflict, working with trauma, and helping people make positive decisions about their future suggests that it can accomplish many of the objectives of psychotherapy.” (Fox, 2014 p. 7)

Playback supports people in connecting with each other through personal story, creating community, engaging in finding their individual and collective voices for change, acknowledging their dreams, developing caring networks through shared experience. Playback Theatre was developed mainly as a performance art, but quickly discovered to have very deep healing and therapeutic attributes. It is a highly flexible theatre form that requires few technical supports and is often taken to the sites. Jonathan Fox and the Original Playback Theatre Company sought to follow the advice of Jerzy Grotowski of Poland and built a “poor theatre,” needing nothing but our bodies and a space to mark out as the stage” (Fox, 2014 p. 2). Over the years it has evolved and today new forms are being created. Playback is used in a variety of settings including: open performances, celebratory rituals (including memorial services), hospitals, prisons, hospice, businesses (including corporate and management skills and training) mental health and education. Themes might directly engage with social justice, human rights, environment and climate change, disaster recovery and educational issues such as bullying.[[1]](#footnote-1) Playback has also been used in therapeutic contexts and partner with social service groups to maintain the container necessary both during and after a workshop and/or performance.

The ritual of a Playback Theatre performance is easily recognizable. Playback is flexible enough to be in a room, or a performance space. The actors come on to stage, often in a pre-designed way and introduce themselves to the audience by using a playback form. In this way, the actors mirror how Playback is done for the audience in an immediate and engaging manner. Next the conductor continues by asking opening questions of the audience, that are reflected back in short forms helping them to warm up to the theme of the evening, and to sharing longer stories. Often, audience members are invited to connect with each other. The conductor draws personal life stories from the audience, each teller sharing their story with to a group of actors and musicians who spontaneously “play it back” using mime, spoken word, dance, music and improvisational theatre. Stories are told back not with words, but forms that use chant, gestures, and movement. At the end of each story, the conductor finds different ways to check that the enactment reflected meanings that are important to the teller.[[2]](#footnote-2) Over the course of an evening, there might be eight to10 stories told through short and long theatrical forms, creating what is known as the ‘Red Thread” (Salas, 2012) of linkages between stories that grow from one story to the next.

Actors playback the stories, without talking in between stories, and do not process the stories until after the performance. In between stories, there is a moment in which one teller moves back into the audience, becoming re-attuned with the community, and a new teller coming forth. There is skill involved of the actor, to be able to hold the juxtaposition of roles that may span from an inanimate object, to animal or person. This allows for the holding of deeper undertones and elements of emotion of the story. Therefore, in training Playback actors, they learn not only the artistic aesthetics of Playback, but the deeper ways in which to listen to and for a story. What is being spoken? What may not be spoken verbally, but spoken non-verbally? The Conductor and actors are trained to listen to what I call the ‘Metta’ story one that might refer to social, cultural or gender based issues and constructs. Barbara Myerhoff, the cultural anthropologist wrote: "Life histories, give people the opportunities to become visible and to enhance their reflexive consciousness." (Myerhoff as cited in Fox, 2014 p. 7) So in being a teller, we become clearer about who we are; as a vital act of affirmation.

**Playback Theatre in Action**

It is 2003 and the drumbeats of war are heard across the land. Vermont Playback Theatre Company is offering a performance at the local Quaker Meeting house, themed “War and Peace.” Stories are being told by family members and veterans of World War II and of the Vietnam War and pacifists facing the prospect of another conflict brewing in Iraq. Fear and grief at what was happening in the world permeated the stories throughout the evening. Toward the end of the performance a young woman raises her hand *“I think I have a story- I’m not sure- It’s about my grandpa, who just passed away, not me.”* As conductor,I invite her to the teller’s chair, feeling confident that in some way, the story really would be about her as well.

Shari grew up knowing her grandfather and being very close, yet at a distance. “I loved my grandpa, who had died the year before. I felt a strong connection with him, though he never talked much, and I was shy to talk around him. There was a lot of quiet in our house- a sad quiet. I knew his story had affected my mother and her siblings, and in turn my cousins, my siblings, and me. I understood the waves of sadness and regret my mom felt with his death. Could that have been different? And the sudden realization that the honest conversation she’d always imagined for someday would never happen.” I invited Shari to choose someone to play herself in the story. The actor she chose stood up, and she chose the roles of her mother and grandfather. Each of these actors also stood up and quietly waited in a neutral manner as Shari finished her story. Shari described the tension in her house between her mother and grandfather and how the deep silence of knowing her grandfathers past was a deep presence in her growing up. She remembered tension and a darkness that prevailed around her grandfather. I then asked her, “How does this story conclude?” At this point, Shari remembered a dream that she had a few weeks prior of a conversation between her mother and her grandfather. In this scene, her 'dream' grandfather calls and her mother answers the phone. While not fully understanding the conversation, Shari remembers feeling a sense of deep peace come over her as her dream mother and grandfather are talking.

At this point in the interview, I said, “Let's see this now in action- ‘Let's watch’, a common phrase used in Playback theatre that signals the end of the interview phase and the beginning of the enactment phase. With this, the musicians began to play music that brought out the tone of the story. Meanwhile, the actors moved around the stage silently, gathering fabric, (which is used to describe emotion, metaphor and characterization) watching and moving into place. There is a stillness that falls in place. The musicians go into silence. A breath, and then the scene began.

The actors playing Shari's grandparents dance together, on stage. The music changes, becomes darker. World War II has arrived and the draft summons Shari’s grandpa away. The actors perform through sound and movement a scene in which we see the essence of the experience of World War II. This scene ends and the audience watches him come back, home, emotionally changed. In the next scene, we watch as Shari's grandparents’ relationship change and shift finally fall apart, not just from each other but in their own minds and spirits. The teller’s actor narrates a soliloquy center stage about her mother and her siblings being dropped on their aunt’s doorstep, their parents too damaged to be able to take care of their children:

“Last night, I had the strangest dream. Grandpa called.” The phone rang. Michael, the actor playing Shari picks it up. “Hello? Grandpa!” Michael’s voice expressed joyful amazement on the stage. “Mom? It’s for you.”

The actor playing Shari's mother takes the (imaginary) phone. “Hello? Dad!” The audience does not hear what is being said on the phone. As she listened on the phone, her face softens and a sense of peace came over her face.

With the ending of the scene, the actors create a final sculpture, freeze, and then look at Shari. With this glance, the story entered the “acknowledgment” of the story by transferring the story back to Shari, with the eye contact so that she could reclaim it as her own story again. With this, she was invited back into the audience for the closure of the performance.

While Shari told the story in a performance in 2003, she and I met ten years later at which point she relayed to me how important the telling of the story had been for her. She remembered it as a story that helped her to process the experience of her relationship not only with her grandfather, but with her mother as well, in a way that she hadn't before. In fact the ability to share the story helped her to understand aspects of her relationship with her mother which had been challenging. In being able to experience a sense of clarity, Shari was able to make peace with the losses that came from her grandfather going to war. She said, “*I don’t know if the enactment brought any peace to my Grandpa---or to my mom, as she wasn’t there. But I know it brought peace to me.”*

Playback is useful in many countries experiencing war and poverty in which typical rituals may be lacking due to the chaos surrounding them. Often tremendous grief accompanies personal loss or times of societal stress. A safe space is created in which to share deep stories and to grieve, and in doing so, offers the possibility that tellers' lives will be witnessed by a supportive community. Tellers may share stories of grief and loss, and with the aid of the actors, begin to reframe the meaning of their stories. Through Playback performances, individuals and communities may bear witness to their losses, grieve, find hope, and begin to build resilience in their lives using Playback Theatre. I will begin with recount of Playback in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is a deeply impoverished country. In the work that I have done there, the issues of grief and loss have permeated many, if not all, aspects of training and performance. In working with Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and clinical psychology departments at 3 universities, I have shared some of the ways Playback might be used for performance, for addressing social issues, and for healing trauma and loss.

The one thing that has come up consistently, over the years is the fact that living in Bangladesh, amidst the poverty, poor sanitation and corrupt government, most Bangladeshis, to one degree or another live with at least a low level of trauma in their lives. (Kristel, 2012) In trainings, loss and grief often hold a prominent presence. We work with themes, such as young adult suicide, women’s empowerment, domestic violence, economic disparity, and disability issues. These are explored as participants are trained in the method of Playback Theatre.

Playback is taught as a tool for supporting people with disabilities to come together and to share their experiences as disabled people in a culture that inherently does not recognize them as valuable assets in the community at large. In this case, it can be enormously empowering to share stories. In one Playback story, a young deaf woman shared a moment of frustrated exasperation, finding herself unable to find meaningful work. *“People assume that because I am deaf, that also means I am incompetent! But I’m not!!*” Actors, who were also group members, played back her frustration through a form called “Fluid Sculptures,” a brief group form that takes a feeling and a moment and plays it back in sound and movement. Each person played her sense of outcry and frustration. As actors take on roles representing of many kinds of people and experiences, they develop a stronger role repertoire that often then allows them to explore and heal their own issues

Specific themes and stories related to grief and loss have included innumerable stories of siblings or children committing suicide for not passing grades to go to college, acid burnings by husbands and boyfriends, and arranged marriage. My experience of being with Bangladeshi people is that they are very in touch with their feelings and emotions, and their sense of loss.

In 2012, I was asked to supervise a team of 13 people in a crises intervention in Mirasaroi, a small village outside Chittagong, on the Bay of Bengal. The town had just lost 45 boys in a horrific accident. In Bangladesh culture, having boys is highly valuable both socially and economically. The disaster was tragic for a number of reasons. For one, it exposed a number of issues that are prevalent in Bangladeshi culture, particularly in the rural areas. It brought to the surface issues of economics, survival, and gender issues. To lose boys from a family means not only deep emotional grief, but due to cultural and societal norms it also means economic loss. Having boys is experienced by many, especially in the villages as more valuable and boys have more opportunities given to them to develop in educational resources and work. For some families, boys eat first, and are given more food while girls and women often eat less and, might be expected to give their allotment to the boys. Therefore, the loss of these boys was a profound shock to the community, deep and painful, and held many layers of trauma and grief. For many families, losing their children also meant that parents no longer had access to a secure financial future, as the children are expected to support the family.

In a three day assessment visit, the victims’ families were interviewed, along with school children, teachers, and government officials to determine the psychosocial needs of the community. There was obvious tension between those who were impacted and those who were not by the trauma. There was a myriad of political issues, and misconceptions about our mission, and we needed to find a way of being present to the entire community, to gain the people's trust, and to have a lasting, positive, effect. To the community at large, we needed to find a way to be present in such a way to be able to reach the community in a mutually agreeable way that would then have the most longevity in the outcome. While traumatic loss and grief were clearly the overriding emotional factors of what the community experienced, issues of class, economics and gender issues, affected both the adult and school communities through varying forms of individual and collective bullying. Therefore, as a group, we decided to focus on the issue of bullying as a way to also work with the issues of grief and loss individually and collectively.

In this four day intervention, we used multiple therapeutic modalities including Psychodrama, Sociodrama, Playback Theatre, and expressive art therapy. A form of Playback Theatre called *No More Bullying*! developed by Jo Salas and the Hudson River Playback Theatre Company that incorporates sociodrama, and Playback theatre in a unique model was used as the main approach. Playback Theatre was used to help school children to discuss bullying, how it impacted them, and ways in which they could discover other options such as reaching out to teachers and “safe” people. We culminated the project with a Playback Theatre performance in which community members came together to share their experiences of the four days. In this performance, villagers shared stories about how it felt to have the team come and simply be interested in hearing their story of loss and grief, and the journey to giving their voice to their grief. In one story, a father who had lost all his sons in the accident told a story about realizing that in his grief he forgot about his daughter, ignoring her and her grief. In his mind, her needs were not as important. He recounted how the team in coming to his family home and doing Playback (using modified short forms) he was able to see her and the pain that she was in. He was able to see that she too was grieving and needed his support. It was clear to all at the performance, that there was a palatable shift and a turning experience for the community that gathered. While at the beginning of the four day period there had been guardedness, and distrust of our team, there was now a warmth and sense of shared connectedness that was deeply expressive to each of the tellers.

Every night of the gathering in Mirasaroi, the team would gather and process, often with Playback, how they felt about hearing the stories of the traumatized families and how they felt about it. For many in the group, including me, many of the stories were very hard to hear and team members worked to support each other. For a number of people on the team it was personally challenging to bear witness to, not only the pain and trauma of the loss of the boys, but some of the cultural norms that were clearly very alive within this village around family expectations and gender roles. Doing Playback for ourselves during these times, we used these tools to share the stories within us that needed to come out in response to the work we were doing. By holding the container of the Playback Theatre form, we allowed for our own stories of grief to emerge and be held in order for us to be able to connect with the humanity that we were surrounded by.

The ritual of Playback Theatre offers a way to offer a container as it supports an individual’s ability to internalize and bring about the ability to self soothing. When working on deep issues of grief, and loss, being able to identify a safe place, within themselves gives a sense of identification with a here and now experience that they can refer to as they need. For the work done in the village of Mirasaroi, using creative modalities such as Playback Theatre created the container by which communication amongst the community was made possible.

In a different training for people who experienced natural disasters, I had students visualize a safe space that they could actually locate within their body. Students then drew a safe place that was based on the felt sense and any visual imagines they gathered during the exercise.

One young man was very moved by these exercises as it brought up the connection that he had with his grandfather, who had passed away a few years earlier. It was with his grandfather that he had felt the safest in his family. After his grandfather’s death, he felt “stuck” in his life, unable to get to a place in which he could feel at ease or have joy in his life. He never really processed his feelings, as it wasn't very “manly” to show emotion, and was not given support to work through his grief from his family.

Shuba was a young child whose mother had to work very long hours to support the family. He had siblings and they were often left alone. He described not feeling supported by his mother and feeling abandoned by her. He also talked about being able to be at the university thanks to his grandfather who supported his dream of becoming a psychologist. In this story, Shuba was relaying his feelings about his grandfather passing. He had known on some level that his grandfather was not well but was very caught up in his activities at university. In the end, he arrived back at his village just as his grandfather died, unable to say goodbye to him. In realizing that he would not be able to physically say goodbye, Shuba became very distraught.

In coming to the teller’s chair, he had trouble talking about this story. He was crying very hard. The event stayed emotionally very close to him. I invited him to bring up his ally (each participant had a ‘buddy’ that during the workshop would connect with each other to process the day, and to work on specific directives) to sit with him in the telling and enactment of the story. “T” was a supportive presence by simply sitting with Shuba with his hand on his back. The added support visibly helped Shuba to be able to share his story. I was aware that others in the audience were visibly affected by Shuba’s story as well, and I invited them to sit with each other and gain support from being connected.

In playing this story back, I reminded him that although his grandfather had died, we could use Playback Theatre to symbolically bring him back for a conversation through what is known as “Surplus Reality”[[3]](#footnote-3) We set up three areas to focus in on: a scene from his childhood in which he experienced the feeling of abandonment from his mother, the feeling of being connected with his grandfather in which he decides to go to University. The final scene is a conversation with his grandfather, connecting with him, realizing that although he is not present, he was still with him in spirit.

It was important, as a troupe to not re-traumatize the teller, but to play the story back with sensitivity. Playback theatre training focuses on role development and flexibility, as we portray a role; they become a part of the actor, being filtered through their own emotional landscapes, and life experiences. Many of these roles are emotionally challenging and, therefore actors are trained to accept roles and to delay emotionally processing them till after the performance. This allows them to be able to be fully present to the teller, and thus, to be of service to teller and audience, as much to decide what form would be proper to use to play back a moment. This allows for the ability to create the conditions for what Carl Rogers calls “unconditional positive regard” (Salas, 2013 p. 117).

As the conductor, I was very aware of the heightened emotion in the room. There were five actors (four women and one man) and two musicians. I saw that they were very involved in the story. I reminded them that in doing this for Shuba they would benefit, but in order to do the story, they needed to be able to process their own feelings enough so to be able to play back the scene for the teller. Shuba had chosen the teller’s actor and someone to play his mother and grandfather. As this was a workshop, with people new to the form, not a performance, I decided to work with the tableau form (a Playback form that uses “frozen sculpture”) to describe a story without words, as it has strong inherent framing.

With each scene, the actors sensitively and creatively used scarves to express the emotion and metaphors of the story. Working with the Tableau form and fluid sculpture, as well as using the form of a Three Part Story (see glossary) to offer structure in what was a very emotionally told story. It was played back not so much with the greatest of acting skills, but with a sense of the color through the scarves, metaphors and movements of the story. This enabled the actors to capture the teller’s feelings of abandonment, shame, and guilt. The final scene did have dialogue, allowing for the teller’s actor to meet with his Spirit grandfather in a conversation, to express his gratitude and appreciation to his grandfather being there to support him in attaining his dream of college. The releases through the metaphorical conversation, done with his grandfather, supported Shuba in building his sense of his inner resilience and empower him to continue his studies with a renewed sense of energy. As the story evolved and was played back, Shuba watched closely, deeply engaged in the action. He often nodded at different moments and once he whispered to me “*I did say that*.” When the story ended, and the actors had looked at the teller, he was still emotional, yet calm, sitting straight and attentive. The act of being able to see himself having a conversation with his grandfather, which up to that point, he didn’t think was possible, was deeply moving and healing for him.

I invited him to sit in the audience with his support person next to him. Many people in the audience were deeply moved by this story. The idea that one could in fact still have a conversation with someone they had loved but who had passed on was clearly revelatory and seemed to open doors for approaching their experience of grief. At this point in the process, I invited everyone to connect with someone else in the audience. Often times in a Playback performance, after a deep story such as this one, there will be a few minutes in which the musicians play music. Music is a balm. Soothing nerves, calming emotions, music can be used to integrate the story and allow the Teller to reintegrate into the audience. It also allows others in the audience to consider and reflect on his story, and to synthesize it through the lens of their own stories that may be raised through hearing and witnessing the teller’s story. I then asked the group to think of a common Bangladeshi lullaby that they could all sing together. For a few minutes, we sang. By sharing music together, people were able to process and have space to gather themselves. A few more stories and then we ended by sharing themes from the day’s work and played them back in a group sculpture as a way to culminate our process.

Closure is transition from the dramatic journey to outside reality. “The intensive and carefully designed process not only helps client reflect on and integrate the past, but creates a sense of opening to the future – pointing to the steps that lie ahead, the possibilities, and the hope as one continues the journey” (Emunah, 2009, p. 47).

The process of receiving the story is a gift (Rowe, 2007). We are inherently storytellers. We shape our lives often as stories; either small or large. Stories are “built into our way of thought. We need stories for our emotional health and our sense of place in the world” (Salas, 2013, p. 22) As actors, we receive these stories from the tellers as gifts, we are witness/observers to a part of a person’s journey- engaging the story, noting the timing of the story and shaping the performance of the story. The story is then ‘given back’ to the teller, transformed by spontaneous improvisation, and the humanness of the actors, so that s/he can then take it and reflect on it. Actors note changes in nuance that occurred in the space between the telling and the completed retelling to give back to the teller and audience, completing the circle. The conductor holds the presence and pays attention to the subtle as well as broad dynamics within the audience, as well as the connection between the actors and the audience.

In Playback Theatre performances, the audience acts as the observer /witness. Each story then becomes the story of all, as people hear the story of the person, see it played back, and imagine themselves in the shoes of the teller, or often, remember stories of their own that perhaps took place have been in very similar circumstances (Rowe, 2007). Often listeners hear a theme, or thread, in a story that reminds them of a story of their own. “Personal stories give Playback Theatre it’s organizing focus” (Rowe, 2007, p. 68) A thread of the story told is something that triggers the observer to remembering a story of their own, and which might then become the next story told on stage if the audience member wishes to share and is chosen.

**Conclusion**

Playback Theatre is a method of working with grief, loss and empowerment that allows movement toward resiliency. By being able to share stories that are personal in a forum that allows for a “healing power of aesthetic experience” (Salas, 2013p. 128), individuals are able to have their story witnessed and to be able to observe their story acted with care and acceptance.

Loss can happen at any turn. To be able to explore it in all its nuances through creative modalities such as Playback theatre, one is able to assimilate a sense of identity within the whole community and to be connected as a whole within community. As a community both actors and audience alike, there is a deepening and gentle reaching that occurs as the threads of stories bring people together, building bridges in ways that are often unexpected and heartfelt.

Playback Theatre is an act of courage. For tellers to share their personal, often very intimate stories, and for actors to bear witness to the stories told and to offer through their skills, desires, shared histories. In this way, using Playback Theatre to heal from loss naturally works toward developing resiliency, as the shared experience empowers not just the tellers and audience, but the actors as well.

**Summary of Terms**

Here s a short list of a few of the terms used throughout the chapter to explain terminology commonly referred to in Playback Theatre.

**Conductor:** Although all the roles in Playback are important, the conductor is probably the most diverse in his/her role. The conductor is the Master of Ceremonies, the “conduit” between the actors, the audience and the tellers. It is up to the conductor to adequately warm up the audience, and elicit the story as well as then frame it for the actors.

**Actor:** The actors’ job is to listen to each story from a deep place and then play them back in a spontaneous way that keeps the essence of the story, but does not “parrot” the story. When given a role, the actor stands up to receive the role and listens “from the heart” to what that role is. The actors quickly and with little or no talking set up for the scene.

**Teller's Actor:** The actor that is chosen to play the role of the teller for a given story.

**Musician:** The musician is on stage with the actors. Through improvisational playing, the musician can lead the story, back a story up, working with the actors intuitively. Musicians play during the set up of a story, as well as the story itself. Music is commonly used for fluid sculptures and stories. Music is also very important for moments of allowing the audience to internalize a story that was deep and moving.

**Audience:** The audience is the witness/observer. Each audience member plays an important role in the process of listening to the story as well as the playing back. Often the audience is asked whether they connect to the teller’s story, while he/she is still telling it. In oral traditions and native cultures, the telling of stories always happens within the group and that the group as a whole is a part of the healing. The response to a story by the audience is important as well as it helps the teller understand whether his/her story has been acknowledged.

**Teller:** The teller is the person who shares a story- whether from the audience, or coming up to the tellers’ chair. The teller is the person who often is the voice of the group- the story that creates connections and continues the red thread of stories. The teller can be the person who brings a story out from the group that needs to be told, even if no one has spoken about it before. The teller’s role is one that takes courage. It is with the warm up and sociometry provided by the conductor (and sometimes in the introductions by the actors) that allow for the tellers to come forth. It is not a role to be under estimated in its strength and courage.

**Short Forms**: Most short forms are under a minute- no more than two. Usually no roles are taken; rather the perspective is that of the teller only. There are many forms and more are still being created in companies around the world.

**Fluid Sculpture:** The basic of the Playback forms, Fluid Sculpture is Sound and Movement done as a group based on a very short moment and feeling from the teller. The goal is to create a moving, sounding sculpture and allows the audience to see the moment fully.

**Pairs:** Pairs are a moment in which a person has two distinct and different conflictual feelings about one situation, which is played back together, both from the tellers’ perspective.

**Performance:** Playback Theatre being done by a group of trained actors for an audience. May or may not be themed.

**Psychodrama:** Developed by J.L. Moreno (1889-1974) Different from Playback Theatre at its core psychodrama uses deep action methods to explore and correct issues that have been identified in the group. Often there a protagonist is chosen whose issue represents the main elements of the group. The protagonist brings forward their drama and the members of the group are brought in as auxiliaries to aid the dramatic enactment of the scene(s) brought forward by the protagonist (different from the tellers experience of relating the story and watching it played back by a group of actors).

**Progressions:** Progressions are extended fluids. Instead of taking a short glimpse of a moment and feeling, the actors present the story, in 2-3 short “scenes” taking the feelings of the top experiences and through fluids.

**Sociodrama:** is a dramatic play based on themes chosen by the group in which several individuals act out assigned roles for the purpose of studying and remedying problems in group or collective relationships.

**Workshop:** Playback Theatre being done with a specific population and theme in which workshop participants also participate as actors, musician or conductor.

**Psychodrama:** A therapeutic modality also based on personal story, developed by Jacob Moreno (1889-1974). The teller is referred to as the “protagonist” and in Psychodrama, the protagonist is directly involved in the drama, supported by the “Director”.

**Tableau:** Brief story from teller in audience is retold by conductor in about five short sentences, usually present tense and “story language.” After each sentence, actors create image and hold it, accompanied with minimal movement and no sound (There are many variations on this).

**Three Part Story:** Three part story is when three actors take three parts of the story and one at a time show it from either the tellers perspective, or three distinct roles from the story that gives the essence of the whole story. This form is useful (along with others) for giving structure in a story, when the story told might be very emotional or chaotic.

**Long Forms:** Long forms, such as scenes are longer stories that involve the Teller coming to the stage, sit with conductor, tells story, and chooses actors for self and (usually) main characters. **Enactment**: Also known as Scenes, the story is gathered, and the conductor has the teller choose roles. After which the actors create the scene on their own based on what they heard from the teller. At times with longer story, the Conductor will help to define the frame of the story, to help bring in important feelings, and nuances of the story. Actors create a freeze at the end then, look at the Teller.

These are but a few of the forms that make up what Playback Theatre is. Forms are constantly evolving. Short forms are often used as warm ups at the beginning of a performance or a workshop, or for telling stories that might have high emotional content and be safer to use a form that can encompass the story but with a stronger frame, or container. The longer forms are used for delving into stories in a deeper way. For a deeper look at how to do Playback Theatre, and an in depth look at more of these forms I refer you to Jo Salas book *Improvising real life: Personal stories in action,* 2013. Tusitala Press, NY or to the Centre for Playback Theatre website at: www.playbackcentre.com

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1. There are multiple Playback Theatre companies currently working on Social and Environmental Justice projects. For further review of projects, I refer you to the Centre for Playback theatre resource listings at www.playbackcentre.org [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For a thorough description of Playback Theatre including history and applications, I refer you to the work of Jo Salas (2013*) Improving real life: Personal story in Playback Theatre,* Tusitala Press (second ed), and Jonathan Fox(1986)*Acts of service: Spontaneity, commitment, tradition in the nonscripted theatre* . Tusitala [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Jacob Moreno developed a psychodramatic technique called "surplus reality" A space where people could live out alternative realities on stage and try out different ways of behaving in a safe space and get feedback from others. As demonstrated here, it is also useful as a tool to support conversations with those who they may or may not see again. This is a tool that comes from psychodrama, and in and of its self, is not a Playback Theatre technique. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)