

# Hopework: The Tree of Life as a helpful metaphor for multiple families having children with cancer

By Linda Moxley-Haegert

Never in their wildest dreams would most parents think of having a child diagnosed with cancer. Then when it happens it seems like their greatest nightmare. Even when the percentages regarding chances of cure are good, the news that their child will have to go through years of chemotherapy, sometimes surgery and sometimes radiotherapy, often hospitalization is very hard to hear and when it happens even harder to bear. Their children will often feel sick, will lose their hair, will have to stop going to school and can only see one, very well friend, at a time. There are so many changes for children and families. Often one parent has to quit work, the other children in the family will get much less parent time than previously and finances go down.

When parents approached me to ask for a support group I began to think about how I could do this and not end up with too many stories of complaint and suffering. Narrative practice helps people move away from the reality of the problem stories into other realities which are also there but relatively unavailable. I knew these parents and children had a wealth of stories of mastery and coping and I was challenged with finding a way that their achievements, knowledges, resources and perhaps unique discoveries could be voiced. I thought of the Tree of Life metaphor and felt that this might be a helpful metaphor for these families. When I first started talking about having a support group, the Art Therapist on our Oncology/Haematology team thought she could have an art therapy group for the children diagnosed with cancer and their siblings at the same time as I would hold the parent support group. However, when I started talking about the Tree of Life metaphor we came up with the idea of holding two half-day workshops that would include any family members who wished to come.

Montreal, Canada, is a multi-lingual city with the majority of its inhabitants speaking either French or English as their major language. Many parents are bilingual or multilingual and most children are multilingual but with a preferred language. We decided to hold our group as a bilingual group, French and English, just like our hospital. We acknowledged that each person would have varying comfort in the two languages but that by repeating ourselves in two languages we would have the advantage of truly clarifying what we say and how we understand it. It was our goal to use our



bilingual group to every person's advantage and we asked everyone to exercise tolerance of errors, pauses, and miscommunications stating that together we would find a way.

In our introduction we discussed that what joined the families was the experience of the diagnosis and treatment of cancer. The experience of pain in the process was acknowledged and the possibility of strong emotions coming out in the sharing was discussed. We discussed ways that this might be managed.

We introduced the idea of creating a metaphor that could help us replace darkness with light and approach the struggle of childhood cancer with the solace of community, creativity, and caring. We wrote an introduction in both languages for the families stating that one of the most painful aspects of cancer is how meaningless it is. We can ask the WHY of so many things but for this, there are no answers. We suggested that one of the ways that narrative therapy and art therapy might be helpful is to promote family members finding some meaning in their experiences. We discussed that children make meaning out of their experience through play. So in this workshop we would play together using the tree of life as our special metaphor, our symbol that we would use to introduce each family to each other but also to help each family to see itself, hopefully from a different perspective.

We used our Oncology/Haematology team and our hospital, The Montreal Children's Hospital as our model when going through the process of creating our tree, as you can see from picture one (picture of the instructions on the wall with our painting of the tree of life in the centre). We cautioned the family members not to create a masterpiece (although many masterpieces were created as can be seen by our



Forest of Life presentation, picture two) but rather a metaphor as they created their trees. We hoped that just as we would refrain from judging each other in terms of our language capacity, we also would refrain from judging anyone's artwork, especially our own (not always easy with different age groups as can be seen from the picture of one boy very unhappy with his tree. He was three years old and even when others encouraged him with hugs and positive comments on his tree he still felt discouraged). We hoped that all our discussions, which would follow would use this standard of non-judgement.

We felt that this introduction was important in order to try to create a safe place for these families, which hopefully could create an environment of sharing and telling stories that would honour their knowledge, values and skills. We were so pleased with the open telling of stories that occurred. I would like to acknowledge the seven families who agreed to share with us all their stories, their trees and their pictures. (Included are some lovely pictures of their work).

We began our tree using writing instructions in each language, which were on the walls on both sides of the table. I felt honoured to witness such sharing. The working together was amazing as each family collaborated thoughtfully with each other (two pictures of hands working on the projects, mother and child gluing and mother and child telling their story are telling of this collaboration) and provided encouraging comments to each other about each family's tree (pictures of the Forest).

What seemed to sustain most families through hard times was community. These communities were cultural, religious, family and even the culture of the oncology team, including the oncology families. Two stories of culture were particularly moving. One, told tearfully by a French Canadian mother, expressed such gratitude towards her Italian in-laws and their community who kept them supplied with meals for over a month while their son was in hospital with his newly-diagnosed leukemia. The other was narrated by Sri Lankan parents who, with their two daughters, drew a maple tree (the symbol of Canada) to express their gratitude to be living in a "peaceful country, filled with warm and welcoming people" who helped them feel cherished and safe even through the difficult period of discovering that their daughter would lose her vision because of a retinoblastoma tumor. This girl's 6-year-old sister entertained us all by explaining the meanings of the many lovely words of hope written on the branches of her family's tree.

Another story told by a Croatian mother expressed the hope to be able to give back to other parents the many gifts of "love and support" that she had been given by the hospital personnel and the parents of other children with cancer. Her story has helped us begin a new project of developing a "kitbag of ideas – tools" which will be written into a bilingual brochure to be sent out to families of children who have been newly diagnosed with cancer. We are



going to have two more workshops to develop this new fruit (a gift we want to give because of having received) from the two Tree of Life workshops. Who knows where it will all end? It is my hope that this is a beginning that will become a spiral with no end.



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