

Learning to Laugh: A Portrait of Risk and Resilience in Early Childhood

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In this portrait, Travis Wright documents young Goddess's capacity for strength in the face of trauma and neglect. Goddess, a sixteen-month-old child who has never laughed, is Wright's first client at his clinical internship during his graduate studies. Drawing on his work with Goddess, her mother, and her teachers, Wright explores the ways in which these many relationships help Goddess learn to laugh. Goddess's story provides a vivid depiction of the consequences of negative experiences in early childhood and the potential for programs to help children move beyond traumatic beginnings. The author describes how, through Goddess, he learns to see strength in behaviors he previously thought to be maladaptive. In reflecting on Goddess's agency in her transformation as well as on his own, Wright beautifully documents one child's journey from risk to resilience.

Goddess

Sixteen months old, Goddess¹ has never learned to laugh. It is unclear if she has never experienced this emotion or if she has simply given up on it. With a very dark complexion and distant eyes, Goddess often arrives at school bundled in her dingy pink coat covered with the smell of cigarette smoke. Spending most days sitting silently in the corner of her toddler classroom, she does not smile, play, or ask her teachers to hug, console, or sit with her. Though taller than most of her sixteen- to twenty-month-old classmates—five rowdy boys and two equally energetic girls—Goddess seeks none of the same attention. She does not run around the room, ask the teacher to “Help me please,” cry, throw, pinch, hit, laugh, dance, sing, or annoy. She simply sits. Often Goddess’s gaze is fixed, staring blankly out the window. Other times she is clearly gazing within, her blank expression signaling that, though physically present, her thoughts have carried her to another place.

I met Goddess when I was assigned to work in her classroom as part of a clinical internship required for completion of my graduate studies in mental health counseling and human development. Though it is uncommon for children to participate in therapy at such a young age, Goddess's school, Child Works, is the site of a university research project aimed at fostering the positive development of young children and families living in poverty. Recognized as a therapeutic preschool by the state's department of social services, approximately one-third of the children attending Child Works are in state custody or living in families with supervised custody due to substantiated claims of abuse or neglect. Initially assigned to Child Works by the court system, Goddess was born into the protective custody of the state, her mother giving birth to her while incarcerated on drug charges.

Goddess and I spent close to ten hours a week together in her classroom, on the playground, and in weekly play therapy sessions. Though initially assigned to Child Works for one academic year, I volunteered as clinical staff for more than four years in order to further my support of Goddess and several other children. I heard Goddess's first laugh, rubbed her back as she struggled through nap time nightmares, and supported her through family struggles. My relationships with Goddess and her classmate and eventual therapy partner, Jorge² (Wright, 2007), have been the most important learning experiences of my educational career.

Supporting Goddess as she navigated the demands of her life challenged me to revisit parts of my own. Like Goddess, I have consoled my hardworking single mother as she worried about making ends meet, about where we would live after losing our home. I have felt unsafe. I have watched loved ones struggle with depression, addiction, and the police. I have also been too afraid and angry to talk. As I came to know Goddess, these perceived similarities helped me feel a connection with her and better understand some of what she might have been experiencing. This resonance was particularly important because for much of our time together Goddess did not have the words to share with me her own feelings and understandings.

When we first met, Goddess often looked sad or was blank-faced, registering little emotional affect, requesting little physical affection, crying infrequently, and unlikely to look at her caregivers or respond directly to them. She eventually learned to laugh—as evidenced in one poignant moment shared with her teacher, classmates, and me. Driven by this moment, this portrait³ is guided by the research question, How does Goddess, a young child navigating experiences of trauma and neglect, learn to laugh? Reflecting on the risk and resilience inherent in Goddess's responses to her world, I used field notes, memos, journal entries, direct observations, videos of our therapy sessions, and interviews with Goddess's teachers, social workers, therapists, and her family as the basis for analysis in this work. Recognizing the challenge of reconstructing past events, I offer my perceptions, acknowledging that others' experiences of them may have been different.

While researchers acknowledge the importance of student-teacher interactions (Pianta, Hamre, & Stulman, 2003), parent engagement (Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009), related clinical services (Gleason, 2009), and positive interactions with peers (Rubin, Bukowski, & Laursen, 2009) in high-quality programs, there is little work that details how these various elements interact within the life of one child in the context of a particular program. This nuanced representation allows for a better understanding of the complex interactions among these various considerations, providing a helpful model for supporting young people navigating similar challenges. With Congress debating programs like the Early Learning Challenge Fund, an \$8 billion investment in infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, states, like Utah, Connecticut, and Alabama, considering the need for universal preschool access for three- and four-year-olds, and advocates in other locales, like Washington, D.C., pushing for the expansion of existing universal preschool programs to include children from birth to age three, this is particularly timely. As challenging economic times press government leaders to prioritize these investments in early childhood education over other types of social service and educational supports (Wright, *in press*), such positive representations become especially important.

Not What I Imagined

Situated in the midst of rows and rows of identical white three-story duplexes, Child Works Early Childhood Development Center is the heart of Fresh Start Housing Development. After decades as the city's most imposing housing complex, Fresh Start has been recast as the star of the mayor's urban renewal program. Though the new paint lightens the neighborhood's once rundown, shabby appearance, the countenance of its residents still seems stolen. While driving in, the bus in front of my car pulls over at each stop; the handful of people do not board, their expectant looks indicating that they are waiting for more than the bus.

A brown brick building perched on top of a tiny rise, Child Works watches over the neighborhood. Windows stretch across the front and sides of the building, giving it the appearance of smiling when viewed from most any direction. The bright reds, blues, yellows, and greens of a tiny fenced playground complete with slides, a bouncing bridge, and a toddler-sized playhouse signal that this is a place where children are meant to be happy. Echoes of laughter coming from the playground, as I pull into the parking lot, indicate that many here are.

Walking across the parking lot and to the front door, I notice that a line has started to form. Approaching, I see that each family is required to sign in before being buzzed into the center by an armed security guard. Though it seemed only a mild inconvenience to parents, who must be used to this morning frustration, I feel uneasy. Why does the school need such protec-

tion? Does such a ritual cause the children to wonder about their own safety? Asking mothers in front of me if this happens every morning, I find out this procedure is in response to a recent incident—a father pulling a gun on his child's mother when he found out she had requested a restraining order to keep him away.

Finally buzzed into the entryway, I become very self-conscious, wondering if the parents are eyeing me with suspicion. Rather than the requisite "Parent Bulletin Board" on display in many preschools, the one hanging on the wall at Child Works consisted of a photo listing of all registered sex offenders in the area. A full three-quarters of them are Caucasian males, the only other faces like mine at Child Works. Recognizing my own discomfort and sense of being suspect, I wonder how these images might be affecting the students? Do the children also feel unsafe, afraid of people who look like me? How dangerous do they believe the world to be?

After a minute waiting by the main door, my new supervisor, Linda, the school's clinical director, comes down the hall to welcome me. Shaking my hand, she says, "Well, were you planning to work with kids or run the place? I don't think those clothes will work very well for where you're heading." Instantly, my Banana Republic slacks, Kenneth Cole dress shoes, and merino-wool v-neck make me feel even more conspicuous. As the first in my family to attend college, now completing graduate work, I often find myself in unfamiliar situations. At such times, I generally heed the advice of my favorite aunt: "Always dress the part." Given that the preschool milieu is a new one for me, I defaulted to my mental image of "hip elementary school principal" for fashion guidance. It takes me only seconds to realize that I have miscalculated.

Linda suggests that I come to her office to borrow something to protect my clothes, indicating that I should stick with jeans and a T-shirt in the future. Once there, she hands me a big red XXL "Have You Hugged Your Child Today" T-shirt, which I slip over my sweater. Hanging almost to my knees, I am mortified to realize that this will be my first impression on the rest of the staff.

After adjusting my attire, Linda escorts me to my classroom. Walking down the hallway, with each new room we pass, I notice that the children seem to be getting smaller. I am perplexed; I assume that I will be working with the oldest, toughest boys in the school. As a male working with younger children, I am almost always cast as a disciplinarian. When we turn right to enter a new wing of the school, a banner proclaiming "Our Bundles of Joy!" confirms my suspicion.

Indicating her concern that many of the school's children witness negative interactions between their mothers and male partners or do not have men in their everyday lives, Linda says, "I've assigned you to work with our toddlers—where your job is to be nurturing. We're going to help these kids develop a new way of thinking about men from the start." Rather than perpetuating the idea that men are supposed to be tough and scary, Linda hopes to provide a different opportunity for her students.

Later, in a supervisory meeting, I express to Linda my concerns about working with very young children. Confessing doubts about both my ability to work with this age group and the possible effectiveness of therapy with such little ones, I am also secretly concerned about being so “hands-on” with the students. Against the backdrop of a recent priest sexual abuse scandal and the sex offender bulletin board that greeted me in the lobby, I fear that one paranoid parent or a false allegation could put an end to my career. And since talking is my strong suit, I am also a bit skeptical about working with clients who cannot yet speak. Patiently listening to my reservations, spoken and unspoken, Linda gently replies, “I have a strong sense that these Teddy Bears are going to teach you a lot this year, Travis. I need you to step up and try your best.”

The Teddy Bear Room

At first pass, the Teddy Bear classroom looks more like a physician’s office than a classroom. Bathed in fluorescent lighting, the faint smell of bleach fills the sparsely furnished room that contains only a changing area, two knee-high tables, eight miniature high-chairs, three thigh-high shelving units filled with blocks and toys, and a small sand table. On a shelf out of the students’ reach sits a small tape player, now filling the room with Spanish nursery rhymes.

Bright white, the walls are covered in a smattering of student artwork with a huge picture window filling one side of the room. Holding on to the windowsill for balance, students watch the various neighborhood pigeons and seagulls feast on trash in the dumpster just outside. I note that although someone taped multicolored tissue paper on part of the window to camouflage the scene outside, the now sun-bleached paper seems to be either forgotten or too much work to be removed, only amplifying the view.

Looking down, I notice three little faces staring up to greet me from behind the entry gate. The smallest, Jorge, points up at me and a big grin fills his face. Standing next to him is Aaron, looking as if he stopped crying only seconds before I arrived, the tracks of tears still evident on his cheeks. When I say, “Hi, little girl,” to the adorable child with two pig-tailed puffs of hair, she grins and replies, “I Jada.” All three giggle as Linda unlatches the gate and ushers me into the room.

After I enter, a little girl and three more boys walk over to join the commotion. Though curious, these four prefer to stand a few feet away and survey the scene. Linda says, pointing to each child, “Good morning, Kayla, Devante, Jared, and Clifton.” Bending over a bit to further engage everyone’s attention, she then points to me and says, “This is my good friend Travis.”

Stepping out from behind the changing table, Diane, the classroom teacher, removes her rubber gloves, shakes my hand, and says, “Do you know what you’re getting yourself into? These kids will drive you crazy!” Initially unnerved by this greeting, I am soon put at ease by Diane’s open demeanor and warmth, our conversation punctuated by her gentle reminders and giggles with the

children. Later, I am struck by how easy she is with them, speaking as if they are fully capable of responding. “Jada girl, how you doing today?” “Clifton, you tell your momma she dressed you nice.” “Aaron, please get over there and let Cynthia wipe those boogies off your face.”

Finally noticing my attire, Diane zings, “I see you dressed right for the occasion.” With a big grin, she looks over at her co-teacher, Cynthia, who is also inside the changing area, and asks, “What do you think?” Shaking her head in agreement, Cynthia glances over, “Lord child, ain’t that the truth!” New to Child Works, dressed in tight jeans, a low-cut sweater, and a lot of gold jewelry, Cynthia could very easily have been prepared for a nice evening out. Acknowledging her effort and trying to build rapport, I say to Cynthia, “You look super nice. Why are you so dressed up today?” She responds, “Taking care of these babies is a special occasion. They need to know that they are a big deal and that I don’t take them for granted. Dressing up every day reminds them and me that we got some important stuff to do here.”

Appreciating their spunk, I think to myself that we’ll get along just fine. Indeed, eventually one of my most important mentors, Diane, will push me to confront my fears in engaging the children and their families, teach me to change my first diaper and how to comfort children to sleep, and instill in me the importance of high expectations and support.

Morning Meeting

Walking toward the center of the room, Linda begins to sing, “Good morning to you. Good morning to you. Good morning everybody. Good morning to you!” She then takes a seat on the floor and asks all of her “friends” to join her. Once all of the students are more or less paying attention, Linda begins: “Hi, friends. This is Travis. He’ll be coming to play with you. I really like him, and hope you do too. Can we please sing our hello song for him?” One at a time, each child stands and dances while everyone else sings, “Good morning to you! Good morning to you! Good morning, dear friend! How are you today?” And to this question, each child undoubtedly replies, “I’m fine!” before taking a seat on the carpet and joining the chorus for the next friend in the circle. An uncomfortable public singer, I watch this scene and cannot help but feel anxious about all of the morning circles in my future.

After the last child in the circle, Clifton, dances, Diane reminds the students of the schedule for the day. But before she can finish, Linda interrupts to say, “Diane, I think we still need to hear from one of our little friends,” pointing to a child I haven’t yet noticed. Sitting in the far corner of the classroom is another little girl. Blank-faced and disinterested, she seems oblivious to the fact that everyone is singing for her. Finishing the verse with no response from the child, Diane says, “Good morning, Goddess! Are you fine today? Let’s sing it again and give you a chance to tell us.” Though everyone in the class again sings happily, Goddess does not join in, dance, or say that she is “fine!” Indeed,

from my perspective, most everything about this first impression indicates that she is not.

Recognizing Risk

My attention is initially consumed by the rambunctious energy and raucous demands of the seven other children, five boys and two girls, who spend their days racing around the classroom. Though I eventually come to care for and appreciate the complexity and strengths of each child in the Teddy Bear room, I spend my first visits completely overwhelmed. My inability to see more than chaos is reflected in my observational records for that first week, where it seems to me that Jada spends the mornings pacing the room, while Kayla runs in circles yelling, “Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!” Devante insists on smacking everyone on the face and Aaron tries to eat most everything, turning to toys after scrounging every last Cheerio from under the breakfast table. Clifton whines incessantly for Cynthia to hold him. Every time someone enters the room, Jorge runs to the door, asking the stranger to pick him up, while Jared often runs, terrified, for Diane’s legs. Though the Teddy Bears do not have very many words, their actions clearly communicate their demands, hinting at possible life challenges outside of the classroom. As a first-year clinical intern, it is these loud problems that I assume to be the focus of my responsibilities.

Tasked with supporting teachers on classroom management and student behavior problems, to my novice eye, the ability to sit quietly and to make few demands seemed disturbingly like success. In a room where each child has so many needs, most of them manifesting in screams or disorganized running around the room, silence naively appears like positive development for Goddess, a way to cope with the chaos around her. In our harried days, classroom teachers often fantasize with me about needing to zone out. Yet, in an environment where everything is so noisy, it is difficult to recognize that silence should be perceived as the loudest cry for help.

It is four weeks into my time as a counseling trainee at Child Works. While mentally rehearsing my to-do list for the day, it occurs to me that I have scarcely spoken to Goddess. It’s not that I meant to ignore her; it’s just that she does not do any of the things the other children do to garner my attention. Concerned by my own lack of responsiveness, I put her at the top of my priority list. Linda agrees that Goddess could benefit from support in expressing a range of emotions and engaging the other children and adults in the room and assigns her to be my first client—ever.

Yet, even though I requested Goddess as a client, it is with trepidation that I undertake the challenge. On learning during one of our initial conversations that I am gay, Linda advised that I should “keep it to myself” because many of the parents have “an uncomfortable time with it.” Reflecting repeatedly on this admonition in my internship journal and process notes, I come to the realization that as a gay male working in education, I have often been con-

cerned that someone would question my intentions. Though I wish it were not so, as a consequence of feeling vulnerable, I have at times found myself holding back both physical and emotional reassurance from students. Already my work in the Teddy Bear room is challenging this defense; toddlers insist that I hold their hands, hug them, or allow them to sit on my lap.

Given my concerns, it seems to me that working with Goddess might be a good match, as her standoffish demeanor is less threatening to the particular defenses I have built up. By way of completing a required formal observation, I plan to spend the next day sitting in the opposite corner of the Teddy Bear room in an attempt to get a better sense of who this little girl is.

The Little Girl in the Corner

The following morning I arrive at Child Works just as Goddess is being unloaded from her transport van. Her social worker has arranged for Goddess to be driven from home and back each day to ensure that she attends school. An elderly, morbidly obese man sits in the driver's position fiddling with his coffee cup while a young woman helps free Goddess from the car seat. Though I have now been present on several occasions when Goddess is delivered to the classroom, I do not recognize this woman and then realize that I have never seen the same person bring Goddess to her classroom more than once. For such a small child, particularly one with a difficult background, I am concerned that a different stranger taking her to school each day must be incredibly frightening.

Although I can barely make out any of the conversation going on inside the van, I hear the woman say harshly to one of the children still waiting to be dropped off, "Stop your crying. You're going to school today whether you like it or not." Seeking to help Goddess escape some of this morning's stress, I volunteer to walk with her to the classroom. Even though I am her counselor, the van worker indicates that she is only allowed to leave children with classroom teachers, restoring a bit of my faith in the safety of the transportation system. Thanking her for keeping Goddess safe, I volunteer to wait until all of the children are unloaded, and I then escort both Goddess and her to the Teddy Bear room.

Waiting, walking down the hallway, entering the classroom, and standing as I clumsily unzip her little pink jacket, Goddess seems a thousand miles away. When I ask if this is typical behavior, Diane says, "It takes her some time to wake up every morning." To me, Goddess's dissociation seems like more than fatigue. Watching Goddess from across the room, I contrast her blank-faced inaction with the messy milk spills, slurped Cheerios cereal, and spoons banged on the tables by the other children. It is not until the others have left to begin playtime that Goddess finally begins to eat. Using her hands, she fills her mouth with a messy bite, hardly noticing the milk as it runs down her arms, chest, and legs. Eventually, Cynthia carries her to the changing table.

Singing a lullaby, Cynthia removes Goddess's pants and then diaper. I note that unlike most of the other Teddy Bear students, who squirm, grab their feet, or pull at Cynthia's nose or hair when she leans in to change them, Goddess does not move or make a sound. She tenses her body, clenches her fists, and stares at the ceiling, her penetrating gaze intensely focused on nothing in particular.

Finished, Cynthia lowers Goddess to the floor. Patting her bottom, Cynthia says, "Go play and have some fun." But Goddess remains frozen, clenched fists held to her chest, her expression blank as she watches Jada and Jorge chase Aaron around the room. When they come too close, Goddess makes a barking sound, sending the trio away from her. When the path is clear, Goddess toddles across the room, still using her tippy-toes for balance. The lack of control in her bouncy gait is comical in contrast with her serious demeanor. I cannot help but smile as I witness Goddess in this very childlike moment, a welcome break from my increasing concern.

Once in the corner, Goddess picks up a plastic changing doll. Her back to the wall, she begins to hold the baby tightly to her chest. When Devante walks over to look at it, Goddess grasps it even tighter, responding simply, "My baby." Undeterred, Devante tries to snatch the baby out of Goddess's arms—a mistake. With no visible emotion, Goddess uses the baby to hit Devante in the chest. When he starts to cry, she looks at him and says, "Go!" giving him "the look," as her teachers call it.

While Goddess's eyes generally seem distant, during these moments her eyes narrow and brow furrows, and she stares at the recipient with such intensity that it is clear that one step closer will most likely result in annihilation. Everything about her diminutive countenance communicates, "Stay away!" "The look" is so powerful that even teachers have learned to keep their distance. Occasionally on the receiving end of it myself, it would be some time before I felt comfortable challenging her resolve.

For the rest of the morning, except for a mandatory roll around the block in the eight-child stroller, Goddess remains in the corner. Alternately playing with the doll, staring out the window, and watching the other children as they race around the room, she seems content to go it alone. There is little, if anything, about Goddess that communicates, "Please come close to me." She does not smile, laugh, cry, or pout—none of the hard-wired tricks typically used by young children to manipulate adults into meeting their needs. As well, I cannot remember an occasion during my first months in her classroom when Goddess requested something, anything—a pencil, crayon, hug, or an extra serving of food. She simply sits quietly, inside herself, only becoming roused when someone takes it upon her- or himself to approach.

Indeed, to most, Goddess is simply thought of as "that little girl in the corner," since that is where she spends most of each day. It is usually Cynthia who says, motioning to one of us, "Can you get that little girl in the corner to come over here and change her diaper?" or "We got to get that little girl in the

corner to come over here and eat some lunch." Though Diane, Cynthia, and the other children often go out of their way to engage Goddess, these efforts are almost always rebuffed. Avoiding interaction with her peers, and everyone else, for that matter, Goddess seems content to stare off into space, gently resting her index finger on her bottom lip.

Developing a Plan

As the children settle in for lunch, I make my way to Linda's office to discuss my observations. Over peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, she asks me to share my list of concerns "using my best clinical trainee vocabulary." I tell her that except for "the look," Goddess presents with little affect, never smiling or frowning; she appears to dissociate, or emotionally detach, from reality. She seems not to feel meaningfully attached to her teachers or peers. Her body becomes rigid while having her diaper changed, and she becomes unresponsive to her caregiver. She keeps peers and teachers at arm's length. She is hypervigilant, keeping her back to the wall so that she is able to always monitor her surroundings. Her appetite appears suppressed. She seems not to feel meaningfully attached to her teachers. She seems to be carrying a heavy load. I also express my concern that Goddess seems to have different people bringing her to school each day and is often overlooked in the busy classroom.

I'm excited to share my clinical formulation of post-traumatic stress disorder, but Linda first asks me to share the list of strengths I noted during my observation. To this request I have no response. Linda reminds me that in order to help someone see possibilities in life, we must first be able to see the possibility in them—looking for sources of both risk and resilience. Finally, she asks me to describe my overall impression of Goddess. "This is a sad and self-protected little girl. I wonder if she has ever even laughed," I respond.

Before we continue, Linda excuses herself to collect something from the director's office. Returning, she lays a file folder on the table in front me, encouraging me to "have a look." Goddess's case file, this folder details the circumstances that have brought her to Child Works. Reading through the pages, I see a disturbing history beginning to emerge. Goddess was born in jail, where her mother, Lynette, was incarcerated on drug possession charges. Although the pediatrician had feared that Goddess's health may have been compromised by her mother's drug use, she was born healthy and did not share her mother's addiction. However, the doctor was careful to note in her medical chart that "it will still take some time to determine any cognitive effects."

When Goddess was a month old, Lynette was released from prison. It is unclear what transpired over the next ten months, but eventually Goddess and her mother ended up at a local homeless shelter, where one of the employees noticed that Goddess was wearing a plastic grocery bag for a diaper, appeared to have no socks or toys, and was being fed soda from her bottle. A call to the local child protection agency resulted in an investigation, and Goddess was

diagnosed as “failure to thrive” at the local health clinic. Thereafter, Lynette was referred for participation in Bright Futures, a residential program serving homeless women and children, where, for the last three months, she and Goddess have been sharing a room. While Goddess is at Child Works each day, Lynette participates in job training and GED preparation and receives addiction counseling and treatment for depression. When I finish reading the file, I look at Linda across her desk and say, “She’s been fighting since the day she was born.”

Linda explains that I will become Goddess’s primary caregiver at school. Working in concert with Diane and Cynthia, I will be responsible for responding to Goddess’s needs and for providing her with appropriate classroom-based support and clinical mental health services. She says that such a care-giving approach will be critical before beginning play therapy, since Goddess will first need to rework her ability to form attachments and learn to trust that the world will respond to her needs. Similarly, we will need to reorient her emotions and self-esteem. Until Goddess begins to change her worldview, I am to help her experience and expect care and model appropriate emotional responses. Later, after the meeting, while putting the finishing touches on the treatment plan, I type my primary goal: “I want to hear Goddess laugh.”

Learning to Laugh

Over the following months, I work to anticipate Goddess’s every need. Recognizing the importance of being welcomed by a familiar face, I meet Goddess at the van each morning, always asking the workers, “How’s my special girl today?” I hope a kind word and the subliminal message that this child is important might result in a bit more kindness toward her. Over time, I notice that Goddess seems to be more present when I greet her. Though far from reciprocating with a big smile, her pensive stare begins to hint that maybe she is starting to look forward to seeing me. My own genuine grin when I see the van approach each day helps me realize that I, too, am starting to look forward to these reunions.

During our first week working together, I sit about three feet away from Goddess, mirroring her play and behavior. Each day I move a little closer, always saying out loud what I am doing to communicate to Goddess that “I want to be a good friend.” If I scoot too close, she snatches up all of the toys in front of her and says, “Stop.” If I fail to respond quickly enough, she backs herself further into the corner and curls into a ball—outwardly representing her instinct to retreat inward.

Though it will be some time before she seeks out physical affection, Goddess does soon appear to draw some comfort from my presence. While coding videotapes of our interactions, I notice that after about six weeks, whenever I walk across the room to talk with Diane or stand to toss something in the trash, Goddess follows my every move with her eyes. She never asks me to

come back, but she will rarely return to her activity without my rejoining her. Although it takes some time before she asks me to “Help, please,” or even acknowledges me directly, my presence does seem to help her spend less of her day staring into space.

In this dance with Goddess, I begin to appreciate more deeply the role of both autonomy and connectedness in her psychological development, and in my own. In order for Goddess to feel safe enough to connect with others, she has to sense her own freedom, or autonomy, in our relationship. Given the trauma of her background, it is necessary for her to feel that she can stand on her own, and still withdraw if life suddenly falls apart. However, in healing, it is important for Goddess to also develop the ability to trust others. In my own work as her clinician, I am struggling to learn similar lessons, allowing the children to care for me without running away from their affection. As I note in a reflection from the time, “Though scary for both of us, learning to trust each other, keeping ourselves safe while learning to draw closer, becomes a challenge and gift of our time together.”

Given that a big part of Goddess’s therapy is learning to recognize and differentiate emotions, I use our time together to point out different types of reactions. When a friend drops a piece of food and cries, I might say, “Oops. Devante dropped his food. He looks sad.” I would then manufacture an exaggerated frown-y face of my own, mirroring for Goddess how different types of emotions might look. Similarly, when a student smiles, I encourage Goddess to “look at her happy friend” and make a happy face of my own.

I become more intentional about modeling appropriate interactions with peers. I invite children to play with me while I sit by Goddess. Similarly, if reading her a book, I sometimes invite another child to sit with us. Though too young to be friends, I make every effort to help Goddess have a positive outlook on her classmates, sowing the seeds that might eventually grow into trust and acceptance. Similarly, I hope that by helping Goddess’s classmates see her in a more positive light they will be less likely to socially isolate her.

The most uncomfortable parts of my day—diaper changing and nap time—have also become important in rebuilding Goddess’s sense of trust. Initially, I felt vulnerable in these moments, wondering how people might perceive me and feeling intimidated by Goddess’s own vulnerability. However, Diane’s coaching has allowed me to feel confident and to provide Goddess a sense of power over her body. Asking permission as I begin each step of the process, I narrate, “Goddess, do you mind if I unbutton your pants,” or, “Now I’m going to put on a new diaper, ok?” Initially, she stiffened her body and stared into space during the diaper changing; but now, as she has come to trust me, I count to her or whisper a quiet song and she relaxes her muscles and makes eye contact.

At nap time, Goddess eventually allows me to help her fall asleep. Though tired, she generally struggles to relax enough for napping. Similarly, because she often wets herself or has nightmares, she has a difficult time staying asleep.

But, as Goddess comes to feel secure in my presence, she allows me to rub her back, which helps her fall asleep more easily. Even though initially ambivalent about this type of interaction, I have come to value these quiet moments. It is moving to feel Goddess's body relax as she trusts me enough to fall into sleep.

While Goddess has come to expect more from me, she has also begun to feel more vulnerable. I notice that after three months, Goddess begins to cry when she sees me—a victory in its own right in that she has now begun to care and express emotion. Sometimes it takes her as long as an hour after arriving at school to want me near. Other times she runs to me as soon as she sees me and then begins crying as soon as I pick her up. On a few occasions, she has raced to me, accepted my hug, and then hit me in the face. Torn between her desire for connection and her fear of losing it, Goddess is still learning to navigate the inherent risk in relationships—which are particularly challenging since previously she has been so often disappointed.

At times like these, I try my best to follow Goddess's lead, narrating what I imagine she must be feeling or needs to hear. I have learned to say, "I'm excited to see you too, Goddess," or, "It is scary when I miss you." Other times I reassure her, "I will take care of you," or, "You are safe with me." However, I have also come to realize that my actions mean far more than my words. If I do not do exactly what I promise, Goddess might not talk to me for the rest of the day and only cry when it is time for me to leave, perhaps fearing that she pushed me away, never to return. With a past so full of chaotic comings and goings, both hellos and goodbyes are challenging for her to navigate.

In addition to my school-based efforts, I also work to build a relationship with Lynette, Goddess's mother. Several times during the first few months, I visit Lynette at Bright Futures to develop a better understanding of her hopes and fears for Goddess. In an interview during our first meeting, she shares with me the following:

I failed at being a parent twice⁴. . . . I failed by not listening, you know, and always ending up in jail incarcerated . . . and just not doing great things. Like, I failed at doing the right things you know? I didn't want all of those things to stay and I'm tired of losing children, you know. I was tired of being in the street. I was tired of going to jail.

Sharing her struggles with substance abuse, homelessness, and depression, Lynette is working hard to provide a stable home for her daughter, though it is not always easy. Lynette recognizes that as she becomes more stressed, her depression intensifies. As her depression intensifies, she is less emotionally available for Goddess, thus creating a vicious cycle of not living up to her own expectations as a mother. Confessing that she had a "horrible" childhood of her own, Lynette hopes to build a stronger relationship with Goddess than she enjoyed with her own mother. When I ask about her current motivation, she attributes her desire to Goddess's name, explaining:

I didn't want to lose that name . . . I wanted to keep it, you know. I would never have been able to name the next child Goddess . . . I was in jail and I named her and I was—it was like a rough time for me. I didn't wanna be pregnant but I kept thinking I wanted something royal. I just wanted something royal like that, and then Goddess came.

Lynette voices that though it is difficult for her to trust people, especially when asking for help, she is determined to do whatever necessary to turn the tide for Goddess.

Lynette, Diane, Cynthia, Linda, and I begin meeting regularly at Child Works to discuss shared approaches for supporting Goddess. At one such meeting, Lynette shares that she does not always know how best to communicate with her child, given that she has so rarely felt respectfully communicated with herself. Experts in soothing children and developing routines, Diane and Cynthia work with Lynette to develop a more consistent caregiving approach. Linda has become Lynette's advocate, helping her to recognize her own strengths and areas for strengthening. In the same way that Linda gently pressed and inspired me to do better in my work in the Teddy Bear room, she also helps inspire in Lynette a heightened sense of self and a more positive view of her abilities.

I meet with Goddess and Lynette regularly, at Child Works or during home visits, to provide direct coaching to help her learn how to play more easily with her daughter. Lynette inspires each of us with her dogged determination, persistence, and shy sense of humor. Though initially it seemed that Lynette was "the helped" and we were "the helpers," our meetings have become much more reciprocal, with each team member offering and receiving support and feedback. Even before her daughter laughs, Lynette is able to laugh with us.

The Moment

Although it has taken some time for Goddess to respond to the facial expressions of those around her, it has taken her even longer to represent positive emotions of her own. Because of her depression, Lynette has most often gazed at her daughter with a blank face. As a result, Goddess has not developed an emotional vocabulary or control of her facial muscles and the ability to contort them into various emotional expressions. Despite making progress in other ways, after four months of intensive work with Goddess, and still not hearing her laugh, I begin to wonder if possibly her body never learned to make the sound.

Almost two months later, Diane, Cynthia, and I take the Teddy Bears into the indoor play area for recess. We first roll balls with the children and then distribute the mini-tricycles. At some point, Jorge begs, "Tickle me!" I am hesitant to start, since last time it took almost forty-five minutes before everyone tired of the game—everyone except Goddess, who refused to be tickled. Indeed, the first time she watched me tickle Jorge in the classroom, his laughter was

so terrifying that she began screaming and ran to her corner. Remembering Goddess's reaction, I make a point to tell her that her friends have asked to be tickled. I explain that they will be making really loud happy sounds. Preparing, Goddess backs against the wall to see what will happen next.

The game begins with Jorge. I tickle him and his body rocks with laughter. After only a few seconds, Aaron jumps in front of us, "Me turn!" One after another, the children jump into my lap for a turn. After a few rounds, Goddess runs across the room and falls into my arms, her body stiff, fists balled, and eyes closed. My immediate thought is that Goddess is in the middle of a traumatic episode. Has the chaotic game and noisy laughter been too much for her?

Holding onto her shoulders, I ask, "Goddess, Goddess, are you okay?" Once she opens her eyes, I stand her back up. "Are you okay?" I ask. Once again, she stiffens and falls into my lap. This time, I yell for Diane, "What's wrong? Is she okay?"

"Maybe she wants you to tickle her," suggests Diane.

I hadn't considered the possibility, but perhaps this is just what Goddess wants. Gently, I begin. Her body stiffens even more just before she opens her mouth and lets out the most confusing sound. Somewhere between a moan and howl, Goddess's offering seems more pain than joy. Fearing that I have hurt her, I stop instantly and return Goddess to her feet. Goddess immediately falls back into my lap. Now certain that Goddess is asking to be tickled, I go for the sensitive spot under her arms. Once again, though louder this time, Goddess lets out a howling moan.

Recognizing its meaning simultaneously, Diane shouts, "Goddess is laughing!" Both of us break into laughter of our own, just before our tears begin flowing. This is one of the most magical moments of my life—witnessing this ugly, beautiful laugh.

I can't stop tickling Goddess now, and, amazingly, none of the other students attempt to interrupt for a turn of their own. Either a result of shock or understanding, they also seem to appreciate the significance of the moment. For a full minute and a half, Goddess howls with joy. Tears stream down my face.

Reciprocal Transformation

Over time, the sound of Goddess's laughter became indistinguishable from that of her peers. While there was much work left to do to support Goddess in fully negotiating the wounds of her past, her capacity for laughter would play no small role in her healing process or in inspiring a network of support. Indeed, positive changes in Goddess seemed to inspire similar changes in those around her. In turn, as we had more positive regard to offer, Goddess began to receive more from us. This mutually reinforcing feedback loop became critical to her continued progress.

Moved by Goddess's success, and perhaps reminded of their own potential to make a difference, Diane and Cynthia began to make extra efforts to recognize Goddess. Rather than leaving her alone during morning meeting, Diane moved circle time to Goddess, who eventually came to tolerate others in her space. And gradually, circle time returned to its usual place in the center of the classroom, with Goddess happy to join in.

Although Diane had always been a pro at providing care for her young charges, she had self-admittedly "been a little low-key about planning the instructional program," preferring a more free-wheeling environment. But through our work with Goddess, she came to appreciate the value of a more intentionally structured classroom. While most of the Teddy Bear day had always consisted of free play, nap, and lunch, Diane now began to incorporate activities into the classroom. We would sometimes cover the floor in bubble wrap, aluminum foil, paper, or some other material in an attempt to inspire and intrigue the children. As well, we adults began collecting found materials that the children could explore with in the classroom. Over the course of my four years at Child Works, Diane, Cynthia, and I collaborated to develop a full-blown early learning curriculum, with some elements inspired by the Reggio-Emilia approach, a progressive model of early childhood education.

In the same way that changes in Goddess's outlook and demeanor facilitated positive change in many people at Child Works, they also motivated Lynette. As Goddess became happier and responded more positively to her mother, Lynette reported also feeling more "alive," "loved," "accepted," and "proud." As Lynette started to have more energy, felt better about herself, and became more confident in her ability to parent, she became more proactive in her relationship with Goddess. In one later interview, Lynette said that she had moved from a "respond-as-needed" to a "taking-over-and-raisin'-my-baby" approach to parenting. Over the span of months, we noticed that Goddess arrived at school cleaner, her braids tighter. Eventually, when Goddess became upset at school, she would pine, "I want my mommy."

I began to marvel at Lynette's ability to transform herself. During our initial meeting, I would have guessed Lynette to be in her forties and was shocked to discover that she was twenty-six. But, over the next four years, Lynette began to sparkle, and her appearance eventually matched her age. As she successfully wrestled her own demons to the ground, Lynette became much more confident, outgoing, and successful. Though she experienced the occasional setback, she came to establish a stable home environment for Goddess by securing placement in a new mixed-income housing development outside of the neighborhood that was part of the mayor's antipoverty initiative. After giving birth to another daughter in my last year at Child Works, Lynette described the experience as allowing her to "redeem myself and do it right from the beginning." By the time I said goodbye, I had every reason to believe that she would. Indeed, without Lynette's hard work and self-transformation, Goddess's own healing would not have been possible.

I, too, was transformed. Through Goddess and the other Teddy Bears, I have become aware of the role that developing a very real sense of affinity, care, and love for my students plays in my work with them. Goddess did not listen to me because I was her therapist. She listened to me because I was her Travis. I showed up each week, played with her, hugged her when she cried, and allowed her to see that I was excited for her to walk into the classroom each day when she arrived. Particularly for children who may struggle to experience love or stability in other parts of their lives, it is important that they experience these feelings in a very real and tangible way if they are to become older children and adults capable of demonstrating these emotions to others. This means that I must also experience emotions for my students if they are to experience the outcomes or demonstrations of these feelings.

However, it has been challenging at times to allow myself to feel or demonstrate these feelings toward my students. As a man, and particularly as one who is gay, I have been shocked to realize the extent to which I have unknowingly been conditioned not to hug children or respond to them through physical demonstrations of affection. Yet, it was through hugs, physical proximity, and time allowed to discover the world in both structured and unstructured ways that Goddess began to heal. Working with Goddess has allowed me to experience the importance of showing up consistently, spending time, remaining open to connection, and listening in supporting others. In the same way that support, consistency, and care were necessary for Goddess to begin developing trusting relationships with others and me, I found I needed the same in order to risk being different. Through the care demonstrated to me by Goddess, Jorge, Diane, Linda, and others, I, too, was able to risk new kinds of relationships, self-understandings, and views of the world.

Risk

Goddess provides a poignant example of the consequences of negative experiences in early childhood. Learning about life through the perspective of a mother struggling with depression and addiction, Goddess never expressed the typical emotions of childhood, nor did the manifestation of them ever serve to meet her needs. Barely more than a year old, she already questioned the world's ability and desire to respond. Goddess rarely enjoyed the moments of pleasure necessary to develop positive emotions like laughter. As well, growing up in a world that often failed to respond to her cries, she also never fully developed her tears. Internalizing the world as a place of assault, Goddess had already started her retreat.

Unfortunately, the necessary barriers she created to protect herself also began to isolate her from opportunities to develop new knowledge, skills, and expectations. Looking inward, Goddess failed to learn many of the skills necessary to communicate to the outside world as well as generate positive responses from it. Though none of us at Child Works intentionally overlooked Goddess,

her lack of affect did not draw us to her, only confirming her perception of her place in the world.

Though Goddess should not be expected to advocate for herself at such a young age, it was to her detriment that she did none of the things “typical” children do to draw adults to them. Across my experiences as an educator, in the pre-K through university levels, I have observed that the children hardest to like almost always receive the worst treatment from peers and adults. In a highly competitive environment, like the classroom, Goddess and others who have never honed their skills eliciting positive responses are labeled as behavior problems or simply lost in the shuffle.

Perhaps this is the most insidious consequence of maltreatment: if one is poorly loved, it is difficult for one to know how to be lovable. As well, if one is raised by a depressed or absent caregiver, never seeing a smile, one does not know how to manufacture or recognize laughter. Unfortunately, for many maltreated children who never come to expect much from the world, this attitude is often an important determinant of their future life outcomes.

Resilience

However, Goddess’s silence can also be understood as a resilient act of self-preservation inside the environment to which she is responding. While in the classroom her silence did not serve her well, it is an efficient response to experiences of maltreatment. If a caregiver is absent in her response, crying does not serve to have one’s needs met. Similarly, if one is uncertain of the next meal, learning not to cry is a very efficient way to conserve energy for survival. For those children at risk of physical abuse, it makes much sense to become as invisible as possible.

Though initially my emotional response was to feel sorry for Goddess, I soon came to respect her strength. While no child should have to experience such maltreatment, Goddess did endure. Rather than seeing Goddess’s silence as a sign of brokenness, changing my perspective allowed me to recognize in her someone who was fighting to live. Through this reframing I could begin to imagine her laughter. Rather than trying to “save” or change Goddess, I eventually came to understand my role as being to support her own inherent strengths. As I began to see more clearly these possibilities in Goddess, she and those around her began to see them more clearly as well. In the same way that expectations may be the most damning consequence of risk, perhaps they are also the greatest hopes for resilience.

Change in Goddess began to create change throughout her world. As she became more trusting, she also became more outwardly focused and less temperamental and shared more positive affect. Soon she received more positive attention from her teachers and peers, allowing her to build additional social-emotional skills through her interactions with them. Similarly, as Lynette began to see Goddess in a different light, she began to enjoy her more, feel a

greater sense of efficacy, and gain energy from her daughter's love and affection. Indeed, it is the mutual transformation that occurred between Goddess and the important relationships in her life that inspired and sustained a support network for her, thereby greatly improving her future prospects.

The Gift

Sitting on my desk is a photograph of Goddess that was taken during the second week of our play therapy sessions. I scarcely recognize the blank face staring back, hollow-eyed, with a runny nose. Hair disheveled, this child looked lucky to have made it to school. Next to it is a photograph of the day we said good-bye. At this, our final celebration, Goddess is grinning from ear to ear, with her hair braided, and melt from her favorite ice cream bar running down her arm. Each time I look at it, I am reminded of the strength of children, their power to overcome, and given hope that everything can change. If I close my eyes and listen, I can still hear the sound of that painful, beautiful first laugh. Each time, this memory makes me smile and also brings a tear to my eye. I marvel at how this moment of abandon, a momentary escape from so much pain, continues to liberate. It is this sound, of a little girl who spent most of her days sitting in the corner afraid and self-protected, that has taught me so much about hope, joy, and love.

Notes

1. I use pseudonyms to ensure the confidentiality of participants.
2. In a previous article, I explore my experiences supporting Jorge, Goddess's therapy partner and classroom friend, as he navigates challenges in his family and the process of gender socialization. Together, these two children allowed me to learn much about young children, gender, school-based clinical intervention, and myself.
3. Portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), the organizing methodological approach I use here, combines rigorous analytic and interpretive strategies with aesthetics to capture the complexity and subtlety of human and organizational experience. Consistent with the aesthetic considerations of this approach, portraiture does not typically include citations, though the interpretive framework of the portraitist is embedded in an understanding of the relevant research literature.
4. Lynette had two children removed from her custody and placed in adoptive homes prior to giving birth to Goddess.

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