

IMAGINATION WORKSHOP, A TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE
By Jim McGrath, Executive Director of Imagination Workshop

In 1983 I was an unemployed actor and an undisciplined writer. In short, I was a bit of a wastrel. I was told that I could earn twenty bucks a pop going to training sessions for Imagination Workshop, a nonprofit that served (and still serves) the mentally ill using the theater arts. I had actor friends who had trained with the Imagination Workshop, and a select few who were chosen to do the work. Training could last forever, and many of us who trained together didn't make it out of training. I almost didn't.

Month after month I was never chosen to be one of the ones who went into psychiatric hospital settings to lead psychiatric hospital patients in structured improvisational acting and creative writing workshops, using the skills and leading the exercises taught us in the training sessions. As the months went by, terror grew among us left-behind trainees about the actual eventual experience in these hospital settings. What kinds of problems might you have to confront?

Here was my problem, the reason why I wasn't being chosen. An Imagination Workshop Artist/Leader has to be two things.

First and foremost, he or she must be an actual theater artist. Some of the best known, most often seen actors of the day were and still are vying for those Imagination Workshop gigs. I had studied theater in school and acted in Equity Waver Theater. That was my resume. You had to be recognized by the IW trainer artists as a professional actor, writer, or director. I had been all three, but not in anything like a major venue.

In addition to being a recognized artist, he or she has to be something else: a mensch, an adult human being, who can be at ease in a strange setting and treat everyone in that setting with non-judgmental respect. The IW artist/leader must have a willingness to engage with those who suffer, and joyfully share with non-actors and writers an artist's most precious possession: the creative experience.

I was, at that time, neither of those things.

So I stayed in weekly training sessions for over a year. During that time I learned all of the major Imagination Workshop exercises, derived from Viola Spolin actor games and formulated by Imagination Workshop founders Margaret Ladd and Lyle Kessler as structured exercises that lead participants on a short cut to the creative experience. I knew the exercises. They seemed to me to be nothing more than structured make-believe. I had no idea how they could help anyone, or how to lead anyone who might be resistant in these fairy tale games.

Then in 1984 I was called off the bench. An actor working with an outpatient group at UCLA's Neuro Psychiatric Institute got a job in a Broadway play and had to leave for New York at a time when this group was rehearsing an original play, written by the patients, and cast with patients together with professional actors. I had to take his place in the play and, more importantly, observe the work of the artist leaders first hand. The leaders of that group were the founders of Imagination Workshop, Margaret Ladd and Lyle Kessler.

Actress Margaret Ladd was by then a star in the network series *Falcon Crest*. I had already admired Margaret's work in films like *Friends of Eddie Coyle* and

Robert Altman's *The Wedding*. What I did not yet know about her was that her creative talent had combined with her natural empathy to alchemically produce a golden institution that would become a staple in my life for over thirty years.

In 1969, Margaret Ladd was in Massachusetts watching a Gertrude Stein play performed by psychiatric hospital patients. Sitting next to her watching this performance was internationally acclaimed playwright Eugene Ionesco, who commented that the patients were expressing themselves "from the place that dreams come from." Margaret herself was delighted with their "wonderful spiritual energy."

Months later, Margaret Ladd approached psychiatrists at Mt. Sinai hospital in New York with an idea. "Actors and mental patients both have highly complex imaginations," she said to them. "We actors turn our imaginations outward to an audience. The patients turn their imaginations inward." Margaret suspected that if a psychiatric patient were to have the creative experience that an actor has, this might provide relief from suffering and lead to positive breakthroughs.

She began work with the patients at Mount Sinai, co-leading groups with her then fiancé, now husband Lyle Kessler, a genius playwright Margaret met working at Actors Studio. Lyle Kessler was intrigued by the struggles of the patients. He was quoted in the Los Angeles Times as saying, "They were working their way out of terrible psychic binds. To them it was a situation of life and death. To me, the greatest acting is on that level." Together Margaret and Lyle expanded what was now Imagination Workshop to New York State Psychiatric Hospital, where they worked with long-term patients on locked wards. It was there that a miracle

occurred. That miracle was captured on black and white video tape and I have seen it. I have since seen many such miracles first hand.

A man who had not spoken a word in over ten years, who was considered catatonic, was invited by Margaret and Lyle to take part in an Imagination Workshop exercise. Staff members warned them that this man would do or say nothing. The exercise involved choosing a historical figure, becoming that person physically, and saying a nursery rhyme the way that historical figure would. Out of nowhere, this man said a nursery rhyme as Louis Armstrong, imitating Armstrong's voice. In the guise of Louis Armstrong, this man felt the freedom to speak. He mimed holding a mike, spoke in a gravelly but highly expressive voice, in full volume. His body moved naturally when playing this character. His physical commitment to the character was total. The character he played, trumpeter Louis Armstrong, was his pathway to health. The reaction of the doctors at the hospital was pure astonishment at the suddenness of his transformation. He was quickly able to reintegrate himself and talk to his therapist, and was shortly released from the hospital. By becoming someone else and assuming the lively persona of the greatest jazz musician ever, he found that he did indeed have a voice.

Two years later, Margaret and Lyle, having moved to Santa Monica, approached Dr. Louis Joylan West at UCLA Neuro Psychiatric Institute (now Semel Institute), then chairman of the world's largest university department of psychiatry, about bringing Imagination Workshop into his program. Four years later, Dr. West said in a Los Angeles Times interview, "We have seen benefits. How helpful or why helpful we've yet to ascertain. But we're talking about a rather

specific adjunct to treatment in which one ought to be able to perscribe it for those who would benefit, just as we would do with occupational therapy.”

Since its Los Angeles beginnings, Imagination Workshop has served hudreds of patients a year, not only in psychiatric hospitals but in homeless centers, prisons, seniors centers, and schools, utilizing the talents of specially trained Los Angeles film and theater artists, such as Jill Clayburgh, Susan Sarondon, Trish Van Devere, Blythe Danner, Sam Waterston, Ted Danson, and Robert Altman.

Lyle Kessler often stresses that the Imagination Workshop, which he helped develop, is not therapy or psycho-drama. “Nor is it about big emotions. Psychiatric labels are dropped and diagnoses forgotten so that patients can create fictional characters, through which they can explore themselves safely. As Margaret Ladd explains, “They develop character muscles. By playing characters removed from themselves and creating a repertoire of behaviors, they start to find all kinds of ways to behave. I think it gives people, who are too inhibited and fragile to relate to others, a second chance. So that through their imaginations, they feel safer and can give it another try. A lot of them have secret struggles they are afraid to reveal. They devlop courage and can make an effort to relate to therapy. We’re a stepping stone.” Psychiatrist Dr. Lester Zackler, Imagination Workshop’s Board Chairman, values the effect Imagination Workshop has on patients of “the dropping of old preconceptions for a rare dose of sponteneity.”

As I later received training from Lyle and Margaret, became more of a professional artist and mensch, I went on to spend thirty years working with thousands of psychiatric patients along with other artist leaders. I remember so

many miracles. A woman, who had trouble making words because of trauma, found words when playing her character. She had trouble getting a job because of her fear of job interviews. Later, when she landed a great job, I asked her how she did it. Her answer was “I decided that if I could do that Imagination Workshop, I could do anything.” Another woman created a character who was a singer. In the play she embodied that character with such detail that she actually became a wonderful singer. Another man who couldn’t hold a job because of his fear of looking at people found the needed courage in an Imagination Workshop exercise, playing a character who wasn’t afraid of looking at people. He also is now among the employed.

I can never forget these and many others who found what theater artists take for granted. The creative act is a freeing act, and can even be a self-healing act. To those of us who professionally pursue the theater arts, the focus is always on the final product: the performance or the creation of a new script. Meanwhile the process itself may actually be contributing more to our lives than we know. In Imagination Workshop we find amateurs having these amazing experiences of self-awareness because of merely taking part in the creative process.

A new book called *Yes, And* written by Kelly Leonard and Tom Yorton of the famous Second City improvisational comedy troupe has provided an interesting model for adapting the methods of improvisational comedy to help businesspeople to communicate, collaborate, and innovate. The title of the book refers to the basis of all improvisational comedy. You say “Yes” to the exploration of a far-out new idea, then you say “and” by stretching the idea to heightened levels that may seem absurd at first. Leonard and Yorton have found that workplaces that embrace the

“Yes, And” philosophy are more inventive, quicker at problem solving, and have more engaged employees that work settings that judge, criticize, and reject new ideas quickly.

At Imagination Workshop, our mission is to serve not businesses or workplaces, but disenfranchised individuals who have fallen through the cracks of mainstream society and who have been led to believe that they cannot function. We have been using improvisation to help clients break that downward spiral for forty-six years. Among the results of this experience for the patients are often improved social skills, enhanced performance in job interviews, and higher self-esteem, all buttressed by the accomplishment of writing and acting in a play. Scientific studies at the UCLA Semel Institute have proven these results.

In my own experience as an artist working with mentally ill patients for over thirty years, I have found myself to be one of the beneficiaries of this process. Today, those with mental illnesses are stigmatized by the public perception that they are time bombs waiting to go off. The stigma is so negative that many who suffer avoid getting needed help in order to avoid being stigmatized. In Imagination Workshop, we invite patients to leave the stigma behind, to take some time off from it in order to imagine themselves to be capable and lovable characters. I have been fortunate enough to observe the positive effects of that healing experience. Working with those who suffer has shown me that every individual is gifted with transformative creative powers beyond imagining. Once given the permission to playfully create something, an individual becomes, at least momentarily, freed from all of the negative concepts of self that hold one down. In those moments of

freedom, great discoveries can happen. The most important of these discoveries is that the mind is capable of conceiving of and delivering not just fearful destructive thoughts but positive life changes as well. This, in itself, is a wonderful discovery that we all need to make over and over.