Reflections and Possibilities

by Terry Marks-Tarlow

Anyone in doubt of the power of the small need only look towards the current era—a tiny virus has suddenly and dramatically brought the world down to its knees. Everyone is jerked out of automaticity.

As a clinical psychologist on the Westside of Los Angeles since the mid-80s, I have been watching social trends. The pace of life and pressures on children have been steadily increasing, especially for families who want to stay competitive by keeping up with the neighbors and getting their children into elite colleges. Long wait lists exist for academic preschools. Working parents are exhausted from carting children from ballet to violin lessons, onto soccer practice. No time exists to catch one's breath, get enough sleep or cultivate inner space.

Movies like "Race to Nowhere" illuminate how children are burning out with the stresses of high school. Scandals erupt as celebrity families are caught cheating on SATs or paying coaches to lie about children's sports involvement on college applications. Symptoms of anxiety and depression have been climbing along with suicide rates among teens. Among young adults, there is an epidemic of "failure to launch" from the care, guidance, and support of parents.

Prior to the pandemic, things had become truly out of balance. The pandemic is a good time to take stock. In response to the forced slowing, in my practice I notice a division among my patients: some are able be still, sit with their feelings, and engage their imaginations. Those who open up their creativity are doing much better than those who are desperate to return to their previous lives.

As one year ends and the next begins, it is my hope that as a society we can move away from complacency with the norm and slippery ethical slopes to re-envision what is healthiest for the next generation. Should we return to the same pace of life and stresses that preceded the virus? Perhaps not... Neuroscience provides some clues for how we might rebalance.

Nonlinear researcher György Buzsáki examines rat navigation by studying place cells in the hippocampus. His research offers a two-stage model of how rats become well oriented to their environment. The first stage is akin to *dead reckoning* by sailors on the high seas: here, the rat keeps track of its actions and perceptions as it moves its body through space. By coordinating and calibrating each of its senses,

e.g., sight, sound, touch, smell, to one another and to its own movements, the rat becomes able to create an internal map of itself in relation to its environment. Once achieved, the rat can then switch to the second stage, akin to *landmark navigation* in sailors. Here, the rat triangulates by using external signals, like the sight of a water bowl, to coordinate with its internal map of the environment in order to navigate successfully. By moving from stage 1 to stage 2, the rat is now fully oriented and no longer relies upon embodied feel to keep track of its whereabouts. Instead, it can remain in one place while folding external information into its internal map. Voila!

Whereas the hippocampus is at the heart of navigating through physical space in rats and other mammals, in humans it is also the seat of autobiographical memory. In *Clinical Intuition in Psychotherapy* (2012), I propose that children use a very similar two-step process to become oriented in social space. In step 1, children use the free play of imagination to get an embodied feel for various social spaces. One day a young child might pretend to be a doctor, while the next day she becomes a patient, an ambulance driver, or an undertaker. In this way the complexity of society is folded into the imagination of children through the calibration of their senses and bodies with their imaginations. This process cannot be dictated, as it comes from the inside out, not the outside in.

Buzsáki found that rats never get oriented from the inside out if forced to run on straight tracks. So too will children fail to become oriented in social space if their time is too tightly scheduled. Much like rats need the freedom to chaotically wander around their environments, exploring each point from every angle, so too do young children need the freedom to let their imaginations go wild, so that they may explore multiple points in their social environments from every angle. Only then can children calibrate their perceptions, emotions, imaginations, and actions with the roles, rules, and relationships of broader society.

Imaginative play is the work of childhood because it provides a path toward navigating life intuitively, from the inside out, from internal maps created by direct experience that teach them how to trust their own instincts, decision-making and sensibilities.

Although pandemics are bound to happen now and again no matter what, my gut tells me that the fast pace, frenetic activity, and heavy carbon footprint of people the world over ripened us for infection. As we face the new year, I truly hope that when things open back up, people will retain some of the stillness and reflective capacities possible now. I hope society can learn to find more of a balance between action and stillness, between external stimulation and internal support. In an age of ever-increasing information and disinformation, it is all the more vital that parents help children to navigate from the inside out by fostering and trusting their own intuition.

This brings me to contemporary society. Prior to the pandemic, processes of exploring the social world through the free play of imagination were getting more and more hampered. Especially in middle and upper-class households, parents thought they were doing their children a favor by tightly structuring their time and scheduling one activity after another, toting them between soccer, art classes, bal-

let, etc. But by not having any downtime, children were not moving according to the inner promptings of their imagination. This inadvertently hampered their capacity to move from the inside out according to intuitive promptings. As a result of continuously outer directed activity, they could not get oriented from the inside out. The result was a generation of children having difficulty leaving home, directing themselves, and launching into independence.

The pandemic has slowed everything way down. Parents and children are no longer able to run around from activity to activity. We are forced to be still. This gives us opportunity to face ourselves, to face what we haven't wanted to deal with. While this can trigger symptoms of anxiety and depression in, it can also give broader society an equal opportunity to reflect on new directions. If parents truly understand how play is the work of childhood, they will unplug their children from digital devices that hamper imagination. They will withdraw from frenetic schedules that prevent children from getting oriented to their environments. They will give the current generation of children the opportunity to expand inner space and become oriented from the inside out through free play. This is my hope for the year to come: that forced stillness will allow a healthy reckoning in all.

Terry Marks-Tarlow, PhD grew up in New Jersey and moved to California where I received my B.A. in psychology from Stanford University and my Ph.D. in clinical psychology from UCLA. She was trained primarily in cognitive-behavioral work then sought additional training at the Gestalt Therapy Institute of Los Angeles (GTILA), eventually becoming President. She was trained in hypnosis from Jean Holroyd and Michael Diamond at UCLA's Neuropsychiatric Institute, plus studied guided imagery with Muriel Fuller. For over a decade, she has been studying interpersonal neurobiology and regulation theory with Allan Schore. She is currently an adjunct faculty at Pacifica Graduate Institute and core teaching faculty at the Insight Center in Los Angeles.

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