

Dr. Silly Will See You Now

Healing young minds with puppets, pranks and goofy toys.

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The Hard Cases

The office of Dr. Silly is a very good place to be a kid.

Dr. Silly, known to adults as [Anthony J. Palumbo, PhD](#), children's therapist, sees his patients in a nice sunny room with a good supply of toys, action figures and other stuff to play with. There is a table soccer game wedged behind the desk, and board games are stacked to the ceiling. Most important of all, there are dozens and dozens of puppets, all kinds of puppets in virtually every costume imaginable, lined up on the bookshelves, waiting -- heads cocked, legs dangling -- for someone to invent a story.

Parents in search of academic credentials will find thick texts and piles of journals comforting, but it is the puppets who testify to the power of Dr. Silly's most important therapeutic tool. Here, they silently remind everyone who enters, is a man who meets children as a traveling companion -- older, smarter, a lot more certain about the way out of their troubles and into a happier future, but still enough like them to know how they feel.

"Silly was more like a friend than a shrink," [Jonathan Nickerson](#), 17, says of the year he spent in weekly therapy sessions with Dr. Silly after his parents divorced. "We made films together. It was fun."

When they first talked, Jonathan was reeling from the breakup of his family, from abandonment by his father, who moved to the Midwest and rarely contacted him, and the feelings of inadequacy and rejection that inevitably followed. Dr. Silly penetrated Jonathan's wounded silence by staging weekly "shoots" of a long-running video with action figures standing in for real events and genuine feelings. In the process, Dr. Silly slowly eased Jonathan's desolation into the light of a miniature video sound stage and, in the process, set him free.

"Many hurt children are silent," Dr. Silly explained. "I use play and puppets and video to get them to express what gives them such pain."

Seven years later, Jonathan has gained enough distance to dismiss that period as "the worst year of my life," and to know when it's time to see Dr. Silly again.

"Ah, yes, Jonathan has a girlfriend," Dr. Silly says in a thick Viennese accent. "He must have zee tune-up."

Gales of laughter, the most common sound of a session with Dr. Silly, bounce around the room.

Hundreds of children from the water-fringed communities along [Buzzards Bay](#) in southeastern [Massachusetts](#) have had their lives similarly transformed by Dr. Silly. They come, chauffeured by worried parents, to Silly's office at the rear of a small house in the old seaside neighborhood of Wareham -- a block from the beach, half an inlet from [Cape Cod](#) and an entire world away from the emotional pain that brought them there.

After 10 years as a university teacher and author of books on play therapy, Dr. Silly has the typical therapist's pastiche of analytical techniques and insights -- Freud, Jung, Skinner, their followers and debunkers. But he also commands hundreds of characters, accents, slapstick routines, stories and allegories -- the legacy of 20 years as a puppeteer, including studies at the [Institut International](#) de la Marionette in [France](#) and Institut für Therapeutisches Puppenspiels in [Switzerland](#). Drawing on puppetry's almost limitless repertoire of clowns and sages, Dr. Silly cloaks therapeutic insights in laughter and, in the process, reminds children burdened with sadness of the sheer fun of doing something...well, silly.

Dr. Silly's therapeutic playground is a little bit mad, a little bit manic. One minute he narrates "Little Red Riding Hood" as [Don Corleone](#) would have told it to his grandchildren if he hadn't had a heart attack in the middle of the tomato plants ("There was this old lady. They called her Grandma..."). The next minute he imitates a nun demanding to see math homework, with all the moral might of the [Vatican](#) focused on the sin of unfinished fractions. Sometimes he crafts his approach in advance. Other times, he simply wings it.

"I had this one boy I absolutely could not get to talk," Dr. Silly recalled. "I went through my whole bag of tricks, and he still wouldn't talk." Finally, Dr. Silly remembered an Italian puppeteer he'd seen perform in [France](#) and launched into an operatic falsetto: "Talk, talk, talk, who needs talk? I will sing to you until your head is completely shrunk..." The kid began to sing as well: "No, no, no, you will never shrink my brain." The two brought most of the youngster's problems into the open during an hour-long session of therapy as opera buffa.

In short, no child can resist him, which is a good thing considering how many children need help in times of crisis. They are referred to Dr. Silly by pediatricians, school counselors and, for a heart-breaking few, by the staff of hospitals for patients with acute mental illness. Some come to him because they are drowning in the dislocations of divorce. Others contend with bullying and ostracism because they are different -- physically or intellectually limited, disabled or, strangest of all to kids on American school buses, they simply don't like to play sports. Most of his patients are boys between the ages of 8 and 15 who are estranged from their fathers. A few have already been suicidal or self-destructive.

"They seem to send me the hard cases," Dr. Silly muses as he casts his mind over the parade of children he has treated. "I call them the stoop-shouldered kids. They're bent under the burdens of their problems and their pain. I try to make them laugh to release them from all that. God knows, they need something to lighten their lives."

The Light Touch of Laughter

At 62, Dr. Silly is the sum of a peripatetic career that, in retrospect, was tailor-made for helping troubled children. He began as a street-gang worker, and then became a serious psychological researcher in a white lab coat who studied the ways children learn to think. Wanderlust lured him to the faculty of a university in rural [Australia](#), and it was an incident in a [Sydney](#) theater that drew him to puppetry. He saw how the audience watched puppets, rapt, and realized that he

could use puppetry to reach out to children who otherwise resisted the meddling of therapists.

For the next 15 years he was obsessed with finding new ways to use puppets to help unlock the broken hearts of children. He collected puppets, made puppets, wrote plays for puppets, adapted puppets so that children with handicaps could use them, invented puppet theaters that could clamp onto a hospital tray. One theater -- an umbrella with a scrim sewn on around it to hide a young puppet-master -- could even be attached to a wheelchair.

There came a night in the middle of this creative fever when he emerged from his basement workshop with his latest puppetry invention and announced to his wife, "I'm Dr. Silly." A style of healing he'd been evolving for years now had a name.

He converted an old school bus into a play center, painted Dr. Silly on the side and took puppetry on the road to homeless shelters. It was on the bus that he showed Nina,* who'd had to give up her cat when she and her mother moved into a shelter, how she could make a paper fish tank to paste to the window of her new room so the sun would shine through. "She cut out and colored the most beautiful fish to put in that tank."

He made a special helmet that had a marionette attached so that a boy with cerebral palsy would be able to make a puppet dance using slight movements of his head. Later in the hospital's elevator, he heard the thank-you the boy had composed through the disembodied sound of a computerized voice synthesizer: "Dok-ter Sill-lee, I love you."

Recently, puppets have played a lesser role in Dr. Silly's therapy sessions, a casualty of young imaginations stunted by endless hours playing video games. ("Puppets don't blow up; that's a real disadvantage nowadays.") He relies more on ordinary talk therapy -- assuming his talk can be considered ordinary. Any of the children he sees now need to learn how to cope with demons they will never fully escape, so a heavy dose of commonsense coping mechanism is part of the treatment. ("I try to give them hope and a plan.") For example, he told Teresa,* whose drug-addled mother never came to see her, that she would buy the car of her dreams someday and never have to wait for her mother to visit again. ("You can just drive up to see her anytime you want.")

He concocts put-downs for the bullies who turn playgrounds into killing fields for fragile young egos. Dr. Silly convinced Chris, a brainy boy who dreams of becoming a paleontologist, that he will triumph over those who tease him for being different. ("I tell him to say, 'Yeah, I'm different. I'm going to be rich and famous.'") He advises Brooks, who never gets picked for sports teams despite being the biggest kid in class, to say that it's probably safer for them if he doesn't play. And he always refers to bullies as gorillas. ("That's an image that works when they're taunting you.")

Whatever approach he takes, he remains a magical adult, a chameleon with a white mustache who can morph deep insights into jokes and heal psychological wounds with the light touch of laughter. A local pediatrician who regularly sends patients to see Dr. Silly says she does so for the same reasons she recommends one surgeon rather than another -- he gets good results. "The kids like him, they want to go back to see him, and they get better with him," says [Dr. Cheryl Greenfield](#). "I don't know how he does it, but he has this ability to get to their level -- which is not necessarily down -- and connect with them. Whatever it is, it works."

Whatever it is, it makes him Tyler's magical adult friend. At 10, Tyler has spent most of his life in hospitals, undergoing more than three dozen operations to repair cranial deformities and other

birth defects. Tyler is tutored at home, which insulates him from playground ridicule, but also deprives him of friends. So his mother, [Sheila St. Jean](#), relies on Dr. Silly to confirm her son's right to a place in the world. Weekly visits from the wide range of characters bubbling out of Dr. Silly provide him with playmates as much as they help him with his emotional problems.

"When Dr. Silly is here, Tyler isn't sick," his mother says. "Instead of being a sick little boy with all these things wrong with him, he can just be a kid. Of course, I think Dr. Silly is just a great big kid himself. A giant, very smart kid who knows how to make little kids feel better about themselves, no matter what's happened to them."

**Not their real names.*

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