

**The Capacity to Tell a Joke: Reflections from Work
with Asperger's Children**

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The capacity to tell a joke is a highly complex interpersonal event that depends upon the maturation of certain developmental achievements which are absent or stunted in children with Asperger's Syndrome. These include the ability to know another's mind, a sense of interpersonal timing and, most notably, a capacity for abstract thinking. The author discusses Freud's (1905) notion of joke-work, which is akin to dream-work, both of which are pathways to forming mental representations. Freud considered joke-work as a mental activity that operated on the verbal level and the author examines the preverbal dimensions that are rooted in the earliest mother/infant interactions. An extended case discussion of the psychoanalytic treatment of an Asperger's boy is offered to illustrate these points and to demonstrate the activity of joke-work as a means of building mental representations.

“nonsense in jokes is made to serve the same aims of representation [as in dreams]” (Freud, 1905, p. 175).

“Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you fall into an open sewer and die.”
Mel Brooks

In the film, *Sling Blade* (1996), Billy Bob Thornton plays Karl, an autistic man who was recently released from a psychiatric hospital where he had been confined for many years after murdering his mother and her boyfriend. The product of an extraordinarily impoverished and violent background, Karl lived an isolated life and was adrift in the world of emotions and its interpersonal subtleties. In sharp contrast, he displayed a unique “empathy” for machines of all kinds and earned the respect of the residents of the small Southern town in which he lived for his ability to easily repair mechanical equipment that his neighbors were unable to fix. Karl befriends a young boy and his mother, Linda, who invites him to live in their garage over the objection of her bellicose and violent boyfriend, Bill Cox. One day Karl overheard Bill tell a joke to a friend:

Bill: Did I tell you the one about the two ol' boys pissing off a bridge

Friend: I don't reckon so.

Bill: Well there were these two ol' boys and they hung their peckers off a bridge to piss. One ol' boy come from California, the other come from Arkansas. The ol' boy from California says, "Boy, this water's cold", and the ol' boy from Arkansas says, "Yeah and it's deep too," [implying a much larger penis].

While the two friends laughed together, Karl did not react and walked away perplexed.

Later in the film, after a devastating argument between Bill and Linda that teetered on the edge of violence, Karl came into the kitchen to find her sadly alone at the breakfast table. The mood is dark with hopelessness and resignation. Karl, sensing the woman's despair, is awkward and quiet; then, without expression, he says:

"There's these two fellers standin' on a bridge goin' to the bathroom. First feller says that the water's cold, other feller said the water's deep.....I believe one feller come from Arkansas, get it?"

After a long pause, Linda, baffled yet sensing Karl was trying to be a support, thanked him for his gesture. Clearly, Karl grasped Linda's distress and attempted to cheer her up with words that made others laugh, but since Karl did not understand the meaning of the joke, his deadpan delivery without any emotional inflection reduced it to a *non sequitur*.

Joke-work as a Pathway to Representation

I would like to suggest that the capacity to tell a joke is a highly complex interpersonal event that depends upon the maturation of certain developmental achievements which are absent or stunted in children with Asperger's Syndrome. These include, but are not limited to: the capacity for symbol formation, the realization that other people have a separate mind of their own, a sense of the rhythm and timing of interactions, and an empathic ability to place oneself in another's experience. Difficulties in these areas of development leave the Asperger's child in a concrete world in which symbolic play is a puzzling activity, metaphors make little sense and the world of emotions can be an incomprehensible maze of misunderstanding. One 10 year old boy I saw told me of being teased at school and when I said that I wouldn't want to be in his shoes,

he looked at me blankly and said, “But your feet are too big.” In my clinical experience, the evolution of the capacity to tell a joke may be an important milestone in the progress of analytic work with some of these young patients and, I believe, offers us a valuable opportunity to observe the unfolding of factors that permit a child to enter, however belatedly, the magical realm of metaphor and play.

In the Introduction to his 1905 book, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud stated

“jokes have not received nearly as much philosophical consideration as they deserve in view of the part that they play in our mental life” (p. 9),

an observation that remains true in our current psychoanalytic thinking as well. The subject of humor has received considerable attention in our literature (e. g., Britton, 2003; Pasquali, 1987; Poland, 1990), but the emphasis has been on its use to soften a patient’s overly harsh conscience, especially by employing *irony*, to offer “A joke [that] is a judgment which produces a comic contrast” (Freud, 1905, p. 10). Freud states that jokes create a momentary experience of “bewilderment and illumination” (p. 12) by finding a similarity between things that at first glance appear unrelated and are stitched together by the play of words, double entendres and a likeness in sound. It is the word play at the core of a joke that mainly captured Freud’s interest and led him to the main conclusion in the *Jokes* book: that there is *a significant overlap between the processes involved in the construction of jokes and dreams*.

The following joke illustrates the phenomenon of “bewilderment and illumination”:

Freud dies and arrives at the pearly gates where St. Peter is delighted to meet him. “It is an honor to have you here Professor and we could use your help. You see, God is very depressed and we hope you can speak with him.” Freud of course agrees. He is led into a room where God is sitting and St. Peter closes the door behind him. Days, weeks and months go by and finally Freud emerges from the room exhausted, bruised, his clothing ripped. With great anticipation St. Peter asks whether God is still depressed. Freud

responds, “Oh, I took care of that in an hour, but he just didn’t want to let go of his omnipotence.”

Like many jokes (and dreams), there are multiple levels of meaning condensed here, but I want to focus on the punch line: the joke’s structure creates a momentary sense of *bewilderment* and a question, “Why does Freud emerge tattered?” The joke leaves us wondering about this, building a sense of tension, which is released by the *illumination* of the punch line.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), Freud posited the role of *dream-work* in the construction of a dream and in the *Jokes* book proposed an analogous process, *joke-work*, in the formation of jokes. Both procedures involve the use of *condensation*, *displacement*, *faulty reasoning*, *absurdity* and *turning into the opposite* (as in the quote from Mel Brooks).¹ For the purposes of our discussion, I want to emphasize that there is an underlying psychological mechanism necessary for each of these factors: the capacity for *symbol formation* or *representation* by which one thing can stand for another. Noting that absurdity and silliness in dreams is one channel of representation, Freud similarly observed that “nonsense in jokes is made to serve the same aims of representation” (1905, p. 175). Freud assumed that each of us possessed a capacity for symbol formation, and therefore an intact and functioning *dream-work* or *joke-work*, but did not consider situations in which these faculties were either damaged or non-existent. In another publication, I (author, 1985) wrote that this impairment of symbol formation results in

“the concrete patient’s imprisonment in a current situation... that casts a shadow of narrow meaning across all experiences. The concrete patient cannot lift himself out of the immediacy of the moment and is trapped in a state of mind that cannot see beyond itself” (p. 379).

Freud places great emphasis on the *joke* as different from other forms of humor. Jokes appear spontaneously and involuntarily in the joke-teller’s mind, the appearance of which is preceded by

¹ Grotjahn (1951) noted that the inability to remember jokes and dreams both derive from repressive mechanisms.

“an indefinable feeling... which I can best compare with an *absence* [the French term], a sudden release of intellectual tension, and then all at once the joke is there – as a rule ready-clothed in words” (1905, p. 167).

Unlike other expressions of humor such as an amusing essay, consciously delivered jests or “innocent jokes,” the *true joke* is a product of an instantaneous unconscious process by which a barely recognized (preconscious) thought “plunges into the unconscious... seeking there the ancient dwelling-place of its former play with words” (p. 170). *Thus, the true joke is a temporary structure that appears unbidden in the joke-teller’s mind, like a dream or a reverie, and is one pathway to representing unconscious (or unrepresented) psychic material.* Unlike dreams which are mainly visual, the joke stays at the level of language and in its sojourn in that “ancient dwelling place of its former play with words,” the joke aims to recover “the old pleasure in nonsense” (p. 176) that triggered laughter in childhood. I witnessed this recently when my 22 month old granddaughter told her first joke – “A, B, C, buttons,”² which was delivered with a giggle that evoked a response of infectious and absurd silliness in her family audience. According to Freud, this is the long-forgotten childhood territory of verbal, nonsensical zaniness which the joke revives.

However, on a deeper level, this first expression of joke-work likely reaches down into my granddaughter’s preverbal (unformulated or unrepresented) experiences having to do with emotions about separation and union as though she was familiar with Freud’s (1905) observation that “nonsense in jokes is made to serve the same aims of representation [as in dreams]” (p. 175). She is putting together two seemingly unrelated concepts – letters of the alphabet and a button – and this pairing may well serve the “aim of representation” because the letters, though

² In effect this “joke” was employing a mechanism found in more sophisticated humor which offers “a judgment which produces a comic contrast” (Freud, 1905, p. 10), that, in essence, says, “Isn’t it ridiculous to think of A, B and C connected with buttons?”

appearing to be individual elements, hang together as part of a whole (the alphabet) and a button both fastens objects together while also enabling their separation. My granddaughter's joke-work seems to be the equivalent in word play of Freud's (1915) description of his 18 month old grandson's *fort-da* ("gone-there") game in which the toddler made a toy on a string disappear by tossing it out of his crib and then reeled it in gleefully to make it reappear: each of these grandchildren in their own way were developing symbolic strategies (one through words and the other through action) to work through and represent early experiences of separation and reunion.

For Freud, though the mechanisms (condensation, displacement, etc.) by which joke-work and dream-work operated were essentially the same, jokes were constructed from verbal psychic material while the roots of dreams reached deeper down into the preverbal layers of the mind. However, in discussing the origins of laughter, Freud (1905) commented in a footnote that

"the grimace characteristic of smiling, which twists up the corners of the mouth, appears first in an infant at the breast when it is satisfied and satiated and lets go of the breast as it falls asleep" (p. 146, note 2).

Thus, the *capacity for laughter* begins at the dawn of psychological life with the baby's first smile in response to the satisfaction associated with "the pleasurable processes of discharge" (p. 147) of the infant's hungry tension. In Freud's view, from the economic perspective, in relating a joke the comedian evokes tension and anticipation of relief by first eliciting a sense of "bewilderment" in the listener which is then alleviated by the discharge of laughter as the "illumination" of the punch-line³ is delivered.

Ernst Kris (1938) and Edith Jacobson (1946) later elaborated Freud's emphasis on the centrality of psychic discharge and added that the suddenness of the release of tension was an important element in generating laughter. With infants, Jacobson noticed, laughter may be

³ Freud did not use the term "punch line" since it came into usage in the 1920s or 1930s, many years after his *Jokes* book.

produced by the sudden intrusion of some fast motor activity, such as tickling, that disturbs on-going rhythmical patterns,

“which, *though first suggesting danger*, arouses pleasant anticipation of relief, [and] laughter comes as a final pleasurable motor release” (p. 44) [italics added].

I believe that the suggestion of danger which Jacobson notes is connected to the threat of overstimulation that imperils the early sense of psyche-soma integration: there is a fine line between the pleasurable laughter of a baby being tickled and the terror of disintegration from too much stimulation. This anxiety of disorganizing laughter remains, in my opinion, an element in the adult enjoyment of a joke: a hilarious comic is described as “side-splitting,” one who “cracks me up” or makes us “die laughing.” Dick Cavett (2013), in his obituary of the late comedian, Jonathan Winters, wrote how the comic could cheer people up but “at the risk of injuring themselves, laughing as hard as I was.” Regarding this point, Spero (2009) observed that

“From early development onward, powerful states of manic exuberance, laughter, and gleeful aesthetic rapture are experienced as pleasurable *and* painful, requiring sensitive containment lest they overflow and overtake the infant mind” (p. 195) [italics in original].

Spero (2009) speaks of a “joke envelope” that is part of the early developmental experiences which wrap the nascent psyche in a protective cover. Together with Anzieu’s (1990) notion of the *skin ego*, Bick’s (1986) discussions of the importance of skin in early object relations and Frances Tustin’s (1994) work on the *rhythm of safety*, the joke envelope is a central element in this constellation of archaic organizers of the psyche-soma. The joke envelope evolves from what Spero calls early “auditory crises” of overstimulating acoustic experiences that shock the immature psyche which, like a delicate cake baking in the oven, can be readily deflated by abrupt excessive “noise.”⁴ Spero does not describe the interactional aspects of this early stage of the

⁴ Perhaps this is the source of humor underlying jokes of flatulence? These reach down into the early unrepresented bodily experiences characterized by sound, the buildup of abdominal pressure and subsequent discharge.

joke envelope, but I assume the playful teasing, tickling and funny sounds exchanged between mother and infant are its behavioral manifestations. In the mature joke envelope, the psyche is able to harness these primal anxieties with language and thereby further the capacity to tell a joke.

In addition to these factors that underlie the construction of a joke, there are other interactional capacities that must develop in order for the joke-teller to effectively “set up” his audience for the delivery of the punch line. It is commonly said that “*timing is everything*,” which is equally true for giving a psychoanalytic interpretation as it is for telling a joke. In both situations, the “punch line” or interpretation is offered at a “point of urgency” (Klein, 1932; Strachey, 1934): in the clinical encounter when the transference affects are heightened and within the reach of conscious awareness and, in telling a joke, when the listeners experience an inner tension created by “bewilderment” which is released through the “illumination” of the punch line. The comic must have the intuitive sense of timing, like that of the analyst, of the moment at which maximum laughter will be produced: a punch line delivered either too quickly or too long after the body of the joke evokes minimal laughter. This is a situation not unfamiliar to the psychoanalyst who is no stranger to the comic’s lament, “I was dying out there tonight.”

The ability to know another’s mind goes hand in hand with good timing. Just as the analyst must develop his intuitive skills to know what the analysand is capable of tolerating, so the joke-teller must have the aptitude of reading the mood of his audience and sensing their receptivity to certain material. The capacity to know another’s mind, of course, is a complex achievement which depends upon the ability to tolerate one’s separateness from the object, to have achieved what Stern (1986) calls an “emergent self,” and a curiosity about the contents of the mother’s body which Meltzer (1975) asserts is the wellspring of an infant’s fantasies. With the emergence

of a container/contained relationship (Bion, 1962), the baby senses the presence of another mind accessible to its projections and devoted to transforming its unprocessed emotions into meaningful psychological events. With the later emergence into the depressive position (Klein, 1935, 1940) the growing child can experience others as whole objects and demonstrate concern (Winnicott, 1963) for the mother. Finally, the appearance of mature symbol formation in the depressive position is the key that unlocks the infant's mind from the narrowness of a two dimensional world into the exuberance of a universe of infinite imagined possibilities⁵.

To summarize: joke-work, along with dream-work, is one of the pathways to representation. For Freud, the *true joke* is a temporary structure that appears unbidden in the joke-teller's mind and, sharing similar qualities to a dream, is one pathway to representing unconscious psychic material. While dreams are largely visual in nature and reach down into the darkest depths of the unconscious, Freud (1905) appeared to view the origin of jokes in the remnants of early experiences that are registered verbally, i. e., what he called the "ancient dwelling place of its [the joke] former play with words... [and] the old pleasure in nonsense" (p. 176)." However, I believe that the lineage of the capacity to tell a joke originates in the earliest interactions between mother and baby. *Laughter*, which is released by the punch line of a joke, develops in the first months of life and is linked with rhythmic patterns of increased stimulation followed by sudden quietude, thereby establishing a primordial *joke envelope* that helps gather together the psychosoma into an "emergent self" (Stern, 1986) associated with nascent affects of pleasurable stimulation. As development proceeds, successful experiences in a container/-contained relationship, achievement of the depressive position and its attendant capacity for symbol formation as well as concern for the object, build an ability to empathically know another's mind

⁵ Rhode (2011) states that many Asperger children have a sense, albeit not always well developed, of others having an inside in clear distinction from autistic children who lack this capacity.

along with a sense of interpersonal timing. These achievements are the necessary bedrock, together with Freud's emphasis on regression to childish play with words, which underlie the capacity to tell a joke.

Aspergers Children and the Impairment of Joke-Work

It is well established that Aspergers children typically are concrete, have an underdeveloped sense of humor and experience difficulty in understanding metaphorical language. Often highly intelligent and gifted linguistically, they can recite with encyclopedic accuracy the vast array of *facts* acquired about their favorite subjects yet simultaneously appear “numb and dumb” (Tustin, 1986, p. 27). Their joke-work, which is one pathway to representation/transformation of emotional experience, is either severely damaged or lacking completely. This impairment, of which the incapacity to tell a joke is one example, is reflective of the underlying limitations in their emotional and cognitive development. More specifically, the difficulties these children have with empathy, separation, managing states of “pleasurable excitement” (Tustin, 1983, p. 129) and profound terror lead the child to “autosensual maneuvers” (Mitrani, 1992, 2011) aimed at restoring a semblance of inner control, often through attempting to rigidly command their environment, because “If he fails in this rigid manipulative control, the child feels that he will cease to exist” (Tustin, 1984, p. 147).

For Tustin (1994), autistic states in patients are a means to deal with “the trauma of their catastrophic awareness in infancy of their bodily separateness from the mother's body” (p. 120). This is a body-to-body closeness whose goal is to adhere as much of the infant's skin surface as possible to the mother's skin surface, what Meltzer (1975) calls an “adhesive identification.” In ordinary circumstances, this autosensuous connection to the mother promotes the gradual consolidation of disparate sensory experiences in the child that begin to coalesce around a sense

of a core self. Premature separation from this state results in an inchoate sense of having one's "skin boundary frontier" (Grotstein, 1984) suddenly peeled away⁶, resulting in

"the experience of impending disintegration of one's sensory surface of one's 'rhythm of safety' resulting in the feeling of leaking, dissolving, disappearing, or falling into unbounded space" (Ogden, 1989, p. 133)

In addition, the patient may have the sensory experience of a black hole where a core self should exist due to this catastrophic rupture from the mother.

Owing to the unique challenges that confront the Aspergers child, his capacity for humor, especially the aptitude to tell a joke, is extremely limited. Their subjective experience of terror at separation from the mother forecloses the growth of a shared *potential space* (Ogden, 1985; Winnicott, 1971) in which symbols may form, because distance from the mother (as in having a separate mind) is felt as an existential threat. Furthermore, since the provenance of autistic phenomena is in the earliest somato-psychic world of infancy, the first boundaries of the self as defined and sustained through various "envelopes" (skin boundary frontier, primitive skin ego, psychic envelopes, joke envelope) always feel under threat of dissolution, so psychic energies are invested in various autistic maneuvers that preclude ordinary maturation. With regard to the joke envelope, the capacity for laughter and "pleasurable excitement" remains a particular danger due to the risk of disorganizing over-stimulation.

I have seen a half-dozen child and adolescent patients in psychoanalysis who are either Aspergers or have significant autistic enclaves in their personalities. Each of these cases also had noteworthy histories of sensory integration difficulties early in their life: it was as though separation from the sensory buffering mother left them denuded of protection from the glare of light, the abrasiveness of touch and the booming noise of sound. These inborn sensitivities, I

⁶ An adult woman I (author, 1996) previously reported on felt that she had neither an inside nor an outside and that she was like "a face on a pane of glass" (p. 44). Separations from me reminded her of burn patients with skin grafts: if the bandages were taken off too soon, the new skin would peel off with the gauze.

believe, likely create some sort of feeling for the infant of having been born prematurely, experienced as being improperly protected by various skin envelopes, and thereby increasing the infant's need for adhesive identification with the mother. This need for a "second skin" (Bick, 1968) from the mother may be so intense that even the most capable mothers are unable to provide the needed protections from sensory overload. In other situations, there may be an interaction between the baby's moderate need for a sensory buffer and a mother who, for a variety of reasons, is not sufficiently available. In either case, autistic defenses may be automatically deployed to manage the infant's onslaught of unbearable somato-sensory overstimulation.

Clinical Vignette: Andrew, the Teller of Jokes

Andrew's parents consulted me regarding longstanding concerns about their son: an only child and now 4 ½ years old, he was a very anxious boy who needed to control his environment lest he erupt in tantrums. They were also very troubled by his lack of friendships, fearfulness of separations, hitting, spitting and biting. Nevertheless, he could also be warm and cuddly as well as good company at times. When asked about home life, his mother laughed nervously and said that he ate all his meals in the bathtub which, of course, I was quite shocked to hear and so inquired about this. The parents spoke with much anxiety about numerous pregnancies that had failed in miscarriage, exhaustive medical tests and procedures, all of which came to naught. Finally, with the help of a donor egg impregnated by father's sperm, Andrew came into the world. Consequently, his mother and father appeared to forge an unconscious pact never to expose Andrew to any frustration; thus, if he desired to eat in the bathtub, so be it. The story reminded me of the legend of the Buddha's childhood: that his parents, too, kept their son within the walls of their royal home sheltered from the harsh reality of poverty and sickness lurking just

over the ramparts. However, unlike the Buddha who reacted with grief and compassion upon contact with reality, Andrew, terrified and overwhelmed, desperately sought to keep everything rigidly the same.

Indeed, change of any kind frightened Andrew terribly. A few months after beginning four times a week analysis (also meeting with his parents every other week), and just before his fifth birthday, Andrew tried in vain to lift one of the chairs in my office. He grew quickly frustrated and I offered to help, saying that he had a birthday coming up; that soon he would be five and later on six and then seven, that he would grow stronger and be able to lift a chair on his own. However, instead of feeling reassured by my comments, Andrew broke down in tears and wept more deeply than I have ever seen a child cry. He said, "I don't want to be five or six or seven. Then I wouldn't know who I was and no one would know me, not my mother or father because I would just disappear." I said he was terribly worried that getting bigger meant he would disappear and he wants everything to stay the same so he doesn't have to be so scared. Unlike other less troubled children who worry that growing up carries increased expectations or fear the loss of childhood, for Andrew getting older threatened his very existence and he imagined himself simply vanishing, unrecognizable to the minds of those upon whom he depends to know he exists.

Many children and adults with Asperger's Syndrome (now considered in DSM-5 as a high functioning Autistic Spectrum Disorder) can be highly intelligent with areas of esoteric expertise that feels wooden and pedantic – for example, Andrew knew every imaginable detail about the Titanic. He would spend long periods of sessions lecturing like an oddball professor about the exact dimensions of that doomed ship, its hydraulics, the number of passengers, the lack of adequate life boats, how many feet below sea level it had sunk, but no mention of the incredible

tragedy that occurred. It was not that he had formed a narrative of the catastrophe which was repressed, but rather he was unable to give emotional meaning to the shipwreck; the Titanic for Andrew was a conglomeration of facts and not a story of unthinkable human tragedy. He had yet to develop the capacity to imagine and tolerate the scope of this human disaster which could then be pushed out of his awareness.

It was very difficult to access Andrew's emotional world and he would often regale me with endless stories that replicated from memory the dialogue of the various books he read or were read to him. If I attempted to interrupt and ask a question, he told me to wait because he needed to finish his recitation; however, it soon became clear that these tales were used as an autistic object (Power, in press; Tustin, 1986) to create an impermeable wall to keep me, and the possibility of my making meaning, at bay. I was able to interest Andrew in drawing, but his drawings were always of different kinds of trucks with no accompanying narrative. When I inquired if these vehicles had drivers, he said that these were automatic trucks that did not need a person to operate them. I took to drawing my own pictures, and later comic strips, while he drew his trucks and he was mildly interested in the stories I invented; however, when I introduced emotional themes, Andrew told me he doesn't like feelings and that I should shut up. At other moments, he "played" with the toy cars and crashed them together, yet looked blankly at me when I suggested the two cars he was crashing into each other seemed angry. "They're just made out of plastic, they have no feelings," he said and I replied, "I was pretending." Andrew answered, "I don't like pretending, it's boring," and I offered, "Pretending can be fun, but also scary because kids can start to pretend scary things." He responded with silence.

Understandably, as with other Asperger's children, my countertransference was a mixture of boredom, frustration, discouragement and an experience of "reverie deprivation" that Ogden

(2003) describes. In the midst of my frustration with Andrew, an adolescent Asperger's boy I had seen for many years was in my waiting room attempting to come up with a caption for a cartoon in the *New Yorker* weekly caption contest. His unexpected clever suggestions surprised me with their subtle and lively wit that had rarely emerged in our attempts at conversation. Though I did not consciously link this with Andrew's treatment, I noticed a short time later that I had begun to spontaneously engage in word play with him. For example, on a Monday session I welcomed him back and, knowing that he was an "expert" on dinosaurs, unexpectedly said, "I heard about a boy who was in a battle with a dinosaur in the park across the street [from my home office], was that you?" He laughed and said, "That's silly, there are no more dinosaurs." I also found myself making puns and Andrew was curious what I meant; I explained that I was making a "pun" and soon after he started to invent some of his own. In retrospect, I could more easily enlist Andrew in fanciful word play than in pretend play with objects. Furthermore, my joking seems to have intuitively sensed that I could meet Andrew at that "ancient dwelling-place of ... play with words" (p. 170) that Freud described and that my puns and "wild thoughts" (Bion, 1997) evoked "bewilderment and illumination" (Freud, 1905, p. 12) in Andrew. I believe these off-the-cuff strategies helped to create a shared play space between us and that my use of puns and absurdities made "comic contrasts" (Freud, 1905, p. 10) that helped to foster the capacity for symbol formation⁷.

One day he arranged all the toy cars in three lines and said they were stuck in traffic. The cars did not move at all and I attempted to speak for the drivers: "Oh this traffic is terrible, I'll be late for work (or getting home)." He said they don't have any feelings and then took out the Freud (the "doctor") figure from the toy box, noting that he looked like me, which Andrew then

⁷ The word *symbol* derives from the Greek word *symbolon* which suggests throwing things together, especially for the purpose of comparison. Thus, my puns and word play, Freud's "comic contrasts," were in the service of promoting symbol formation.

placed watching the traffic. Dr. Freud remained inert and I tried to speak for him, commenting that the drivers must be frustrated and Andrew said, "The traffic's frozen, that's all." It then dawned on me that this was an exact representation of what was happening between Andrew and me: that I felt like an on-looker observing our interactions which were frozen in an inanimate state. This realization enlivened me and I felt encouraged because for the first time he communicated something about our relationship that enabled me to understand him more fully. In addition, he used the Freud figure to stand for me, which signaled Andrew's beginning capacity to form symbols *about an interpersonal situation*. I said that I thought the doctor would like to unfreeze the traffic but didn't know how to do that. Andrew did not reject my statement and appeared to be listening.

A short time later, Andrew came into the office, made a beeline for the window blinds and removed the plastic rod that adjusts the amount of light coming in. Earlier in the analysis, he would play with the blinds by repetitively raising and lowering them to soothe himself, but on this day he stood on the analytic couch and pretended to lift himself with the rod, saying that he was a pole-vaulter. I was stunned and delighted by this sudden appearance of imaginative play, asked if I could join him, then grabbed the rod from the other window and enthusiastically entered the play. I remember thinking, "This is up-lifting," and then realized I had made a pun. I said "This is fun using the rods to pretend we are pole-vaulters" and he responded, "They can also be fishing poles, let's go fishing." We pushed two office chairs together side by side and pretended to be fishing off of a boat, catching imaginary salmon, lobsters, etc. I felt energized by this play and decided to try making a joke: I pretended to struggle reeling in an object, feigned coughing and said, "Oh no, I think I caught a cold!" Andrew laughed and said, "You can't catch a cold in the ocean, that's a funny joke."

Andrew's nascent ability to understand metaphor, fostered by our play with words, gave him the initial tools needed to work through emotional experiences such as separations from me. Andrew, ordinarily a well coordinated boy, stumbled when coming into my office the day before his one week vacation. He said, "I tripped," and I said he's going on a real trip tomorrow with his family and we won't be seeing each other. He laughed and said that was "funny." On the day of his return, Andrew came into the office and flopped into a chair saying with exasperation, "I can't believe how I get into these situations!" which is a verbatim quote from the Charlie Brown comic strip. Then he looked sad and commented that I got a new curb [actually true, installed while he was away] in front of my house. I said it makes him sad to see that and he said he didn't know that would happen. I replied, "Maybe when you saw the new curb you wondered whether other things changed, like whether I'd be here or look like me." He said he knew I'd be here and that I always look like me, then commented that he's taller than he used to be. I interpreted, "We haven't seen each other for a week and maybe you're worried I wouldn't know you because you got taller." He responded by opening the office door to check that his mother was in the waiting room and said "my mother is always there too."

In the week prior to his 6th birthday, Andrew had us playing as farmers who were planting and harvesting potatoes. The day before his actual birthday his mother left me a voicemail saying that Andrew had asked to see her vagina. On his birthday, which landed on the last session of the week, Andrew arrived wearing a Burger King crown. He was very anxious, running back and forth across the office, compulsively touching objects and whisking his sleeve with his hand as though brushing off invisible dust. I said, "It's a very exciting day and you're full of energy," and he replied, "Yes, it's a special day, it's my birthday." I said that it was his 6th birthday today and that birthdays could be exciting and also scary at the same time. With pressured speech, he

spoke briefly about riding the school bus, which he did not yet do, and this reminded me of some recent play of a school bus crashing. As I was recalling the earlier play, Andrew said, “Wanna hear a joke?” and I asked him to tell me. “Did you hear about the giant who threw up?” he questioned with obvious glee and before I could finish saying “What happened?” he said in one breath, “It was all over town get it?” He fell back in a chair as we both laughed, asked if I’d like to hear another one, and when I nodded he offered, “What did the necktie say to the hat?” I asked for a moment to think about it, but he quickly told the punch line, again in one breath: “Go on ahead I’ll hang around here get it?”

As this session drew to a close, Andrew said he’d like us to return to our planting and harvesting potatoes and instructed that we were to dig holes, then plant seeds in them. I said, “It’s very easy to grow potatoes, but it’s much harder to make a human baby.” Andrew said he once saw a picture of a baby before it was a baby and “it was like muscles together, it was just muscles.” Then he told me a funny story about a bird sitting on an egg and there’s such a strong wind that the egg got blown away 6 times; thus, the mother had to run after it to sit on it again. Apart from the fascinating content in these two hours (the pre- and post-vacation session and his birthday), we can see Andrew’s growing capacity to represent his emotional experiences of loss, terror of growing up and curiosity about how human existence comes into being. He also conveyed the tenuous sense of his own “going-on-being” (Winnicott, 1960) in the story told on his 6th birthday about the mother bird trying to nurture her egg which blew away 6 times. It was as though he was communicating the fragile sense of his own existence and also, perhaps, some unconscious knowledge of his mother’s many miscarriages and difficulty getting pregnant.

Andrew would often bring in jokes, partly as gifts to me, and they served as important opportunities in continuing to build a capacity for symbolic thinking and metaphor that are

essential for the growth of an inner emotional world. Three dimensional narratives of oneself develop to foster an experience of subjective depth that replaces the clusters of mechanical facts that thinly papered over the infinite ink of black holes. In addition, working with Andrew's jokes and other word play contributed to his growing ability to gain a sense of mindfulness, that is, an understanding that others have a mind separate from his which may also think differently. For example, when Andrew was unable to allow me time to think of the punch line for one of his jokes, it was in essence an inability to recognize that I had a mind of my own (Caper, 2000) which needed time to think. Thus, I let him know that even though he was eager to share his joke, that I needed time to think about it. This brief hiatus also allowed the building up of anticipation of the punch line that brings about the "sudden release of intellectual tension" (Freud, 1905, p. 167) through laughter. Allowing himself to tolerate not telling me the punch line improved his capacity to withstand unpleasant feelings.

Discussion and Conclusion

In summary, I have attempted to show the process of mental growth in a young boy with Asperger's Syndrome over a period of 1 ½ years of child psychoanalysis and the role that *joke-work* may have in this process. This development occurs on two levels simultaneously. First, on the *Freudian level*, the gradual evolution in the ability to engage with me in verbal jousting (puns, jokes, absurdities) led to the establishment of a capacity for word play of which Andrew was previously incapable. This silliness helped to promote an appreciation of metaphor by producing what Freud (1905) called "a comic contrast" (p. 10) and a momentary experience of "bewilderment and illumination" (p. 12). It was in the moments after the bewilderment of the joke's set-up that sufficient tension built up which was then abated through the discharge of laughter triggered by the illuminating punch-line. For Freud (1905), the unconscious delight of

the joke rested in its transporting the listener back to “the ancient dwelling-place of its [the child’s] former play with words” (p. 170). The joke, in Freud’s opinion, though similar in its construction to dreams, did not reach to the depths of unconscious experience accessed through the dream, but stayed at a level of verbal discourse while dreams were largely visual in nature.

I have argued that there is also a deeper unconscious stratum to the joke on the *preverbal level of early infancy* that has to do with the somato-psychic integration of a core sense of self, a capacity to know another’s mind and a sense of interpersonal timing. By encouraging Andrew to tolerate waiting for me to think about the answer to his joke, I was helping him become aware that others have minds that are separate from his and may work differently. He often hit children at school when they differed on a subject in which he was an “expert,” but this behavior diminished significantly as he learned to wait for me to think before delivering the punch line. I often thought out loud, mulling over certain possible answers, thereby allowing him a window into my thinking strategies. In this manner, we were like a mother and infant playing at feeding the baby: gently teasing a six month old with teaspoons of food hovering tantalizingly close to the infant’s mouth until the food is finally delivered, the mother and baby laughing in unison. Similarly, Andrew had to learn to withhold the punch line long enough to build sufficient tension to enhance our laughter and to develop a sense of interpersonal timing that is at the core of relationships and a good comic’s talent as well.

The topic of *representations* is of great current interest in contemporary analytic thinking⁸ and most of these contributions take their inspiration from Freud’s concept of *dream-work* as well as from Bion’s (1962, 1992) elaboration of dream-work in his proposal of *alpha function* (author, 2012, 2013). In a series of papers, Elizabeth and Elias da Rocha Barros (2000, 2002, 2011, 2013, in press) have explored how dream symbols (representations of affects) develop in

⁸ See Levine, Reed and Scarfone’s (1913) recent compendium of papers on this subject.

complexity as indicators of progress in analysis. In a recent paper⁹, Elias da Rocha Barros (2013) stated that “dream-work becomes an incubator of symbolic forms” some of which constitute what he and Elizabeth da Rocha Barros (in press) call the *expressive function of the mind*. Following Langer (1942), the Barros distinguish between *presentational symbolism*, which is expressive of emotions through intuitive processes that evoke affective associations in the listener through projective identification, and *discursive symbolism* which conveys objective meaning, i. e., the dictionary definition, to the recipient.

I find the distinction between *presentational* and *discursive symbolism* to be very helpful in understanding how the expressive function of the mind of an Asperger’s child operates. With regard to Andrew, his initial communications were almost entirely discursive in nature: as noted above, he was an avid collector of the descriptive facts about the Titanic that imparted much knowledge but he was incapable of “incubating” presentational symbols by which to transmit something of the affective human tragedy. However, even though his dream-work/alpha function was hobbled, I was able gradually to enlist him in a process of joke-work that allowed him greater flexibility to slowly consider emotional meanings. Initially, even the *displacement* offered by imaginative play or drawing failed to give Andrew the sufficient buffering from the overwhelming affects against which he had to maintain rigid autistic defenses. His earlier “stories” in analysis communicated little emotionally and felt more like a wall of discursive bricks on which a “stay out” sign was plastered. Our mutual joke-work, however, proved to be a way to reach Andrew through word play and also was a vehicle, as Freud (1905) said, by which “nonsense in jokes is made to serve the same aims of representation [as in dreams]” (p. 175). This joke-work, therefore, served as the “incubator of symbolic forms” (E. M. da Rocha Barros,

⁹ Paper given at the Boston Psychoanalytic Institute, December, 2013.

2013) and later enabled the development of presentational symbols that evoked strong emotions in the sessions, thereby fostering a deeper emotional connection between Andrew and me.

The growth of a symbolic function enables a child to master various conflicts via the working through of play. Andrew has evolved from play with words to playing out stories with me that are more or less verbatim from books he has read; however, these are no longer mere recitations because the stories are unconsciously picked to convey a difficult situation in his concurrent life and evoke sympathetic feelings in me for his dilemmas. For example, Andrew's involvement with other boys also led to his increased aggressiveness in the classroom that was simultaneous with his enacting scenarios in the consulting room from his books about *Big Nate*, a boy who was proud of receiving many after-school detentions for bad behavior. However, Andrew was unable himself to play this character and insisted that I act as Big Nate: I commented that I thought it was too scary to pretend to be Big Nate because he was afraid he'd forget he was really Andrew. Thus, his symbolic capacity, as well as his self-coherence, was not sufficiently developed to permit him to safely imagine stepping into the character's shoes. His anxiety notwithstanding, we were able to use this enacted story to wonder what excited Big Nate about his numerous detentions. Our curiosity about Big Nate's detentions led to a marked improvement in Andrew's behavior.

Andrew is currently nine years old and in the fifth year of analysis: his symbolic capacities and the associated ability for interactive play have considerably grown. Now we are, at Andrew's suggestion, two amateur detectives engaged in uncovering banal middle school crimes, such as stolen lunch money, while at the same time and on another level (Grotstein, 2009) also poking our investigative noses into the enduring mysteries of life: what sort of farming with what kind of seeds create a fully human life; what unknowns are hidden beyond the

veil of a vaginal opening; and how does a boy/man learn to laugh at himself yet know that life is not a joke. I suppose, like the rest of us, he will be thinking about these questions for many years to come.

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