

# STEPPING THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS: EMBODYING HOSPITALITY THROUGH TRANSITIONS

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Welcome. Step through the looking glass with me while I reflect upon stop moments that tugged on my sleeve<sup>i</sup> as I created and directed a play about Alice with my grade 7 students or the final performance of their graduating year. Hopefully, something—a phrase, an action, an encounter—will cause you to pause...

**“Shhhhhhh.” The usher hands me a play program and waves me through into a darkened theatre. I scan the seats, and discover an unexpected occupant sitting in the third row. The director motions to me to join her. “Why aren’t you backstage, running interference?” I whisper, slipping into the empty seat beside her. “They’re on their own. They can handle it.” She turns to face the stage as the lights in the house dim to blackout, and five Alices appear from the wings.<sup>ii</sup>**

I am curious about transitions and the role of transitions in our lives. As I worked with my grade seven students, I wondered how we could get better at transitioning; if it mattered if we got better at transitioning; if having words for and experience with transitions would alleviate some of the frustrations that come with transitions, the unfamiliar, the not yet known. What could we learn from paying attention to transitions as we learned how to enter and exit from scene to scene; from creating a language to address transitions, on stage and in our lives; from considering how and when to highlight transitions; and how and when to have them done as quickly as possible? And what would happen if we learned to pause, and consider transitions in life, on the stage, as stop moments<sup>iii</sup> to which we are responsible, transitions, as action sites of inquiry and learning? I also wondered about my own transition from being a French immersion teacher to a fine arts teacher, teaching drama, as I had yearned to do for so many years. What might I learn as I dwelled in the space of transition that awaited me?

Along with my curiosity about the role of transitions and the possible pedagogical value of attending to transitions, I became aware, as a new teacher, in a new school, of my need for hospitality in education, both personally, and within the curriculum of everyday living with my students. What might hospitality look like in our classroom? Whose responsibility is it to welcome individuals into spaces and places? Would engaging in theatre work with adolescent students allow us to contemplate, address, and extend hospitality? Would I be welcome?

Who are these young preteens who arrive in my classroom, onto my stage? And who, from their perspective, am I, a new teacher, an unexpected stranger, not the teacher they had expected, introducing new ways of being present and in action together, announcing that this year, there will be no musical, but a play that we are all going to create together! Hospitality, the ability to welcome those who we have not been expecting nor invited, requires transition from habits of language, actions, assumptions, and expectations into an action space of inquiry, curiosity, fluidity, adaptation, improvisation, in order to create a language and practice of shared resonance, embodied awareness, and reciprocal listening. Who will I become in our encounter with these adolescent youth who come before me, individually and collectively (Fels, 2010)? Who will we become in the presence of each other?

## The Who and the What

The case study involved a class, like every other class and a class unlike any other, which is always the case when working with students. I entered into a new school and new position hoping to create a productive and supportive environment. I needed my students to welcome me into their space in order to function within and recreate their pre-established community. Our coming together was a transition not only for me but for my students as well.

I was incredibly naïve and incredibly hopeful heading into my work with these preteens. Such hope-filled naivety is a necessary state from which I must begin, a positioning of welcome and anticipation that allows for every possibility and every hospitality; a disposition of saying *yes, and....* I wanted us to create and complete a show together; but what show and by what means had yet to evolve as I learned about, and with, my students through the months that followed. The process of coming into hospitality contained space for both myself and for the students to expand our boundaries at all points.

Although we worked specifically on the show from January through May, we worked on all the skills required—reciprocal listening, respectful scaffolding of ideas, constructive feedback—throughout our ten months together. I was excited to use my theatre training in an intense and focused way with students who would be at least conversant in the arts as ways of working and learning. I was not anticipating resistance —

“I hate drama!”

“I’m only in the program because my mom thought it would be good for me.”

“Can we just play drama games?”

The students, the parents, and the community were accustomed to working on a show that came packaged—a music CD, pre-choreographed dances, big name productions slightly simplified for teens and, additionally, elaborate sets and costumes (designed and created by parents). This kind of product has a structure in and of itself; the lines of responsibility are clearly drawn. I wonder now if the hospitality provided within that framework is one that is hosted by the work itself; in other words, are children simply welcomed into the roles of a prepackaged script with little expectation of creativity or agency, just as guests move without questioning to the next empty chair when the Mad Hatter yells, “Change seats!” The arrival of Alice however, is the disturbance that puts a halt to the ritual of the Mad Hatter’s tea party.

I was determined that for this year’s performance, we would build a play together just as we built community in our classroom—by listening to each other, offering suggestions, exploring ideas, being kind to each other; and in so doing, create something from nothing on stage as we were daily attempting to do in the classroom, *to create and hold space together*. This hospitality might be a fluid and ephemeral kind of hospitality, one that is at times harder to grasp and at times more conducive to the give and take, or reciprocity, of hospitality that is so significant to me. Alas, with reciprocal hospitality comes responsibility—

“Mrs. Wardrop, what do you mean when you say we’re doing this collaboratively?”

“You want us to WHAT? I’ve never written anything, let alone a whole play!”

“I hate group work.”

Our play was not the Broadway-style production musical that parents, teachers, and students all expected from the new drama teacher; I chose to interrupt the expected, to invite my students to articulate what mattered to them through theatre. I wanted to undo what they had learned about creating theatre, so that they might come to

new learning (Frantzich, 2013). What play would they create, I wondered, if I ask them to tumble after Alice down the rabbit hole?

I chose a collaborative process of play building in order to involve the students in all aspects of the show, from writing to editing, from casting to choreography, from first reading to final bow. We completed an intense film study of *Alice in Wonderland* (Tim Burton, 2011), discussing artistic choices of director and screenwriter. Although our play was inspired by the major themes and characters from the film, we transposed both events and characters so that they reflected the students' everyday realities. We improvised scenes based on the major events and moments of transition in a teenager's life.

The students were responsible for naming our characters, for editing and streamlining the show, for designing and finding their costumes, for figuring out which props were necessary and for then locating them. They offered suggestions and help to me and to each other. We had the luxury of working hours a week during class time, crafting every aspect of the show. Two main themes became clear as I fumbled my way—stopping and rushing, wondering and ignoring, playing and labouring: *transitions and hospitality*. Together, through our creative explorations, we learned how to offer, and receive, gifts of reciprocity, recognition of each other's presence, responsibility to ourselves and to each other.

### Transition

'Who are *you*?' said the Caterpillar. This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation. Alice replied, rather shyly, 'I— I hardly know, sir, just at present.'

(Carroll, 1998, p. 40)

What new openings could possibly occur in an elementary production of *Alice in Wonderland* as five Alices tumble down a rabbit hole into a Wonderland which I recognize — oh, yes, I remember those feelings, those fears. How can a play created by pre-teens touch my heart, resonate so deeply? How gently, how playfully, they hold my hand, and lead me into the dark corners of their lives. Each arrives on stage, announcing his or her presence. How do we welcome these unexpected characters who arrive in our midst? Will we recognize that we are not merely spectators but simultaneously complicit and responsible in this emergent performance of encounter? What confessions might be illuminated by the embodied presence of those who have not yet arrived? How dangerous is this welcoming of new arrivals? We may do well to ask of ourselves, as poet Carl Leggo (2008) asks, "To what or to whom do I offer my heart?"

Transitions occur at all stages of our life, we transition from home to school, from school to work, from family to new relationships, independence, to creating new families and communities of relationship. How we learn to deal with transitions requires resilience, flexibility, ability to improvise, to hold fast to values that guide our hearts and encourage us to be kind and compassionate in our relations with others.

Plays have transitions between scenes and *Curious?*, the play that my students and I created together, was full of complex transitions that required us not only to change the physical scenes (sets, props, etc.) but also the tone and atmosphere as we moved from situation to situation. Transitions, in every form, were challenging for us, both during rehearsal and within the classroom, and we had to negotiate and renegotiate them many times over. Transitions can make (well considered and well executed) or break (bumpy and arresting) a performance. Taking too long to move the set, or stumbling into position, disrupts the audience's participation in and commitment to the arc and flow of the narrative. I could have avoided transitions as much as possible, however, it was important to me that we address the difficult aspects of performing plays (and life). Performer and educator Celeste Snowber (2009b) suggests that, "part of attending and listening to our bodies is coming to accept our in-between states, our

imperfections, even our discomfort with what is there” (p. 31). If we are able to listen to and lean into what happens in the in-between states (ie. our transitions) possibility of learning dwells within. During rehearsals and performance, we had to work through the challenge of transitioning in full view of our peers and eventually of our audience members. Accustomed to blackouts during transitions, my students found it challenging to see the transitions as integral to the show, not just something to be done in the dark by invisible hands.

“Who is responsible for moving that block?”

“I think it was Kyle.”

“Kyle?”

“No, it’s not me. I asked Will to do it instead.”

“But Will is already moving another block.”

“All hands on deck! Let’s move through this transition again. Please write who is moving what into your scripts.”

Encouraging my students to understand that all aspects of our production were of equal value and valuable was not a straightforward process. They had been exposed to the idea that set changes were simply physical acts that anyone could do without much rehearsal or consideration. I asked them to reconsider the importance of the work undertaken during the transitions from one scene to the next, and the importance of the individuals undertaking responsibility for that work. I encouraged my students to understand that transitions are as integral to the show as the performance of lines and gestures on stage.

The only way we were going to successfully perform our show, I told my young actors, was by paying attention to the details and acknowledging the truly collaborative and egalitarian nature of our theatre process. I was eager to help my students discover the connection between valuing transitions in their theatre production and in their lives. Through their emerging understanding of the significance of transitions, I wondered, might these adolescents become better able to transition with grace?

Working with 12 and 13 year olds is a gift.

Working with 12 and 13 year olds is a challenge.

Working with 12 and 13 year olds in drama,

a risky endeavour at the best of times,

is ecstasy and agony.

Working with 12 and 13 year olds in drama,

their training vastly different

from the training I would have them do—

is dancing with an angry octopus.

The preteens living and learning in my classroom are in a state of transition in many ways: they are on the brink between childhood and adolescence, they are balancing on the edge of elementary school looking across the chasm at secondary school, they are intensely self-absorbed and desperate to move into the greater world to effect change.

“Hey, Mrs. Wardrop, why are we rehearsing this again?”

“The transition?”

“Yeah, the transition.”

“It’s important to try to get it right.”

“Hmmm. But it’s easier just to go to blackout.”

“I know.”

“So why can’t we just do it the easy way?”

Transitions can be challenging for adolescents (as well as for the adults in interaction with them) and yet, they can be locations of unexpected moments of delight. In naming these in-between times, in giving children ways of expressing the difficulties and discoveries of these neither here-nor-there experiences, I wonder if we would then encourage children to come to understandings of who they are in the in-between space of reimagining themselves anew. These understandings could in turn make it possible for children to transition with greater ease, or at least, with less frustration and anxiety.

Watching the scenes unfold, I recall my own tenuous transition from elementary school to high school, riding the school bus, that waiting period between, wondering what life, friends, heartache awaited me. Yet, the players on stage, the students, have already imagined, and are now playing before us, their dreams, fears, expectations, disappointments, anticipated successes, young teens rehearsing for the worlds that they will create. I watch the students dash to and fro, finding their positions, relocating, moving props on and off the stage, movement choreographed like a dance, like the pulse of a beating heart, the lifeblood of theatre enlivening their steps.

## Hospitality

As a grade seven teacher working with and through drama, I explore and practice a pedagogy of hospitality. I do really mean practicing—so much of my learning is generated by making mistakes and then, reflecting upon them. Trust is a critical component of this pedagogy; trust in myself, in the processes I choose to use, in my students and their willingness to enter into the work with me. Without all these forms of trust, it is virtually impossible to create the hospitable environment that the students and I require in order to be able to work together.

I am emboldened  
I want to do more of this opening,  
This inviting.  
I want to encounter more children in the realm of theatre  
I want to coax them out of the corners  
And see them in half-light and full spotlight.

I am humbled

I can only do this  
When and if my students allow  
If they accept my invitation  
If they present themselves.

I extend invitation to my students to engage with me, with each other, with our co-created emerging curriculum, and with the larger community. I have learned that my students need to experience being hosted and hosting and so

I must trust them and accept their hospitality in return. I want to explore this concept of give and take, offering and receiving, embodied within hospitality, reciprocal engagement that hopefully creates and offers space and opportunity for new learning. As the responsible adult in the room, the educator, the expert, I have discovered that allowing students to host me is a risky endeavour. Placing myself in their reaching, stretching, growing, and trembling hands is hard work, and at times I can barely breathe.

And yet, it seems to me that it is in those moments that my students sometimes recognize what they are truly capable of, to embody and enact the responsibility and the ability to respond (Felman & Laub, 1994) that they are ready to live into. Giving myself permission to receive their hospitality is a gift to them and to me. I am not always sure that my students recognize that reciprocity, or really understand the value of their offerings. I need to learn how to share my learning with them.

Curriculum studies scholar, Molly Quinn, asks us to consider hospitality and its place in education. She suggests that there is often “no room in the inn” of education, and so both students and teachers lack the experience of hospitality offered or received at school. If we can open ourselves to hospitality, writes Quinn, “we also risk ourselves before the other, ... transcend ourselves or perhaps ... come to know ourselves, to be born anew” (Quinn, 2010, p.106). If we have the opportunity to experience a reciprocal hospitality of openness and compassion, could such encounters of hospitality serve as entry points into an environment in which more of us would be able to appear and to truly be seen within an educational context?

My educational context is a classroom full of adolescents practicing becoming themselves, exploring the possibilities of character, pulling on the cloaks of all the aspects of their personalities to try them out and discard those that do not fit. Imagine giving these teens a hospitable place of play and inquiry to practice themselves into being the people they choose to become. This hospitable location might allow them to fail and to succeed, to hate and to love, to be kind and to be hurtful where the consequences are muted but the learning is at full volume. Snowber reminds us that, “it is through opening a hospitable space to our students that the dialogical process of listening can occur. This generative place can be one where the individual listens to the life that wants to be lived within him or her” (Snowber, 2009a, p.4). It is both a challenge and a gift to create a space of hospitality where students are invited to listen to the call within their hearts, to listen to possibilities not yet known that they have to offer.

“Do you really want me to come up with both dance pieces?”

“Yes.”

“Like, to choreograph them?”

“Yes.”

“Can it be...?”

“It can be whatever you know is right.”

Educator JoAnn Phillion suggests that “the stranger needs to be welcomed and nurtured, and love is needed in these encounters” (Phillion, 2010, p. 120). In an institutional climate of accountability and expectation, many teachers feel uncomfortable speaking about love as part of our relationships with our students. Yet many of us are well accustomed to that experience of receiving and extending love; and believe that the act of love is fundamental to our work. Leggo offers the idea that “love opens up spaces for learning, not only in the classroom, but in every moment of being” (Sameshima & Leggo, 2010, p. 76). Embracing love as an integral part of hospitality in education allows us to consider the possibility that what we learn and experience at school could bleed into the rest of our lives.

“Hey, what’s going on? You seem to be pulling away again.”

“I had another fight with my mom.”

“Want to tell me about it?”

Quinn asks: “How can we welcome students into a home that is only partly a home/our own, where there remains a question as to whose home it is ...?” (Sasheshima & Leggo, 2010, p.104). Late in our rehearsals, a teacher informs me,

“You can’t use the theatre studio space next week.”

“Pardon?”

“We need to use it for dance rehearsals.”

“Right. I guess we’ll find some other rehearsal space.”

How do I manage to extend welcome into a location that does not belong to me? How do I create space in a curriculum that I do not set? Quinn asks, “Are we not all visitors, or “host-ages,” of the educational institution, subject to mandated curriculum labors unexpected, unprepared for, not our own” (Sasheshima & Leggo, 2010 p.104)? Through welcoming individual students, however they may come, I am able to create a hospitable place.

During our play building, individual invitations of agency, love, and forgiveness permitted some students to work from a place of vulnerability—they understood that they would be welcomed without exception. This softening of exploratory spaces and inquiries allowed students to take risks they would not normally have taken and opened up new places of exploration and learning. Two students who had faced different but persistent academic challenges were born anew in the hospitable environment that we sought to create together. One had been diagnosed as having dyslexia and, because of the difficulty she experienced reading, never saw herself as competent, or bright. The other had suffered from crippling anxiety and found it difficult to be in a classroom for extended periods of time. And yet, both students became a formidable and positive presence in the production and in the classroom. A third student came to the audition process ready to be seen where she had previously done her best to be invisible.

“Brit is taking on a lead role?”

“Yes.”

“By her choice?”

“Hers and mine.”

“I don’t think you understand what that really means. She hasn’t even been able to be in a classroom, let alone as the centre of attention!”

I hope that by offering my students opportunities to experience and to create hospitality within their school, they come to understand hospitality deeply enough that they may come to enact hospitality for themselves and for others in their lives. The full and rich experience of hospitality of being in relationship with others comes from their own work within the structure and exploration that emerged out of our creative work together. They had to have been hosted, to have seen and experienced the negotiations involved in hosting, accepting and declining invitations in order to perhaps carry an understanding and practice of hospitality into future experiences.

She entered into the space  
And was actually there  
I saw her eyes  
I saw her seeing me.  
It was first light

The first time I'd seen her,  
The first time in seven months  
That she appeared and asked to be seen.

There she was.  
Present  
Wanting  
Engaging  
Being.

She was there

She was finally there  
And I got to see her,  
I was allowed to know her  
In a different way  
In a different place.

Implicit in putting on a theatre production is invitation: to suspend disbelief, to take a short journey, to come into a space and co-create a world, to play, to be someone else and to live some other life. Theatre in our schools offers us opportunities of learning to be present and active agents of creativity, collaboration, and authorship as long as we thoughtfully engage with the crafts and art and heart of teaching and theatre.

If we can transfer what we experience in theatre, if we can learn to engage with openness and hospitality in the act of creating that which we do not yet know, into our larger, outside lives, then we will have learned as Alice does, stepping back home through the looking glass into our lives, applying the embodied skills, knowledge, and art of reciprocal hospitality as we negotiate our relationships, as we traverse our transitions on our journey to unknown worlds.

The gifts of hospitality and of awareness in and of transitions, of being responsible for ourselves, and responsible to each other, are a few of the myriad offerings available when we work in theatre with youth. What is required is an openness and willingness to be wide-awake and welcoming in moments of transition, so that we might listen to the heartbeat and pulse of our presence. When we are welcomed into places of supported risk and invited exploration, we dwell within authentic, meaningful, and enticing action sites of learning.

Are there any other ways we can learn these same things? Yes, of course. But theatre allows for this learning to occur so gracefully, so fully, with so much emotion that our learning carries itself into our lives. The high emotions we live in theatre root our experiences deep into our bodies and our being.

I am awed by the young students who stand before me, arriving in my presence, within our presence. Hannah Arendt (1961) asks if teachers love children enough so as to invite them into the world's renewal, not as we imagine, but as they will come to embody the world they imagine into being (Arendt, 1961, p. 196). Theatre invites children to step through the looking glass to explore and reimagine their present (and future) selves.

By attending to hospitality and transitions, I have come to a place of recognition, that our lives are lived in transition, uncomfortable, yes, yet a welcome release, for each transition speaks to new opportunities, new challenges. As we experienced together, performative inquiry (Fels, 2011) through play building invited my students into a world where hospitality beckons, and transitions are recognized as invitations, new beginnings. I encouraged students to explore the role and importance of transitions on stage, and in their lives, and in doing so, offered an embodied experience that recognizes and values transitions as action sites of inquiry and learning. Our play building



unfolded, not as I expected; yet our experience of creating together offered us the opportunity to offer hospitality as we learned how to negotiate the transitions that we encountered.

**The play tugs on my sleeve; I wish I had as a preteen tumbled down Alice’s rabbit hole to learn what mattered. Would I then, instead of fear and resistance, have welcomed transitions in my life with courage, curiosity, wide-awakeness,<sup>v</sup>? The director leans over, touches my shoulder. “Alison, Ally, Alan, and Alvin are all Alices,” she whispers. “And Abby is our caterpillar.” With a sigh of wonder, I surrender, listening, as the students enact Alice’s world, their world, laying down a new possible world in my presence...<sup>vi</sup>**

Alison: I think we’re all ready to wake up from this dream.

Abby: It seems to me that you’ve just found yourselves.

Ally: I don’t really think I was lost in the first place.

Abby: Those who are lost seldom know they are lost until they are found. ....

Alison: What do you mean by that?

Abby: What do you think I mean?

Ally: I hate it when my mom answers a question with a question.

Alvin: That’s ‘cause it’s not really an answer.

Abby: Of course it’s not. It’s not my job, or hers, to tell you the answers. It’s my job to ask you the questions. Finding the answers within yourselves is your job.

Alan: Great, another super helpful answer.

Alison: This is kind of like talking to a fortune cookie.

Abby: This has been a journey for you. You have learned, you have chosen. It is time to do it again.

Ally: But it’s so much easier when the choice is made for you.

Abby: Is it?<sup>vii</sup>

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#### ENDNOTES

- i See Fels, 2012.
- ii This chapter contains a variety of voices: Amanda Wardrop's (main text body) as the teacher in the room with the grade seven students, Lynn Fels' (inset) as the thesis supervisor and guide, and the students' (dialogue) who created and performed the show.
- iii Stop moments "...offer a choice. Either to remain habit-bound or to regain freedom in one's approach to an endeavour" (Appelbaum, 1995, p.xi). See Fels 2011.
- iv See Derrida as quoted in Borradori, 2003.
- v Maxine Greene (1978) explores Thoreau's concept of "wide-awakeness" as a moral responsibility of engagement, admonishing educators not to succumb to habitual practices as if they were sleepwalkers, but to attend to their teaching and relationships in the classroom, fully wide-awake and mindfully aware of what matters.
- vi See Varela, 1987, p. 62.
- vii From our play script Curious?