

Research Article

A Tail Within a Tale, Within a Tale: An Autoethnographic Account for Dog Lovers, Cat Lovers, and Story Lovers

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2023, volume 8, issue 4
doi:10.21926/obm.icm.2304062**Received:** October 16, 2023**Accepted:** December 15, 2023**Published:** December 21, 2023

Abstract

It was March-April 2020. The first few weeks of the first COVID-19 pandemic lockdown had just begun. Anxiety levels were high, and being locked up at home was an unfamiliar and eerie situation. A music therapist sent her clients (elementary school children on the autism spectrum) daily videos of her dog, Robben, during his daily routines. She dubbed the dog as if he told the children a story about a tail-less cat. This endeavor resulted in a series of 27 storytelling episodes titled "Robben's Pandemic Adventures", which the clients awaited day by day. The current autoethnographic report unveils this music therapist's storytelling experience. Every day she had to produce new creative content for the next episodes of her dog's "adventures", connecting his daily routines, character, and hobbies to the pandemic reality. In this process, she gave her dog a voice, and he "told" daily chapters in an allegoric story about one very unusual cat. The reflections focus on personal and professional lessons learned in the process for the therapist herself and her clients. In addition, the value of children's stories during times of crisis and turmoil - to both the adult storyteller and the children listening - is discussed and connected to the global COVID-19 crisis.

Keywords

Autoethnography; COVID-19; creativity; music therapy



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1. Introduction: The Preface

“Dogs do speak, but only to those who know how to listen” [1].

This story took place during the weeks of the first COVID-19 lockdown in March and April 2020. Life as we knew it came to a screeching halt. Everything stood still, and everything changed in a matter of a few weeks. I remember the first videos that surfaced from China and went viral within days. They showed people collapsing in the middle of busy streets and dead bodies being carried away from grocery stores, bus stops, or the lines at ATMs. These images had a significant impact on us all. At that time, information on the whereabouts of “Patient Zero¹” was shared in great detail on every news channel: where that person went, who he met, where he dined, what bus he took, where to, and at what time. Anyone in the vicinity of Patient Zero was instructed to self-quarantine immediately.

It was a time of hard feelings. I remember the anger, fear, and frustration that overtook people nationwide when the first identified COVID-19 cases arrived in our country, our communities, and our workplaces. A graduate student at my husband’s university visited the lab, not knowing she was carrying the virus until later that day. She was numbered “Patient No. 113”, and people who came in contact with her were immediately instructed to quarantine. The following day, one social worker who did not know she contracted the disease went to visit her patients in a nursing home and unintentionally contaminated the entire facility. Several residents died there within two weeks, sparking greater fear and anxiety nationwide. Indeed, it was a time of great suspicion and cautiousness, feelings that penetrated every level of our lives, from the national to the local. Every town, every organization, every household was affected by this fear.

It was a time of self-preservation and social distancing. Families with one sick COVID-19 patient in the household designated one room for them, where they remained until their fever subsided. Meanwhile, the other family members left food by their door, wore masks throughout the day, and prayed to stay healthy. Every evening on the news, we saw in trepidation how the case numbers grew higher and higher as area by area was infected by the virus. It was a time of tedious lines outside the doors of shopping malls, stores, and supermarkets, talking through plastic shields and keeping three meters between us. It was a time with no hugs and of “high fives” with the elbows.

My family’s daily routines were also turned upside down. Our oldest son was in the military, where his platoon quarantined for seven whole weeks without leave, and we were couped up in our home, each in a separate room in front of a computer: my husband, my younger 17-year-old son, myself, and our dog, Robben.

As the title suggests, the story I am about to tell includes three layers, each exhibiting a lead character. Robben the dog is the main character of the narrative. Further down the story, the plot will thicken, and Pelle the Tail-less Cat shall be presented. One may say that both this cat and I are the supportive characters in the story you are about to read. In addition, I shall ensure to include the audience, namely, the children I worked with, who received increments of the video story via their mobile phones.

¹ This intimidating term, Patient Zero, refers to the one person who was identified by authorities as the first to become infected with an illness or disease in an outbreak.

1.1 Allow Me to Introduce Myself First

I have been a music therapist since 1998. Since 2005, my population of choice has been children on the autism spectrum. Since 2012, I have been employed as a music therapist in an elementary school that integrates children on the autism spectrum with their neurotypical peers. When the pandemic struck, like other mental health professionals around the world, I found myself at home in front of a computer, sad, worried, and unable to meet with my clients.

Although I am a music therapist and a firm believer in the power of music in times of turmoil, the story I will share here does not involve music. The reality of a lockdown presented immense technical difficulties, limited my musical options, and practically hindered my ability to engage musically with my clients. Therefore, my story is not about music being made via the telephone or drumming on kitchen tables in separate homes in futile attempts to synchronize rhythms from both ends of a broken phone line. Similarly, it is not about unsynchronized singing during WhatsApp video calls while the client's television plays different music in the background. When I tried all these futile methods, I felt frustrated and powerless.

Instead, I will share a different route of vocal creativity: storytelling via improvised animated dubbing, which made me feel much more joyful and creative. I share such a non-musical story to demonstrate how invention became more important than the modality of creation (i.e., music). Since music had to be set aside due to the abovementioned technical challenges, I directed a videotaped mini-series titled: "Robben's Pandemic Adventures".

2. Method

"Tell me a fact, and I'll learn. Tell me a truth, and I'll believe. But tell me a story, and it will live in my heart forever".

(An old Native American proverb, cited in [2]).

2.1 Autoethnographic Storytelling: Theoretical Frameworks and Materials

For this report, I shall juxtapose my experience as a music therapist in lockdown and my story of Robben's Pandemic Adventures against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic that affected the entire world.

2.1.1 Theoretical Frameworks

This account is presented in the form of autoethnographic storytelling. In his guide to autoethnography, Poulos [3] wondered: "How could a researcher write about direct experience of the world, write reflectively, write from memory, write about social or cultural phenomena from a singular 'first-person' perspective, and call that research?" (p. 3). Well, autoethnography is a qualitative research method that accepts and is based on precisely this type of writing. Arising during the early 1980s, mainly within the anthropology discipline [4], it allowed the researchers' voices to be heard. In it, researchers share their personal experiences to provide their reflections and insights and extend a greater understanding of societal and personal events [5]. Contrary to plain storytelling, autoethnography attempts to describe events systematically, analyze the participants' experiences, and generate new insights [6]. The name of this approach in itself implies

that there are layers of personal experience (auto), layers of understanding of social and cultural experiences (ethno), and layers of analysis (graphy) involved in the stories told [6]. The experience that occurred to me three years ago has turned from a personal memory of a confined anecdote to a published article, undergoing several cycles of reflection, processing, and feedback from others along the way. For instance, I have shared the drafts with my family members and colleagues to gain their input and thoughts on the experience, the insights that can be gleaned from it, and the clarity of the writing.

2.1.2 Materials

A few primary sources of information were used as materials for this report: (1) my memories and recollections in hindsight, as well as conversations with teachers at my school to tap into their recollections of the events of the time; (2) the daily journal I kept²; and (3) the actual videos I took of my dog, which I filmed on my mobile phone, uploaded to my computer and kept as a souvenir, thinking that one day in the future they will remind me of this unique experience. To write the current article, I returned to reading my diary notes that were written during that first lockdown. While reading, I took notes on interesting and critical incidents that I forgot. I also watched the full videotaped “episodes” of Robben to recall and keep track of the stories' progression.

2.2 The Participants

2.2.1 The Audience

The elementary school where I work as a music therapist is home to about 300 children aged 6-12 (1st through 6th grade). Among them are about 35 students on the autism spectrum who have their own Special Education (SPED) classrooms but are also integrated with the regular classrooms most of the days. By the term “audience”, I refer to the people who received the videotapes of Robben’s story, namely, the SPED community at my school. This community included, first and foremost, the SPED teachers of the different grades, who received the videotapes directly from me and forwarded them to the WhatsApp groups of their prospective SPED classes. These WhatsApp groups included the SPED staff of each class, the children of each class, and the children’s parents. In addition, I sent the videos to the principal of the school, who forwarded them to the WhatsApp group of the entire school staff (i.e., the teachers of the “regular” classes as well). All these children and adults were stuck at home with nothing to do but wait for the lockdown to be lifted. Since I was not included in any of those WhatsApp groups, I could not read the group members’ comments or reactions to my videos, if there were any, and had to rely solely on check-ins with the teachers to get feedback on how well the videos were received.

2.2.2 The Storyteller: The Music Therapist and Her Dog

Until the pandemic struck and the lockdown began, I provided weekly music therapy sessions for many of the children on the autism spectrum in my school. But, as explained above, making music

² I started the habit of keeping a daily journal back in 1994. This habit was inspired by my late grandfather, who kept a diary himself, and encouraged me to ask at the end of every day, one simple question: “In what way did this day differ from all other days?” Thus, in my daily log at the end of each day, I ask myself this question, and write an open-ended summary of that day.

over the phone or video calls was no fun, and making music via Zoom was not yet an option during the first weeks of lockdown. The new communication format was tedious and unpleasant for me, and many clients did not enjoy it either. When I contacted them for a “phone music therapy session”, I often found them at their desks, playing computer games, or preoccupied playing Play Station games in their living rooms. Some were polite enough to put down their games and exchange a few words with me; others were more direct and told me bluntly that they did not want to be bothered. The entire face-to-face relationship was swept from under our feet, and creating a relationship that was based purely on technology was very difficult, especially in light of their autism diagnosis.

As the days of lockdown progressed, and we realized that we were in for the long haul, I felt increasingly ineffective and powerless. I had to find a different route to win the attention and hearts of my clients. Robben, my dog, sparked the idea for this endeavor because, thanks to his need for daily walks, we were allowed to leave the house to take him out to the surrounding nature. During those peaceful nature walks, I could contemplate the strange situation we were in, feel, breathe, and create. I knew many of my clients were animal lovers, and many had a cat or a dog at home. I recalled a children’s television series from my youth called “The StoryTeller³” [7], where an old man sat by the fireplace with his dog and told him European folk tales. The dog asked questions or responded sarcastically to the content of the stories. The idea of a talking dog, I thought, may spark the imagination of my young clients. Moreover, much like the old man and his dog in “The StoryTeller”, who were couped up alone at home by the fireplace (sometimes on a cold night or with a storm raging outside), so were we: isolated at home, disconnected and alone because of the “storm” of the pandemic. A dog who tells stories while a storm looms over the world... I found this idea comforting and soothing, like a warm embrace. Although I hoped my clients would relate to dog videos (surely more than to music played over the phone), it was mainly a way for me to relieve my worries, become creative, and focus on a new inventive project. Notably, I am a doer by nature. Now I had something to do. I had a plan; there were new episodes to be filmed in my newly created Robben’s Pandemic Adventures series, and the journey commenced.

2.2.3 The Main Character: Robben the Dog (2010-2023)

Let us get to know the main character, Robben the German Pinscher. Robben (who turned 10 during the COVID-19 crisis) had a reddish-brown coat of short hair, “Button” ears⁴, and black eyes. His hobbies included sleeping, barking at motorcycles, eating salami when the opportunity arose, sniffing grass during daily nature walks, and hating cats in general, except for one particular cat named Pelle the Tail-less Cat, who impressed Robben and earned his admiration, as shall be explained below. A typical photo of Robben in a story telling position is presented in loving memory in Figure 1.

³ Created and produced by Jim Henson, this series originally aired in the USA in 1987, and later was also broadcast in the UK.

⁴ Some dog breeds have “Button ears” which means ears that are semi-erect and their tip folds over to the front.



Figure 1 In loving memory of Robben (2010-2023).

At the Beginning. Robben was the lead actor in my video series, comprising 27 episodes, each lasting about 5-7 minutes. The episodes were filmed via my mobile phone during Robben's different daily activities: his nature walks, his bedtime routines, his meals, etc. Every episode started with Robben telling something interesting about himself. For example:

"Hello, my friends. How's the lockdown going for you? As you can see, today I'm having a shower because my mom said I stink".

Or: "Hello, my friends, it's day 5 of our lockdown. As you can tell, I really like eating grass - especially if it is wet right after the rain. You should try it. It's a real delicatessen".

Or: "I am very excited today. It is my 10th birthday. You can see the treat I got. They made me a tuna cake that looks like a bone, with a candle on it. Hold on, let's see if I can blow out the candle... Did you see that? That's the first time that I've been able to blow out candles. It's tough when you have a long snout. Now, I'll take a minute to taste it and let you know if it's any good. Hmm. Delicious! You should ask your mother to make you a tuna cake for your birthday..."

Robben Gets a Voice. I filmed Robben while dubbing his lines on his behalf. The entire process was improvised according to the dictates of the dog's behaviors. Improvisation, a technique familiar to most musicians, is one of the hallmarks of the music therapy profession and is used globally by music therapists regardless of their clients' age or diagnosis. It entails a process of exploration, which flows ad-hoc from second to second, with nothing but a general desired direction in mind. The result is as unique and one-of-a-kind as it is unpredictable and impossible to replicate. "For the performer, improvisation is a process of exploration. The creative goal of the exercise may be quite loosely defined, but the revelations achieved through improvisation are intended to have artistic impact" [8].

When a person improvises alone, the exploration is often based on their state of mind, feelings, thoughts, or bodily sensations. When a person improvises with another person (e.g., a music therapist with a client), the improvisatory exploration is based on the ongoing process between them. In my case, my improvisation process was based on exploring my dog's behaviors. Whatever he did, whatever expression his face wore, wherever he chose to stop during his walk, and whatever

he sniffed, ate, or gazed curiously at... I followed suit, trying to see things through his eyes and verbalize what he may have said had he been able to talk.

Throughout the filming, I did not use my natural voice at all. To dub Robben, I adopted the lowest, raspiest voice I could access with my vocal cords. I gave him a highly fluctuating prosody and a deep, hoarse, prolonged syllable at the end of each sentence. Occasionally, I introduced some arguments he may have had with the humans in his family. For instance:

“As you can see, I am very sleepy right now. You can tell that I sleep with one eye open, and you can surely notice that I DO NOT snore. My mother says I snore. This is simply not true. I never snore”.

Another example of an argument happened right after the Jewish holiday, Passover. Robben asked the viewers whether they sang the holiday songs and added bitterly:

“I love to sing too, but my humans do not appreciate my singing. My mother said that maybe someday she’ll let me sing a solo piece, but NOT during Passover evening”.

The Plot Thickens. The first four episodes were shot during the first two weeks of lockdown and featured Robben’s daily life. As the lockdown progressed and it appeared that the return to normalcy was slipping further away, Robben needed more topics to discuss in his videos to remain relevant and exciting. My ideas on how to create interest with dog videos were dwindling. What would he be telling the children next? Then, I recalled my mother's bedtime stories of Pelle the Tail-less cat.

2.2.4 The Supportive Character: Pelle, My Childhood Hero

‘Pelle the Tail-less Cat’ is the lead character in a famous Swedish children’s book series, *Pelle Haleløs*, authored by Gösta Knutsson⁵ [9, 10]. My Danish mother used to tell me the adventures of this sweet grey cat when I was a young girl. His tail was chewed off by a rat when he was a kitten, and despite his kindness, wits, and bravery, he was constantly harassed and bullied by the local street cats in his town.

Led by Mons, the vicious leader of the cat group, and by Bil and Bul, Mons’ empty-headed yes-cats, the neighborhood cats bullied Pelle, laughed at his missing tail, and mocked him for his disability. It was, of course, a metaphoric story that reflected children’s societies with all their complexities. As such, every book in the *Pelle Haleløs* series entailed a conflict, some sad moments, injustice, bullying, cruelty, shame, and fear. Of course, the triumphant Pelle always prevailed at the end of each book, thanks to his loyal friends, ingenuity, and kind heart.

Pelle’s Story is Incorporated into Robben’s Videos. The stories of Pelle were my favorite stories as a child, and as a worried adult, I found the memory of these stories reassuring. I thought this story, about overcoming adversity in general, perfectly suited the societal hardship we all experienced because of the pandemic. Moreover, I hoped that a story of overcoming personal disadvantages and disabilities might send an encouraging message to my clients, who themselves had experienced being different, misunderstood, or even bullied by other children. Notably, in some of Pelle’s stories, the missing tail helped him prevail, succeed, and even win in certain situations.

⁵ Originally published in Scandinavia in the period from 1939 to 1972.

Knutsson’s message to the readers was that sometimes what is considered “disability” can be an advantage. I hoped to get this message across to my clients as well. Thus, I asked my mother to search through her storage, dig up our old Pelle books (she had kept all those years), and send me a few photos of pages to refresh my memory. I searched the Internet for some pictures of cats (one mean-looking cat symbolizing Mons and another image of two silly-looking cats - Bil and Bul). I sent them to the SPED teachers along with the videos of Robben, and Pelle’s story began.

In episode 5, Robben introduced the new topic, telling his viewers that he had recently heard of an extraordinary cat. Then, from episode 6 onwards, after his opening update, Robben went on to tell the story of the cat Pelle, which he had heard through the grapevine of the dog community. Robben narrated Pelle’s story, which unfolded from episode to episode in a free-flowing, improvised manner, parallel to his talking about his daily life.

Pelle Excels in the Cat Tournament. One specific Pelle story that I chose for Robben to narrate showcased a “Track and Field” tournament⁶ for all the neighborhood’s cats. Pelle was encouraged by one of his friends to sign up to participate in it, but, as can be expected, things did not go smoothly at this event. Mons, the bully, cheated to win medals right and left. For instance, in the “shot put” (i.e., ball throw) competition, he provided Pelle and the other competitors with a heavy cast-iron ball, while the ball he used was a light-weight black rubber ball of the same size. Nevertheless, in the end, Pelle won the 100-meter running contest, earning him enough points to win the tournament. He won fairly, of course. In fact, he won *thanks* to his missing tail. He was the first to *fully* cross the finish line, while Mons, who ran neck-and-neck next to him, came in second because he still had a long tail behind him that did not wholly cross the finish line.

Combining the Two Parallel Stories. I tried to balance Robben’s daily experiences as they unfolded in front of my phone camera, with Tail-less Pelle’s developing story. I made Robben’s narration as funny as possible, including comments depicting the dog’s astonishment over cats’ culture, traditions, and customs. For instance:

“There was a party in the neighborhood to celebrate the birth of Amos and Frida’s new kitten. Pelle was invited, too. I wasn’t there because dogs were not invited, but I heard it was a great party, with lots of fish. And also, some more fish. And also, some special fish dish served with fish, and lots of fish sauce on the side”.

Table 1 summarizes the topics of each episode. Writing in Italics represents Robben’s actions; plain text represents the content of his story that was told that day.

Table 1 Summarizes the topics of each episode.

Number	Video Name	Short Story Description
1	Maya introduces Robben.	Maya talks to Robben, explaining the new disease while feeding him kibbles.

⁶ “Track and Field” is an umbrella term for all athletics professions that are typically performed on the running courses and grass plains of stadiums. These include, for instance, running (e.g., sprints, hurdles, or middle/long runs); jumping (e.g., high jump, pole vault, long jump, or triple jump); and throwing contests (e.g., shot put, discus throw, hammer throw, or javelin throw).

2	Robben gets distracted by a motorcycle.	Robben explains to the children why he hates motorcycles.
3	Robben snores	<i>Robben is seen sleeping, and his snoring can be heard very loudly.</i>
4	“Proving that I do not snore.”	<i>Robben is sleeping with one eye open.</i> Complaining that lockdown is boring. He talked about his favorite types of food: salami, meatballs, chicken, and fish.
5	“Tomorrow, I’ll tell you about an interesting cat”.	<i>Robben, in bed, gradually falls asleep.</i> “Although I am a dog, I’ll tell you about a cat. Right now, I’m tired. Remind me tomorrow”.
6	Pelle is introduced	<i>Robben sits in his bed, awake.</i> Tells the first details about Pelle (that he was grey and a rat chewed off his tail).
7	Mons, Bil, and Bul are introduced.	<i>Minutes before Robben falls asleep.</i> Tells about the neighborhood bullies: Mons and his two followers.
8	A baby welcoming party is planned. All cats are invited.	<i>On his nature walk, Robben shows his viewers how he eats grass.</i> Starts telling about Pelle, who goes to the supermarket and sees an announcement on the neighborhood bulletin board about a cat baby welcoming party.
9	Someone cries in the bush: Pelle befriends an earless dog.	<i>Robben eats salami in the kitchen.</i> Tells about Pelle, who hears someone crying in the bush next to the bulletin board. It’s a dog who cries because he is missing one ear.
10	Tail-less Pelle and earless Max tell jokes.	<i>Robben in bed, licks and cleans himself.</i> Tells about fun things that Pelle and earless Max used to do together.
11	A crate of fish falls off a truck.	<i>Robben is in bed, covered in two blankets.</i> Tells about the neighborhood cats who rush to the street to collect fish that fell off the supermarket truck - lots of food for the baby party.
12	The cats’ baby welcoming party.	<i>Robben is getting a bath.</i> Tells about the baby party. Pelle attended and brought along his new friend, Max, the dog. After they leave, Mons the bully, interrogates the cats about Max, and gathers intel about Max with a plan to harass him.
13	Mons, the bully plans to punish Max.	<i>On his morning walk in the street, Robben pees on trees and street light poles.</i>

		Tells about how Mons and his fellow bullies, Bil and Bul, plan to punish Max for attending a cat-only party.
14	Mons's error - bullies the wrong dog.	<i>Robben on his morning walk in nature.</i> Tells the end of the story in which Mons tries to bully Max, but instead makes a mistake and bullies a different dog, who chases him up a tree, where Mons stays all night long, mocked by the neighborhood's cats.
15	New signs appear in Pelle's town, announcing the Track and Field tournament.	<i>Robben sits in the back of the car, watching the road from the rear window - tomorrow there will be a lockdown, and cars won't be allowed.</i> Tells about new signs that decorated the streets in Pelle's town.
16	A new story begins: The tournament.	<i>Robben sits awake in his bed.</i> Tells about the new tournament. The cat that will be the referee is Mons' cousin. Mons arranges with his cousin that he will participate with one condition - that he wins all the competitions.
17	Pelle hesitates whether to join the tournament.	<i>Robben in a morning walk in nature.</i> Tells about Pelle's hesitation to sign up for the tournament. His new female friend, the pretty Tina, encourages him to go for it.
18	The day of the tournament.	<i>Robben in another nature walk.</i> Tells about how Pelle enrolled himself to the tournament, not knowing that the competitions were fixed in advance.
19	The ball throw (shot put) competition.	<i>Robben's 10th birthday. He wears a blue bandana on his neck, blows out two candles, and eats a tuna cake.</i> Tells about how Mons cheated in the ball throw competition, throwing a lightweight ball, and giving a heavy one to the other competitors. Mons wins.
20	Medal ceremony for the ball throw contest.	<i>Robben walking in nature.</i> Tells about the ceremony in which Mons wins 1 st prize unfairly.
21	Mons' scam is discovered.	<i>Robben in nature walk.</i> Tells how Bil and Bul arrive at the ceremony with both balls: the heavy and the light. The crowd of cats discovers that the contest is rigged and is upset.
22	A new competition: sprint running.	<i>Robben walks in nature. Today is Passover evening - lockdown all over the country.</i> Tells about the new competition. Mons tries to cheat his way to another victory and stings his rival,

		Laban, with a sharp thorn under his foot. Laban bleeds and has to withdraw.
23	Mons is scolded by the new referee for non-sportive behavior.	<i>Robben in nature walk.</i> Tells how Mons's pricking of his rival's foot with a thorn is discovered.
24	The running contest in on its way. All contestants take off.	<i>Robben plays with a new toy in the living room.</i> Tells about the tight contest in which Pelle and Mons ran neck-to-neck.
25	So, who won?	<i>Robben sits in his bed and licks his paws.</i> Tells about how Pelle won because his short tail crossed the finish line before Mons' tail was completely over the line.
26	Independence Day and summary.	Robben sits awake in his bed. Talks about Independence Day, and about all the things that he can do independently. Asks the viewers what they can do by themselves.
27	One special episode just for Yuri	<i>Robben sits in bed, his two front paws in the front of the frame.</i> Shows Yuri that he does not have an opposing thumb and praises Yuri for his drawing skills.

3. Findings: Assessing the Impact of Robben's Stories

"When could we remember how to listen? Perhaps early, when we played" [11].

How can we measure the impact of our actions? How do we know if something we said or did struck a gentle chord in someone's mind or heart? Can we even expect to know if, and to what extent, our actions have resonated in people's psyche? Have our stories created an effect on an adult listener? Had the pebble we threw out into the world created ripples in a child's consciousness?

The answers to these questions are complicated and mysterious in regular times when our audience sits right in front of us. They were (and remained) ten times more elusive in the troublesome times of the COVID-19 pandemic. One of my favorite and most inspirational Miley Cyrus songs, "The Climb" [12], best describes how I felt back then. It delivers the powerful message that the result of any endeavor is less important than the process, the effort, and the insights that lead to it. In the quarantined, isolated reality we were in during the Spring of 2020, sending the episodes to my school community was about "the climb" for me. I felt like a submerged submarine that sent out "pings" - signals of life - for someone to record and notice. The teachers reassured me that the videos were forwarded and shared and were "received well". They encouraged me to keep sending daily videos because "the kids liked them". I also received occasional self-reports from the children themselves (see below). But did the recipients - children and adults alike - open my videos? Did they take the time to listen to the entire 5-minute episodes of a dog that told a story of a cat? Did they relate to the stories that Robben told? Did they feel a greater connection to me? To others? Or did Robben's videos lose in the battle for their attention against other, perhaps more attractive, YouTube videos or Play Station games?

I could not be sure and I suppose I shall never know the full extent of the impact of my videos on my clients and their family members. All I could do was hope that of all the “story seeds” I sowed, at least one would catch on and open a new space in someone’s heart. I remember telling myself that it would be worthwhile if I could catch the attention of one sole child and give pleasure and hope even to one person. I would know that my job was done. I treated these videos as gifts I sent out to my clients - gifts of caring, humor, hope, and normalcy. I gave them something to look forward to, a constant and solid reminder of me and my dog. In that respect, my endeavor was about the process, not the specifics of Robben’s stories.

The impact of this gift was felt first and foremost on me. Dubbing Robben made me laugh. It made me physically hoarse but emotionally very peaceful and happy. It made me feel uplifted and giggly - like a person who prepares a surprise party for a friend. Planning the next episode kept my mind busy and swirling, and improvising to an animal's rhythms and natural movements was exhilarating and pure fun. The deep and grainy voice that I gave Robben was quite funny for the teachers and probably quite captivating for the children. Some children believed that it was *my dog’s actual voice*. They could not fathom that I, Maya, their music therapist, spoke in such a voice. The nonsense stuff Robben was blabbering about was quite funny for me to invent, and even now, when I watch them in retrospect, these videos are hilarious.

As for the adults, the SPED teachers were quite thrilled with the idea of my dog videos. They listened to them and were happy to share the episodes with their classes’ WhatsApp groups. In contrast, I did not receive much feedback from the parents of most of the children. I suppose that some parents were unaware that the videos existed, while others were aware but were unavailable, preoccupied, or unwilling to watch them. Perhaps some parents believed this series was the school’s attempt to make their child happy and preoccupied, and they were content with that.

In contrast, amongst the children of the SPED 5th grade class, a few interesting reactions to Robben’s videos were noted. By the time episode #3 was sent out to the SPED teachers, 5th grader Larry (pseudonym) was so excited about the idea of a talking dog that he filmed his dog Luna and published an episode about her - talking in a funny ‘female puppy voice’ - for all his friends to watch. Dave (pseudonym), another SPED 5th grade class member, expressed his displeasure with Larry’s video, claiming that “this is Maya’s idea, and one shouldn’t plagiarize”. This sparked a fascinating, heated discussion in their class’s WhatsApp group, mediated by the SPED teacher, Olga, about “copying” someone’s ideas versus “being inspired” by them.

Dave owned a cat but seemed more fascinated by the footage of Robben than by the story of Pelle, the cat. When I asked him whether he could follow and understand Pelle’s storyline, I got the impression that Pelle’s story went unnoticed by Dave and did not leave any impression on him.

I know that some children watched only the beginning of the videos and lost interest shortly after that; others were not interested and did not follow any of the videos I sent. In addition, I believe that Robben’s Pandemic Adventures was mainly fun initially because of its novelty. As time progressed, the feedback from the teachers became scarcer, and I had a feeling that there was less enthusiasm or anticipation for new episodes.

However, there was one child whose interest and curiosity never faded. Yuri (pseudonym), another member of the same 5th grade as Dave and Larry, was that one exception, that sole child I hoped would hear my “pings”. According to Yuri, he watched the videos from beginning to end, listened carefully, and did not miss a beat. He was that one child who made the entire endeavor worthwhile for me. Yuri, who also owned a dog, sent me daily reminders not to forget to publish

another “Robben video”. He kept asking for more episodes, even when I felt my “creativity tank” was dwindling. He even drew a portrait of his dog Zana, for Robben to see. After the series gradually wrapped up, one last episode was filmed mainly for Yuri and sent only to him. In it, Robben talked directly to Yuri, praised his impressive drawing talent, and showed Yuri his paw, which lacked an opposing thumb. He explained to Yuri that he could not hold a marker or pencil without a thumb. Besides, he needed his hands to stand on. He summarized that while he couldn’t draw at all, it was wonderful that Yuri had a thumb and two free hands and that he could draw so beautifully. In this private message directed solely to Yuri, Robben’s letter to Yuri was of admiration, praise, and encouragement. He advised Yuri to pursue his truly incredible talent further and trust his inner strength.

4. Discussion: The Epilogue

“If we look at internal experiences, the past is no longer there, and the future has not yet come: there is only the present” [13].

What has this project taught me? What lessons have I learned from this endeavor? The answer to these questions can be summarized in three concentric circles.

In the innermost personal circle lies the creative process that kept me feeling active, productive, and alive. I felt sane, functioning, and focused on creating a project to keep me occupied for several weeks. I believe my project exemplifies a reality known to scientists for several decades: creativity and people’s sense of well-being are mutually related [14, 15]. Moreover, researchers have found an essential *causal* relationship in which engaging in a creative effort positively *affects* people’s mental health and sense of well-being [16-19] and, in some instances, can *predict* an improvement in one’s sense of well-being [20]. This finding is especially valid in times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic [21, 22]. Interestingly, besides the positive effect of hope and well-being that my creative endeavor had on myself, I can see how it may have inspired the awakening of creativity in others, as can be seen in Larry’s production of a video of his dog and in Yuri’s drawings that were sent to Robben. In fact, one inspirational feedback I received about my video series pertained to how such work can be used creatively. Further transmission of hope and well-being can be achieved, for instance, if children would be invited to not only receive the videos and watch them passively but to respond actively to the therapist’s art: engage in creative endeavors of their own and produce their own art (e.g., make videos, write, draw, etc.).

The second circle is the professional one. Despite the isolation we were in and despite being confined, my project was not confined at all. Sending a gift of stories, humor, caring, connection, and normalcy to my work community signified an attempt to break the unseen walls of isolation. It made me feel valuable and meaningful within the little community of my school. Naturally, as with any gift, some of the receivers enjoyed my gift of a dog who tells stories, while others did not.

In hindsight, from a professional stance, I can think of a few reasons why some children were excited and remained curious about Robben’s videos while others slowly lost interest. In effect, two separate storylines progressed in parallel: the dog’s story (visually seen in the videos) and the cat’s story (auditorily heard through Robben’s narration). Some children and adults enjoyed following both reports; some settled to follow only the dog; others perhaps focused more on the cat. Members of the audience who held the two stories together in their minds watched Robben eat salami or take a shower *and also* followed the developing storyline of Pelle’s athletics tournament

from episode to episode. These audience members were probably more engaged and likely to enjoy the experience. The two storylines may have enhanced one another to create a rich and exciting multi-sensory experience. In contrast, those who may have experienced the two stories as competing with one another for their attention and focus perhaps experienced the auditory message as weaker than the visual one (and vice versa) and maybe overpowered by it. This may explain why some people enjoyed my gift more than others.

Whatever their level of engagement with the videos, I believe that the children and adults who opened the videos and watched them received the gift of stories, which uplifted their spirits as it did mine. It seems like this connection conveyed a message that someone cared about them and provided them with something to look forward to daily. For Yuri, it saved the day.

This brings me to the third and outermost concentric circle, namely, the importance of stories and storytelling in general and specifically in times of crisis. There are myriad ways in which stories may help children during times of turmoil, and the COVID-19 pandemic was undoubtedly such a time. The use of literature entails many therapeutic benefits, including promoting children's reflective thinking and insight into both personal problems and universal challenges, encouraging catharsis through involvement in the plot, and identification with the protagonist who deals with similar issues [23]. Pulimeno et al. [24] explain that fairytales that are transmitted from one generation to the next reinforce the bonds between parents and children and are the parents' way to equip their children with "information, attitudes, and skills that could act as a kind of 'vaccination' against all kinds of threats to individual or collective health" [24]. In that way, fairytales provide an emotional "buffer" for children and support their intrapersonal emotional regulation and their collective regulation in groups by exposing them to emotionally laden imaginative situations and offering them tools to resolve them. Fairytales possess a few essential qualities, like being imaginary yet predictable and emotionally charged yet contained. These qualities may help children become aware of their feelings and learn how to self-regulate their emotions [25].

I believe Robben had a bit of a 'fairytales' magical touch because of his ability to talk. I hope that his stories - whether of himself or the cat Pelle - made a difference in my clients' emotional regulation and well-being and provided a buffer of sorts and an "emotional vaccination" during the first weeks of the pandemic.

5. Closing Reflections

We are living the pages of tomorrow's history books.

Time had passed. The lockdown lifted years ago, the pandemic subsided and faded into the pages of today's history books. The strange, crazy Spring of 2020, with all its challenges and difficulties, is now but a memory that we carry in our hearts. Yuri, Dave, and Larry graduated from our school long ago and moved on to middle school. For me, Robben's videos are now but a piece of the quilted fabric of my own history and lived experience of the first COVID-19 pandemic lockdown.

Presently, new pages in tomorrow's history books are written every day, and we experience them to the fullest in my country and worldwide. Robben's Adventures series has taught me to stay open and ready for when the right creative idea is born, and the opportunity to create presents itself. When it does, I shall be there.

Author Contributions

The author did all the research work of this study.

Competing Interests

The author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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