Mr. Potato Head, Healer

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In 2000, around the time other tourist destinations were undertaking similar efforts, Rhode Island announced a campaign to advertise our fair state with six-foot high decorated statues inspired by none other than Mr. Potato Head. The Mr. Potato Head Funny Face Kit was first distributed by the Hasbro toy company in 1952, after acquiring the rights from its creator, George Lerner of Brooklyn, NY. Of note, Hasbro, whose world headquarters are in Rhode Island, generously funded our state’s Hasbro Children’s Hospital in the 1990s.

Mr. Potato Head is iconic in these parts, even appearing on a fund-raising license plate. All the same, when news of the statewide Potato Head initiative was announced, some local cynics, myself included, groaned with embarrassment. “New York has its stallions, Boston its cows, and Rhode Island will have...Mr. Potato Heads?” As so often happens in medicine and life, these snide first reactions were premature, and impaired by snap judgment.

Before long, the statues began to appear around the state. Predictably, a Potato Head sporting a chef’s hat and carrying a pizza popped up in Federal Hill, while a sand-encrusted one holding a beach umbrella and a child’s swim tire showed up at the airport, advertising our beautiful beaches. Nearby, Vino Di-”vine,” adorned with vines, grape clusters, and red wine spills, enticed tourists to visit our vineyards (yes, Rhode Island has vineyards). There was a spring green one with brightly-colored peas, a knight in shining armor, a surfer, and another covered in red polka dots. Even the cynics had to admit it was fun to run into them in unexpected places and try to decipher the meaning of their decorations. At the height of the campaign, about 47 Potato Heads “sprouted” around the state, each decorated by a local artist.

Healing power of the Potato Heads

Despite my initial snarky reaction, I had to admit they were adorable. My true opinion of the Potato Head campaign, however, emerged from two patient stories. The first came from a young mother in my practice whose abusive boyfriend had abandoned her weeks before the birth of their son, leaving her to raise the child as a single mother, which she was doing extremely well. Four years later, she was just finding the courage to begin spending time with a young man who had taken a shine to her and her son. One scheme he devised to court them both was driving around Rhode Island to visit the Potato Heads. On their outings they found playgrounds, and ice
cream cones, and other shared adventures. The boy loved the Potato Heads, and over the course of that year and all those outings, they became a permanent threesome. They documented their travels in a photo album that included pictures of them with every one of the figures.

Meanwhile, “wickit fah away,” on the other side of the state – a distance of about 28 minutes by car – a mother and father were raising their three-year-old daughter with autism spectrum disorder. Along with her teachers and counselors they were searching for ways to help the silent little girl access language. One day, the parents and child happened upon a Potato Head, and the girl lit up. “This is Mr. Potato Head,” they told her. For days after she continued to ask for “Mr. Potato Head.” Following this spark, they too began a pilgrimage around the state to find all the Potato Heads and create a scrapbook of the figures. The child became entranced, even obsessed by these photos, spending literally hours every day flipping through the pages of her collection. Gradually, she began to speak about the pictures. Words and stories emerged for the first time. The parents attributed her discovery of language to her connection with the Potato Heads in that scrapbook.

The tourism campaign lasted about a year. A few Potato Heads were vandalized or required repairs and touch-ups. Eventually, all were sold or auctioned off to permanent homes, sent to storage, or relegated to the scrap heap. I still pass by the spring green Potato Head on a regular basis, and I think I know where the polka dot one resides. I’ll admit to feeling a bit wistful about their departure, noting that my cynicism vanished with them. But in their wake, the Potato Heads left a reminder that judgmental first impressions can impair one’s ability to see possibility, not to mention that healing can occur in the most unlikely places.

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**Disclosures**

The author reports no financial conflicts or disclosures. She obtained written permission from the parent of the first child to tell their story. She was not able to find the parents of the child in the second story and has modified personal details to protect their privacy, while conveying the spirit of their experience.

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Potato Head at the Day-O-Lite lighting company in Warwick. [ELIZABETH TOLL, MD]