

VOICES FROM THE PAST:
JOHN HOOD-WILLIAMS AND THE SANDTRAY
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In the 1920's Margaret Lowenfeld opened the doors of her clinic in London and developed the Lowenfeld World Technique. During the next few decades she trained child psychotherapists, lectured extensively and conducted clinical, observational research about children's sandplay and other play modalities. The book *Play in Childhood*, (available from the Association of Play Therapy in Fresno, California) is still one of the finest and candidly descriptive texts about sandplay and play therapy. During that time, a number of psychologists, psychotherapists, and educators came to study her techniques of child treatment. Each adopted the Lowenfeld World Technique to suit his/her ideology, and own style of research and clinical work.

John Hood-Williams, Lowenfeld's senior student, introduced Lowenfeld and her techniques in an unpublished manuscript that he shared with me in 1987. He had worked with me on my extensive sandplay research project in which I had validated some of Lowenfeld's theories and principles, while also discovering further complexities and differentiations in the nature and the evolution of human consciousness, the distinctly different realms of reality accessed during sandplay, and some new ways of effectively using the sandtray in clinical practice. John wrote:

"The toys are non-standard, being what can be bought in the shops, and a collection can be added to over the years. Ideally one tries to provide miniatures of everything that exists in the real world, but as a minimum there must be human figures, domestic and wild animals, transport, trees, bushes, fences, and these must be augmented by things like bricks, buckets, spades, tubing, funnels, and something like plastecine which can be used to make images not provided....

"The child is introduced to the World material as a way of communicating about the 'pictures he has in his head to do with his thoughts and feelings', and he then has free choice about what he will select from the range of toys and how he will use them in the tray. When he has finished making a 'World,' the therapist needs then to explore sensitively the meaning for the child of what he has made in the sandtray, both as a whole and in its component parts-- this is an integral part of the technique.

"In summary Lowenfeld came to believe that thinking and the need to make sense of experience were present from the beginning of life, but as words are not available yet as tools for thought, the infant thinks in images. This image-based thought is lawful, though its laws are not the same as those that govern verbal thinking. The most important characteristic of pre-verbal thought is the way it groups elements together...In pre-verbal thought, groupings are made on the basis of only one shared property, often in terms of sensation, feelings and perceptions as they are experienced subjectively ... the basis for the grouping may be: 'how do these things make me feel?' Margaret Lowenfeld called these agglutinations that result from this process 'clusters'...

"I have found that children welcome the World as a tool for communication, and seem to have a quite natural affinity for it. It is as if they instinctively recognize its possibilities for giving expression to their own imagery, and the images they produce when using it convey meaning in a way that is unique, vivid, immediate and personal, something hardly any child can do in language...

"Central was her concept of the nature of psychic energy...she used the term 'E'...The whole psyche-soma is energized by 'E'... it flows in three channels. The first of these is the physical channel--at the start of life it activates growth and development, later it finds expression in the musculature. The second is the emotional channel--the whole affective life. Lastly there is the intellectual channel--the whole thinking life. 'E,' like electricity, is neutral in and of itself, and like electricity cannot be known directly but only implied by its manifestations.

"In one of the analogies Margaret Lowenfeld would liken 'E' to a river which divided into three channels. A blockage in one channel can either produce a swampy bog in that area, or a stronger flow in other channels. Releasing a blockage in a channel can result in a steadier flow in that channel, and can relieve pressure in the other channels. The physical, emotional and intellectual functioning of the child forms an interrelated whole, where blockages in one area can produce difficulties in other areas. Conversely, undoing blockages in one area can relieve symptoms appearing in another. Unexpended 'E' produces tension and discomfort and often is experienced subjectively as a dangerously explosive pent-up feeling which is often symbolized by images of circular whirling and of resultant disasters."

John continues to talk about the communication between the child and the therapist in the play space: "In any communication there are always three elements--the person making the communication, the message itself, and the recipient of the communication.... In regards to the child something from his inner world is what he needs to communicate--and as inner worlds are largely private, personal and idiosyncratic while the symbol-systems needed to communicate about them are public and general, there

can never be a perfect fit between the inner world and the outer expression ... The message then has to be given form ... at best that will be a close approximation....

Finally, the message must be received and convey meaning to the other person, and this involves a creative act on the part of the recipient; he must create meaning for himself from the items of the message. He can only do this in as far as the items in the message chime with his own inner world, and the private meanings he attaches to these items ... so that the sense he makes of it all will always be somewhat different from the sense the sender of the message intended--at best quite close, at worst a total misunderstanding. To illustrate this, let us imagine that a child in therapy makes a breastlike mound in the sandtray with the toy figure of a man on a bicycle on top of it, said by him to be energetically bumping up and down. Somewhere 'inside' him is an image, and this is as close as he can get to expressing it at this moment with the material available.

The therapist must look at this image, must also be sensitive to the feelings that were expressed while it was being made, and must pay attention to what the child says about it. In this way he has received the message through as many channels as he can. He is then faced with trying to understand what it is that the child is trying to communicate. The sense that he makes of the event will depend on his whole personality, his training, his experience, preferred ways of conceptualizing and a host of similar factors. How he responds, whether it be silently within his own mind, or in terms of something he says or does, will depend on the totality of the factors that make up his approach."

John Hood-Williams, 1987