

Metaphor, Meaning and Movement

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Nickolas was a young child who lived in a wondrous time. Each day he awoke to a sky that was, in turn, warm and sunny or cloudy and moist fitting just what he needed for that particular day to help him in his work. You see, Nickolas had important work to do. Every day, as his mom and dad worked on building the walls of his home, making the rooms bigger, adding new rooms or reinforcing the outside walls of his home, he worked on building his own room within his home. With every day, he added new bricks to his room. Not only did his room become larger, but more beautiful. His dad helped him to make his bricks strong, to withstand the wind. His mom showed him just where to place the bricks so that he could easily move from his room to the rest of the house and so that the room took on a shape that fit him. It gave him room to include all his treasures and spaces to hide when he wanted to be alone. As he looked around his room, he could see everything that was important to him, the colors pleased his eyes, the walls felt textured and strong, it was warm with enough light for his eyes to see the plant that was growing in the corner. The one he had planted from seed that was now peeking out of the soil. He could smell the familiar smells of the moist soil, of the earth he had used to make the bricks and of his puppy waiting playfully for him. Outside his room, he could hear the familiar sounds of his family moving about as they did their daily work. Anytime he wanted, he could go out of his room into any other part of the house to join his family and play next to them while they worked or to help them in their work.

At night, when Nickolas lay in his bed waiting for sleep to come and cuddling his soft teddy bear as his warm puppy lay next to him, he would look out his windows and see a familiar sight. Once he had discovered a bright, sparkling star up high in the sky outside his window. He knew it would be there every night and he visited it each time he lay there. Sometimes he would make a wish on the star. Whether his wish came true or not, he knew he could always count on his star being there.

One day as Nickolas was playing while his dad worked, a strange thing happened. One of the bricks fell from the wall of their home. It was one from the outside wall. Nickolas watched his dad, expecting him to put it back into place and make it strong again, but his dad did not seem to notice. Later that day, while eating their dinner, a brick fell from the kitchen wall. This time, his mom noticed but did nothing to replace it. As time went on, more bricks tumbled. His parents did not seem interested in replacing them. Soon, more than one brick at a time was tumbling down. None of them were replaced. Well, at least he still had his room where the walls were strong.

As more and more bricks fell from the outside walls of his home and were not replaced, bricks began to fall from the walls of his room. Nickolas wondered what was happening. Why did his mom and dad not fix things and take pride in their work as they used to? In fact, it seemed that they were even taking bricks out of the walls. Why would they do that? It was all so confusing. He tried to replace the ones that fell from his walls, but it was so difficult to do alone. His walls looked strange because he didn't know how to make the bricks or to get them in the right way or in the right place. After awhile, his room no longer looked familiar. The colors became dull, the walls lost their texture and strength. The rain began to come in through the cracks. The plant began to die. The puppy began sleeping under the bed.

The only thing that seemed to be the same was the star that he saw every night. He wished very hard on the star to have his home become strong again. But it did not happen. Still, every night the star was there for him to see. It continued to shine and sparkle. The sun continued to

stream through his windows. At least he knew he could count on the star and the sun to be there every day. Sometimes they might be difficult to see because the clouds occasionally covered them, but he always knew they were there and he would see them again.

Then a terrible thing happened. Slowly, his dad began gathering up bricks that had fallen to the ground and hauling them away. Dad began building the walls of a new home somewhere far away. His mother began picking up bricks that had fallen into the house and all over the floor. She began to replace them in the walls. Then they began to fight over who would get which bricks. He could not stand it any more. He went into his room and went to bed. During the night, the bright light from the star awakened him. He lay there noticing how strong the light was that came from the star. He wondered why the walls in his home were no longer that strong. Suddenly though, he realized that even though the outside walls in his home were no longer strong, he could still make the walls in his room strong. He knew he could not count on his parents to help him now. He would have to do it himself. He began work on it the next morning. He struggled. It was tough to do it by himself. But soon he learned to make his bricks strong. He also learned how to line them up so that his walls were textured and strong. As he mastered the skills of building his own walls, he decided to try some different ways of building. He added curves, cubbies and window seats.

After awhile, he felt warm and secure within his own walls. He decided to reconnect the walls of his room with his mother's. He has begun to build a room within his dad's new home. Whether at his mom's house or dad's house though, he continues every night to find his star and take comfort in knowing that it will always be there above him in the sky no matter where he is. After all this, he was amazed one night when the star appeared to smile on him and sprinkle star dust over him as he drifted into sleep.

Just as the story above communicates an important message to children, so do children communicate important messages to adults each day in their play. Within their play, the struggles are embedded in metaphors and symbols. Because children have not developed the verbal nor cognitive skills necessary to process their struggles, they utilize their natural medium of play (Yavari, 1997). This modality enables them to experience their struggles in manageable form. The play composition puts it into a disguised format which removes it from their consciousness and into their unconscious so that the child is not overwhelmed by the emotionality associated with the entire picture. In this way, the child may approach parallel components of the issue one at a time. As she achieves resolution on one segment, she can utilize that resolution to assist her in approaching and working toward resolution with the next component. Thus, the child accumulates the resolution necessary to live with a situation that may be out of her immediate control. The fact that she may have to live within an environment that is destructive to her necessitates her being capable of arriving at a coping style that works for her within that environment. Children will adopt a style of living, thinking and behaving which accommodates their environment (Horton & Cruise, 1997). Through their play, they will arrive at some understanding of the situation and a means of coping. However, left alone, this understanding and coping will be generalized to the entire population and will not assist the child in functioning outside that pathogenic environment. Accepting and respecting the child's perceptions of her environment is the first step toward providing a therapeutic milieu for the child (Norton & Norton, 1997). Following that, offering the child another point of view, a mirror to the healthy aspects of the world becomes the role of the play therapist (Hoskins & Leseho, 1996). Understanding the metaphors and symbolism in the child's play becomes the task of the therapist (Norton & Norton, 1997). Achieving a healthy adjustment style for the child that functions both within and without the home environment is the goal of therapy (Kazdin, 1993).

In this process of play with a therapist, the child experiences her crisis in a secure and accepting environment and moves toward resolution. The resolution is also experiential and immediately becomes a part of the child's repertoire of behaviors and emotional responses and the basis of the child's understanding of the world. For example, in another situation which is often confronted by children, a child who has been sexually abused may characterize the situation as being one of a misuse of power. In the beginning of her therapy, she will be the powerful one in play, metaphorically perpetrating abuse on the therapist. This abuse may take the form of her being a police officer and handcuffing the therapist, throwing her into prison roughly, locking her up, telling her to attempt to escape then shooting the escapee and forcing her to return to prison where she is electrocuted. Following that, as the child experiences more empowerment around the issue, she may take the bop bag, pour bubble making liquid on it, put sand on top of that and rub it in the eyes, mouth and ears of the bop bag. This will be play tape recorded (in order to provide proof to others). As they play, she receives support from the therapist in the form of acceptance and empathy. This further empowers the child to approach the situation from the position of victim once again. This time, however, the child is empowered enough to stop the victimization. The play might proceed as follows: It is night and the family is sleeping quietly. A noise is heard. The child jumps up, finds the interloper, ties her up then takes her off to the police. Everyone is safe once again.

The movement is apparent in the play process as the child is assisted by the therapist in first allowing the child to express her anger over the incident. Next comes the recapitulation of the incident followed by the realization of the inappropriateness on the part of the perpetrator and the recognition of the extent and limitations of the child's abilities in prevention of further abuse. Without assistance from the play therapist and understanding of the metaphors within the play, a child will remain in the angry (or pre-anger) stage of response to abuse (Becker, et al, 1995).

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