

THIS ARTICLE FIRST APPEARED IN THE SEPTEMBER 1990 ISSUE OF THE APT NEWSLETTER. IT WAS THEN REPRINTED BY APT IN A DECADE OF APT NEWSLETTERS PART TWO 1987-1991

IT IS REPRINTED HERE WITH PERMISSION OF THE AUTHOR AND APT.

A CHILD-CENTERED VIEW OF CHILDREN

BY

GARRY L. LANDRETH

AS A GUEST EDITOR, I WANTED TO TAKE THIS OPPORTUNITY TO SHARE WITH YOU SOME OF MY VIEWS ABOUT CHILDREN. I DECIDED THAT ONE OF THE BEST WAY I COULD PERHAPS ACCOMPLISH THAT IS TO SHARE THE FOLLOWING FROM MY NEW BOOK, PLAY THERAPY: THE ART OF THE RELATIONSHIP, TO BE PUBLISHED BY ACCELERATED DEVELOPMENT PRESS.

ALTHOUGH SOME PEOPLE HAVE SAID SPACE IS THE LAST FRONTIER TO EXPLORE, CHILDHOOD MAY IN FACT BE OUR LAST FRONTIER. WE KNOW SO LITTLE ABOUT THE COMPLEX INTRICACIES OF CHILDHOOD AND ARE LIMITED IN OUR EFFORTS TO DISCOVER AND UNDERSTAND THE MEANINGS IN CHILDHOOD BECAUSE WE ARE FORCED TO ALLOW CHILDREN TO TEACH US. MANY ADULTS DON'T WANT TO BE TAUGHT BY CHILDREN, BUT WE CAN ONLY LEARN ABOUT CHILDREN FROM CHILDREN. CHILDREN BRING TO THE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE THERAPIST A RICH TAPESTRY OF EMOTIONAL POSSIBILITIES FROM WHICH THEY WEAVE THE INTRICACIES OF THEIR PERSONALITIES. THE DIRECTION THESE EMOTIONAL POSSIBILITIES TAKE IS AFFECTED BY THE PERSON OF THE THERAPIST, THE KINDS OF RESPONSES THE THERAPIST MAKE, AND WHAT CHILDREN SENSE IN THE THERAPIST.

TENETS FOR RELATING TO CHILDREN

THE PROCESS OF RELATING TO CHILDREN FROM A CHILD-CENTERED FRAME OF REFERENCE IS BASED ON THE FOLLOWING TENETS ABOUT CHILDREN WHICH ARE, FOR THE THERAPIST, THE FRAMEWORK FOR AN EXPERIENTIAL, SELF-PROJECTING ATTITUDE ABOUT CHILDREN. THE TENETS AREA:

- 1 CHILDREN ARE NOT MINIATURE ADULTS AND THE THERAPIST DOES NOT RESPOND TO THEM AS IF THEY WERE.
- 2 CHILDREN ARE PEOPLE. THEY ARE CAPABLE OF EXPERIENCING DEEP EMOTIONAL JOY AND PAIN.
- 3 CHILDREN ARE UNIQUE AND WORTHY OF RESPECT. THE THERAPIST PRIZES THE UNIQUENESS OF EACH CHILD AND RESPECTS THE PERSON THEY ARE.
- 4 CHILDREN ARE RESILIENT. CHILDREN POSSESS A TREMENDOUS CAPACITY TO OVERCOME OBSTACLES AND CIRCUMSTANCES IN THEIR LIVES.
- 5 CHILDREN HAVE AN INHERENT TENDENCY TOWARD GROWTH AND MATURITY. THEY POSSESS AN INNER INTUITIVE WISDOM.
- 6 CHILDREN ARE CAPABLE OF POSITIVE SELF-DIRECTION. THEY ARE CAPABLE OF DEALING WITH THEIR WORLDS IN CREATIVE WAYS.
- 7 CHILDREN'S NATURAL LANGUAGE IS PLAY AND THIS IS THE MEDIUM OF SELF-EXPRESSION WITH WHICH THEY ARE MOST COMFORTABLE.
- 8 CHILDREN HAVE THE RIGHT TO REMAIN SILENT. THE THERAPIST RESPECTS THE CHILD'S DECISION NOT TO TALK.
- 9 CHILDREN WILL TAKE THE THERAPEUTIC EXPERIENCE TO WHERE THEY NEED TO BE. THE

THERAPIST DOES NOT ATTEMPT TO DETERMINE WHERE OR HOW A CHILD SHOULD PLAY.

10 CHILDREN'S GROWTH CANNOT BE SPEEDED UP. THE THERAPIST RECOGNIZES THIS AND IS PATIENT WITH THE CHILD'S DEVELOPMENTAL PROCESS.

CHILDREN ARE PERSONS IN THEIR OWN RIGHT. THEY DO NOT BECOME PERSONS UPON THE ATTAINMENT OF SOME PREDETERMINED AGE OR AFTER HAVING MET CERTAIN CRITERIA. EACH CHILD IS A UNIQUE PERSONALITY AND THAT UNIQUENESS IS NOT DEPENDENT ON ANY SIGNIFICANT PERSON IN THEIR LIFE; NEITHER IS THE SIGNIFICANCE LIMITED TO A FUNCTION OF THEIR BEHAVIOR. THEREFORE, CHILDREN ARE WORTHY OF RESPECT BECAUSE THEY HAVE WORTH AND DIGNITY AS INDIVIDUALS. THEIR UNIQUENESS IS PRIZED AND APPRECIATED BY THE THERAPIST WHO RESPONDS TO THE CHILD AS A PERSON. SOME ADULTS REFER TO A CHILD AS "IT" AS THOUGH REFERRING TO SOME INANIMATE OBJECT. THAT IS ALWAYS DISTURBING. CHILDREN ARE PEOPLE. THEY DO NOT HAVE TO EARN THAT DISTINCTION.

THE CHILD IS NOT AN OBJECT FOR STUDY BUT RATHER A PERSON TO BE KNOWN IN THE DYNAMICS OF THE MOMENT. THE CHILD STANDING BEFORE THE THERAPIST IN THE PLAYROOM IS NOT A PROBLEM TO BE ANALYZED BUT A WHOLE PERSON TO BE RELATED TO AND UNDERSTOOD. CHILDREN, INDEED ALL PERSONS, HAVE A LONGING TO BE HEARD, TO BE RECOGNIZED AS A PERSON OF VALUE. FOR SOME CHILDREN, IT IS AS THOUGH THEY GO THROUGH THEIR LIVES DAY AFTER DAY TAPPING OUT THEIR MESSAGE, "HEY, UP THERE! DOES ANYONE HEAR ME? DOES ANYONE SEE ME? DOES ANYONE CARE THAT NO ONE SEEMS TO CARE ABOUT ME? MY HEART ACHES. DO YOU SEE IT? DO YOU CARE?" AND DAY AFTER DAY ADULTS IN THEIR LIVES IGNORE THESE EMOTIONAL MESSAGES. IN PLAY THERAPY, THOUGH,

CHILDREN ARE NOTICED, LISTENED TO, HEARD, RESPONDED TO, AND ALLOWED TO CHART THEIR OWN LIVES. THIS IS A FREEING PROCESS FOR CHILDREN WHICH ALLOWS THEM TO DRAW ON THEIR INNER RESOURCES FOR GROWTH AND SELF-DIRECTION. THE PERMISSIVENESS EXPERIENCED IN THE PLAYROOM ALLOWS CHILDREN TO EXPRESS THE FULLNESS OF THEIR PERSONALITIES.

CHILDREN ARE RESILIENT

CHILDREN POSSESS AN INNER STRENGTH AND ARE RESILIENT. THEY BOUNCE BACK. ATTEMPTING TO EXPLAIN THAT THEY ARE A PRODUCT OF THEIR HOME ENVIRONMENT SEEMS TO BE FAR TOO SIMPLISTIC AND DOES NOT ACCOUNT FOR THE DIFFERENCES AND VARIABILITY IN CHILDREN RAISED IN THE SAME ENVIRONMENT. HOW DO WE ACCOUNT FOR SOME CHILDREN WHO SEEM INVULNERABLE TO WHAT WOULD APPEAR TO BE DEVASTATING CIRCUMSTANCES IN THEIR LIVES? SOME CHILDREN EXPERIENCE REGULAR BEATINGS BY UNLOVING AND INSENSITIVE PARENTS BUT ARE NOT BEATEN DOWN PSYCHOLOGICALLY IN THE PROCESS. SOME CHILDREN ARE REARED IN POVERTY BUT GROW UP RICH IN SPIRIT AND OUTLOOK ON LIFE. SOME CHILDREN HAVE ALCOHOLIC PARENTS BUT UNLIKE SO CALLED CO-DEPENDENT BROTHERS AND SISTERS ARE THEMSELVES INDEPENDENT AND WELL ADJUSTED. SOME CHILDREN ARE REARED BY EMOTIONALLY DISTURBED PARENTS AND ARE THEMSELVES QUITE SUCCESSFUL AND WELL-ADJUSTED AS TEENAGERS AND ADULTS. A POSSIBLE EXPLANATION SEEMS TO BE IN THE INTEGRATION THAT HAS OCCURRED WITHIN INDIVIDUALS AS THEY HAVE INTERACTED WITH THEIR ENVIRONMENT. SUCH EXAMPLES EMPHASIZE THE CAPACITY AND STRIVING OF THE HUMAN ORGANISM TO GROW TOWARD FULFILLMENT AND MATURITY EVEN IN THE MIDST OF ADVERSE CIRCUMSTANCES.

SIGNIFICANT VARIABLES WHICH RESEARCHERS HAVE SUGGESTED AS CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO MAKING SOME CHILDREN INVULNERABLE ARE HIGH SELF-REGARD, SELF-CONTROL, INNER MOTIVATION, AND A PERSONAL SENSE OF IDENTITY. THESE CHILDREN HAVE CONFIDENCE IN THEMSELVES. THEY FEEL CAPABLE OF EXERTING CONTROL OVER THEIR ENVIRONMENT AND ARE GOAL-ORIENTED. RESEARCHERS HAVE FOUND THAT THE PARENTS OF SUCH CHILDREN HAVE ALLOWED THEM CONSIDERABLE SELF-DIRECTION (SEGAL AND YAHRAES, 1979) THESE FINDINGS ECHO THE DYNAMICS AND PROCESS OF THE PLAY THERAPY RELATIONSHIP AS EXPERIENCED BY CHILDREN.

WHEN I THINK OF RESILIENT CHILDREN, I AM REMINDED OF EIGHTEEN MONTH OLD JESSICA MCCLURE WHO FELL DOWN AN ABANDONED WELL SHAFT IN WEST TEXAS AND CAPTURED THE ATTENTION OF PEOPLE ALL AROUND THE WORLD. WHAT A HORRIBLE AND TERRIFYING EXPERIENCE FOR A SMALL CHILD, SURELY AS FRIGHTENING AS ANYTHING AN ADULT COULD POSSIBLY EXPERIENCE. SHE WAS STUCK IN THAT SMALL SHAFT FOR ALMOST TWO WHOLE DAYS WHO NO ONE TO TALK TO HER, NO ONE TO TOUCH HER, NO ONE TO COMFORT HER. THERE WAS NO WAY FOR HER TO KNOW WHERE SHE WAS OR WHAT HAD HAPPENED TO HER. WHEN RESCUE WORKERS FIRST MADE CONTACT WITH HER AFTER SHE HAD BEEN WEDGED INTO THAT DARK SHAFT AND ALL ALONE FOR FORTY-SIX HOURS, THEY HEARD THIS TINY LITTLE TODDLER SINGING SOFTLY TO HERSELF. WHAT A REMARKABLE DEMONSTRATION OF THE INNER NATURAL MOTIVATION OF CHILDREN TO COMFORT AND TAKE CARE OF THEMSELVES. WE ADULTS ARE NOT WISE ENOUGH TO KNOW THE CAPACITY AND POTENTIAL OF CHILDREN. OUR VIEW OF CHILDREN IS TYPICALLY MUCH TOO NARROW AND RESTRICTIVE. SOME ADULTS WANT TO LIMIT CHILDREN TO THEIR FINITE UNDERSTANDING. THE CAPACITY OF THE HUMAN ORGANISM

SURPASSES OUR LEVEL OF UNDERSTANDING.

ALL CHILDREN SHOULD EXPERIENCE SOME JOY IN THEIR LIFE EVERY SINGLE DAY AND THIS SHOULD BE THE GOAL OF ALL ADULTS WHO INTERACT WITH CHILDREN ON A REGULAR BASIS. CHILDREN ARE DEPRIVED OF JOY WHEN THEY ARE RUSED TO COMPLETE TASKS AND HURRIED TO GROW UP. THERE SHOULD BE PLACES OF CALMNESS AND PATIENCE IN ALL CHILDREN'S LIVES; FOR IN THE MIDST OF CALMNESS AND PATIENCE, CHILDREN CAN DISCOVER AND TEST THEIR INNER RESOURCES. ADULTS MUST BE VERY CAREFUL THAT THEY DO NOT TAKE ADVANTAGE OF CHILDREN'S TRUST. ADULTS MUST BE VERY SENSITIVE TO THE INNER EXPERIENCING OF CHILDREN.

NORMALLY, CHILDREN HAVE FUN. THEY ARE EXUBERANT. WHEN PROVIDED WITH OPPORTUNITIES TO DO SO, CHILDREN APPROACH LIFE WITH EXCITEMENT, OPENNESS AND WONDER. CHILDREN DO NOT HOLD ONTO YESTERDAYS. THE WORLD OF THE CHILD IS NOW. WE CANNOT SAY TO CHILDREN "WAIT" BECAUSE THEIR WORLD IS A WORLD OF EXPERIENCING NOW. THE WORLD OF THE CHILD IS A WORLD OF SLOW AMPLY PUNCTUATED WITH WHIRLWIND ACTIVITY. CHILDREN APPRECIATE SIMPLE THINGS. THEY DO NOT TRY TO MAKE THINGS MORE COMPLEX. CHILDREN ARE CONSTANTLY GROWING AND CHANGING INWARDLY AND OUTWARDLY AND THIS DYNAMIC PROCESS MUST BE MATCHED WITH AN EQUALLY DYNAMIC THERAPEUTIC APPROACH SUCH AS THAT FOUND IN PLAY THERAPY

THE CHILD'S HOUR.

JUST WHAT IS THAT, REALLY, THE CHILD'S HOUR? IT IS ONE OF THOSE RARE RELATIONSHIPS WHERE THE CHILD DIRECTS HIMSELF OR HERSELF, A TIME WHEN SHE OR HE DETERMINES HOW THE TIME WILL BE USED. THIS IS A SPECIAL TIME BELONGING TO THE CHILD TO DO WITH

IN ACCORDANCE WITH HIS OR HER WISHES, TO MAKE OF AS SHE OR HE CHOOSES. SHE CAN BE JUST AS SLOW AS SHE WANTS, INCH ALONG, AND NO ONE SAYS, "HURRY UP." HE CAN BE GRUMPY, ACT GRUMPY, LOOK GRUMPY, AND NO ONE SAYS, "BE HAPPY." SHE CAN DO NOTHING, ACCOMPLISH NOTHING, AND NO ONE SAYS, "GET BUSY. DO SOMETHING." HE CAN BE LOUD, NOISY, BANG THINGS TOGETHER AND NO ONE SAYS, "BE QUIET." SHE CAN BE SILLY, GIGGLE, LAUGH RIGHT OUT LOUD, AND NO ONE SAYS, "ACT YOUR AGE." HE CAN BE SMALL, TINY, SUCK ON THE BOTTLE AND NO ONE SAYS, "YOU'RE TOO BIG FOR THAT." SHE CAN USE GLUE, SCISSORS, PASTE, MAKE A SPACE SHIP, AND NO ONE SAYS, "YOU'RE TOO LITTLE TO DO THAT." THIS IS AN EXTRAORDINARY, SINGULARLY UNCOMMON TIME, PLACE, RELATIONSHIP WHEN THE CHILD CAN BE, EXPERIENCE, AND EXPRESS ALL SHE IS AT THE MOMENT AND BE ACCEPTED FULLY. THAT MAKE A CHILDREN'S HOUR.

REFERENCE

SEGAL, H. & YAHRAES, H. (1979). A CHILD'S JOURNEY: FORCES THAT SHAPE THE LIVES OF OUR YOUNG. NEW YORK: MCGRAW-HILL