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## **FEATURE ARTICLE**

### **THE LEGACY OF MARGARET LOWENFELD**

#### **THE LOWENFELD WORLD TECHNIQUE AND LOWENFELD SANDPLAY**

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MARGARET LOWENFELD, MD, DEVELOPED **THE LOWENFELD WORLD TECHNIQUE** IN THE 1920'S IN LONDON. IT BECAME KNOWN AS WELT SPIEL (GERMAN FOR WORLDPLAY), SANDTRAY THERAPY, WORLD PLAY, SANDPLAY, SANDBOX PLAY, SANDTRAY-WORLDPLAY AND BY OTHER NAMES DEPENDING ON THE THEORY AND METHOD OF THE PERSON USING IT. SHE FOUNDED THE CHILD INSTITUTE. LOWENFELD, A CHILD PSYCHIATRIST, OFFERED AN ALTERNATIVE TO FREUDIAN, KLEINIAN AND JUNGIAN METHODS OF PSYCHOTHERAPY. SHE WAS A CONTEMPORARY OF ANNA FREUD, MELANIE KLEIN, D.W. WINNICOTT, AND C.G. JUNG. HER EFFORTS WERE PRIMARILY FOCUSED ON WORKING WITH CHILDREN AS SHE APPRECIATED THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CHILDREN'S PLAY.

HER BOOK, **PLAY IN CHILDHOOD**, USED THE CASEWORK OF 299 CHILDREN WHO HAD BEEN SEEN AT HER LONDON CLINIC. PLAY FOR LOWENFELD IS A BODILY ACTIVITY, A REPETITION OF EXPERIENCE, A DEMONSTRATION OF A FANTASY, A REALIZATION OF ENVIRONMENT, A PREPARATION FOR LIFE, A WAY OF BEING IN GROUP AND A WAY OF SEEING THE HUMOR IN LIFE. PLAY IS THE CHILD'S NATURAL IDIOM; PLAY IS THE NATURAL LANGUAGE OF THE

CHILD. IN ORDER TO COMMUNICATE WITH CHILDREN, IT IS BEST TO LET THEM PLAY. WHEN SHE BECAME INTERESTED IN NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION SHE DISCOVERED THAT BOTH **THE NON-VERBAL THINKING PROCESS AND THE NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION PROCESS** ARE READILY ENHANCED BY PLAY.

MARGARET LOWENFELD WAS INFLUENCED BY THE PHILOSOPHER R.G. COLLINGWOOD WHO INSISTED THAT THE PRESUPPOSITIONS OF THE OBSERVING SCIENTIST INFLUENCE WHAT HE/SHE SEES (INTERPRETS) OR DOES NOT SEE (INTERPRET). THUS, DR. LOWENFELD BECAME INTERESTED IN **THE UNIQUELY INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCES** OF EACH CHILD AND FELT COMPELLED TO LEAVE BEHIND THE A-PRIOR ASSUMPTIONS AND GENERALIZATIONS ABOUT HUMAN NATURE AND CHARACTER THAT WERE BEING PROPOSED BY PSYCHOANALYTIC-AND ANALYTIC PSYCHIATRY. SHE WAS INTERESTED IN THIS TRIAD: THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE MIND TO THE BODY, THE RELATIONSHIP OF STATES OF MIND AND BODY TO THE ENVIRONMENT AND THE EFFECT OF THE ENVIRONMENT ON MENTAL AND PHYSICAL STATES. THIS LED TO THE HOLISTIC CHILD CENTERED TEAM APPROACH THAT WAS PRACTICED AT HER CLINIC.

SHE WANTED TO GIVE THE CHILDREN THE OPPORTUNITY TO "ORGANIZE" AND "MAKE SENSE" OF THEIR OWN EXPERIENCES AS WELL AS TO WORK OUT THEIR EMOTIONAL DIFFICULTIES: **PLAY IS AN EMOTIONAL AND A MENTAL PROCESS**. SHE STRESSED UNDERSTANDING THE "CHILD MEANING" FOR A PLAY, RATHER THAN INTERPRETING CHILD'S PLAY ACCORDING TO A PARTICULAR SYMBOLIC, PSYCHOLOGICAL SYSTEM OF THOUGHT. SHE FELT THAT PSYCHOANALYTIC INTERPRETATIONS TO CHILDREN ABOUT THEIR PLAY CREATE "A VERY STRONG EXPLOSIVE TO THE CHILD'S MIND", WHICH MOST LIKELY INFLUENCED JUNGIAN ANALYST DORA KALFF TO INSIST THAT HER SANDPLAY THERAPIST GIVE NO "VERBALIZED" INTERPRETA-

TION TO CLIENT'S SANDPLAY DURING THERAPEUTIC SESSIONS.

THE CHILD'S PARTICULAR POINT OF VIEW AS EXPRESSED IN CURRENT PLAY, ACTION AND LANGUAGE, RATHER THAN THE THERAPIST'S STORY OF THE PLAY, WAS THE FOCUS OF HER ATTENTION. SHE MINIMIZED THE TRANSFERENCE RELATIONSHIP TO THE THERAPIST WHO BECAME A TRUSTED ELDER. SHE MAXIMIZED THE CHILD'S TRANSFERENCE AND INVOLVEMENT WITH HIS/HER OWN PLAY, WHICH COULD BE UNCONDITIONALLY RECEIVED BY **THE TRUSTWORTHY, SAFE THERAPIST**. PLAY REFLECTS THE CHILD'S PERSONAL "INNER VISION".

MARGARET LOWENFELD NOTICED THE INHERENT CAPACITIES AND GIFTS OF CHILDREN, INCLUDING THEIR CAPACITY TO CARE FOR THEMSELVES AND TO SURVIVE UNDER ADVERSE CONDITIONS SUCH AS WAR. SHE SAW TROUBLESOME CHILDREN AS "REBELS" RATHER THAN AS "DEVIANTS" OR "SOCIAL FAILURES". SHE OFTEN FEARED THAT PSYCHOTHERAPISTS WERE IN THE BUSINESS OF CREATING "BORING" CHILDREN, WHICH SHE CONSIDERED DETRIMENTAL TO THE CHILD, SOCIETY AND THE EVOLUTION OF CULTURE. TO FOSTER THE EXPRESSION OF CHILDREN'S INNATE CAPACITIES, DR. LOWENFELD CREATED A THERAPEUTIC ENVIRONMENT THAT STRESSED **FREE EXPRESSION AND SAFE EXPERIMENTATION** USING MANY DIVERSE TOOLS FOR PLAY, INCLUDING PLAY WITH SAND, WATER, MINIATURES, A CONTAINER, AND ADJUNCT TOOLS.

IT IS PRIMARILY DURING THE PROCESS OF PLAYING THAT THE CHILD CONNECTS TO HIS/HER INNATE CAPACITIES FOR GROWTH AND HEALING. LOWENFELD HAD LEARNED FROM HER DIFFICULT WAR EXPERIENCES IN POLAND THAT WHEN CHILDREN ACTUALLY HAVE THE TOOLS AND THE OPPORTUNITY FOR PLAY OUTSIDE THE CLINICAL SETTING, MANY ARE ABLE TO HEAL AND MANAGE THE DIFFICULTIES OF THEIR LIFE. CHILDREN'S GROWTH AND COPING MECHANISMS ARE COMPROMISED

WHEN THEY ARE DIVORCED FROM OPPORTUNITIES TO PLAY. DIFFICULTIES ARE CREATED WHEN THEY ARE NEITHER ABLE TO MASTER THEIR EMOTIONAL RESPONSE TO THE SITUATION, OR MAKE SENSE OF THEIR LIFE'S EXPERIENCES.

LOWENFELD, BEING SUPPORTIVE OF HER FRIEND MARGARET MEAD'S ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDIES, WAS QUITE CLEAR THAT **CHILDREN LIVE AND DEVELOP WITHIN A CULTURAL CONTEXT**; THE CHILD'S SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT NEEDS TO BE TAKEN AS MUCH INTO CONSIDERATION AS THE CHILD'S INNER WORLD. EACH CHILD NEEDS TO RECEIVE MEANING FROM ITS CULTURE. EACH CHILD NEEDS TO OFFER HIS/HER MEANINGS AS A GIFT TO CULTURE. DR. LOWENFELD APPLIED HER CONCEPTS OF THE DEVELOPMENTAL INTERDEPENDENCE BETWEEN PEOPLE AND THEIR CULTURE WHEN SHE CONSULTED WITH THE BRITISH EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM. SHE FOSTERED THE CREATION OF A PSYCHOLOGICALLY SOUND EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT THAT ALLOWED FOR CROSS-FERTILIZATION BETWEEN THE ELDERS WHO CARRY THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE CULTURE AND THE CHILD WHO CARRIES HIS/HER OWN INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENTIAL MEANINGS.

#### **TODAY'S CHALLENGE:**

WHEN APPLYING LOWENFELD OBSERVATIONS TO OUR OWN TIME, I AM STRUCK BY HOW MANY OF OUR UNFORTUNATE, UNHAPPY AND DIFFICULT CHILDREN ARE VICTIMS OF A NEGLECTFUL SOCIETY WHOSE ELDERS FOCUS ON END RESULTS RATHER THAN SUPPORTING THE PROCESS AND THE CONDITIONS THAT ENCOURAGE OPTIMAL GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF OUR CHILDREN. TIME AND MONEY MANAGEMENT CURB THE RESOURCES AND THE PATIENCE WE WILLINGLY DEVOTE TO THE TRANSMISSION OF CULTURAL RICHES TO ALL OF OUR CHILDREN. SO OFTEN, WE HAVE NEITHER THE TIME NOR THE PATIENCE TO REVEAL OUR EXISTENTIAL EXPERIENCES OF LIFE, SOCIETY, AND INDIVIDUALITY TO OUR YOUTH OR TO BE

CURIOUS ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCES. AS WE ENTER THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY, IS IT NOT SAD THAT WE STILL HAVE LEARNED SO LITTLE?

THE SANDTRAY, WHICH LOWENFELD'S CHILDREN CALLED THE "WORLD", IS A PLACE WHERE THE INNER WORLD OF THE CHILD BECOMES VISIBLE IN THE OUTSIDE WORLD TO A TRUSTWORTHY, RECEPTIVE ADULT. THE CHILD'S EXPERIENCES CAN BE READILY SHARED. EQUALLY SO, AS THE EXPERIENCES OF JOHN HOOD-WILLIAMS (SUCCESSOR TO DR LOWENFELD) AND THE METHODS OF SANDTRAY-WORLDPLAY SHOW, THE PLAY IN THE SANDTRAY ALSO ALLOWS ADULTS TO SHARE THEIR INNER WORLD OF KNOWING WITH THE NATURALLY RECEPTIVE CHILD. IT IS TIME THAT THE "WORLD APPARATUS" BE INTEGRATED INTO THE FAMILY ROOM AND THE CLASSROOM, SO CHILDREN MAY NOT ONLY BRING FORTH THEIR POINTS OF VIEW BUT ALSO EXPERIENCE THE INNER POINTS OF VIEW OF THOSE ADULTS WHO ARE ABLE TO PLAY IN THE SANDTRAY IN THEIR PRESENCE.

#### **BIBLIOGRAPHY AND RESOURCES:**

SOME OF THESE MATERIALS ARE AVAILABLE AT THE IAPT CATALOG BOOKSTORE, CALL 559-252-2278 OR SEE VISIT THE IAPT WEB-SITE AT IAPT.ORG.

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