



## GROUP PLAY THERAPY WITH ADULTS

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### Introduction

The first time I experienced play therapy was as a graduate student participating in a course on Art Therapy for children. After only 20 minutes of playing with blocks it became apparent that I had played out some very important issues in my life. The play was spontaneous and intuitive, and the recognition of what I had done came only after I sat back and looked at it. This experience left a strong impression on me.

As I examined what had happened to me in the process of play, I remembered what C. G. Jung (1965) wrote about his experience of deep disorientation and inner uncertainty after he had parted ways with Freud. He described how in his search to find his own footing, he first turned to his dreams, as he had done before. He had significant dreams and fantasies during that time, but saw that the dreams could not help him get over his feeling of disorientation. He finally said to himself, "Since I know nothing at all, I shall simply do whatever occurs to me." (p. 173).

The first thing that came to the surface for him were childhood memories of "playing passionately with building blocks", memories which were accompanied by a good deal of emotion (Jung, 1965, p. 173). He said to himself, "There is still life in these things. The small boy is still around, and possesses a creative life which I lack. But how can I make my way to it?" (Jung, 1965, p. 174).

He then described how he gathered stones and spent time every day with his building game. He experienced how "in the course of this activity my thoughts clarified, and I was able to grasp the fanta-

sies whose presence in myself I dimly felt" (Jung, 1965, p. 174).

He discovered in his building game "that play did not necessarily lead down the slope of memory to childishness, but rather led directly to the unfinished business of childhood" (Stewart, 1981, p. 32). Jung (1965) had the wisdom and courage to return to his childhood play which was the beginning of his own myth.

That is what I had experienced in my play session, play, "as the dynamic aspect of fantasy, providing the function of equilibration between consciousness and unconsciousness" (Stewart, 1981, p. 30). The important recognition for me was that I as an adult could once again immerse myself in child's play with the same seriousness as a child at play. Louis H. Stewart (1981) states that through this kind of adult playing, "The adult revives lost memories, releases unconscious fantasies, and in the course of time, constellates the images of reconciliation and wholeness of the individuation process" (Stewart, 1981, p. 36).

The importance of play in the search for self has been recognized by others. For instance, D. Winnicott (1971) found that "It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self" (p. 54). Winnicott (1971) not only recognized the importance of play for the patient in a therapeutic relationship, but stated that psychotherapy is done in the overlap of the two play areas, that of the patient and that of the therapist. If the therapist cannot play, then he or she is not suitable for the work. If the patient cannot play, then something needs to be done

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to enable the patient to play, after which psychotherapy may begin. The reason why playing is essential is that it is in playing that the patient is being creative.

Play therapy has long been established as a very effective therapy for children and much has been written about it. Although the young child is unable to verbalize fears, family conflicts and anxieties, play provides a symbolic language that makes communication possible. As an art therapist I am very much aware of nonverbal communications. Just as art, music, and movement touch knowledge that is outside of our conscious awareness, so does play. Sandplay, as used primarily by Jungian therapists, comes closest to the play that I present here. In a sand tray a miniature world is created, symbolizing the person's inner experience. It is an individual activity witnessed and processed by a therapist. In the play therapy I will describe, the play happens in a group setting where the individual play and the group interaction provide both the "picture of the individual's inner scene" and the possibility for change as enacted with others.

I was working at the time on the psychiatric unit of a small private midwestern hospital. The group of adult patients with whom I used play therapy were mostly going through a depression or stress due to a life crisis. They came from all walks of life.

My use of play therapy began with one of my patients, a tall, shy man, who had been with me in art therapy for several weeks. His recurring images were of strong, immobile mountains with sharp snow-capped peaks, with soft floating clouds playing around those peaks. When he was asked to draw the interaction of the mountains and clouds, the clouds would produce thunderstorms behind the mountain, not affecting it at all. This might have been seen as great strength and also rigidity. He saw it as not being involved, and talked about how women in particular "did things to him" that he had no control over. His body posture too was rigid. Something was holding him back from actively entering into the process of living. He was very serious and did not know how to play.

At this point in our work together I remembered my play session. I sensed that this could be of help to him and he agreed to give it a try. We sat on the floor together and emptied out a big box of colorful blocks of many shapes and sizes. He picked up four golden, cylindrical pillars, held them in his hands for a while and then built a box around them. This was a closed tight structure. The pillars were now invisible. I commented: "All this beautiful gold and no way to get to it."

He tried to make openings, but closed them up quickly when the structure threatened to collapse. His facial expression was one of helplessness. The pillars, which I saw as symbolic of his goodness, self worth and life forces, were blocked in very much the same way as he was himself in life.

I then suggested that we play blockhead, a very fast game in which players take turns piling one block on top of the other, without knocking the structure over. The blocks are all of different shapes. The trick is to place your block in such a precarious way that the opponent's next block will topple the whole structure.

We played this for a while. We laughed a lot, very much like two children having carefree fun. Then I invited him again to play on his own. This time he used the golden cylindrical blocks as pillars for an open palace-like building. They were both visible and functional and important in holding up his building. He looked up at me and smiled. There was no need for words. We both knew that something had changed in him. He left the session looking loose and more at ease. What happened to him after he left the hospital I don't know. All I can say is that he spontaneously played out a new option.

This is how I started to use play therapy at the hospital. Because most of the therapy on our unit was done in groups, I decided to try it in that context. Every new play session was a unique and wonderful experience. Much of what happens in play therapy creates itself in the interaction of the participants with the materials, each other and the therapist. I never cease to be amazed at the symbolic expression of the unconscious revealed through the play forms. I will next describe one such group play session in detail so as to share this process with you.

### The Group in Action

The five women and one man who came to the play session had been together in an intensive inpatient unit for at least a week. They had worked in art and music therapy daily, in occupational and recreational therapy and in talk groups. They had all shared many very personal issues and supported each other in their efforts to make significant changes in their lives. At the end of the week I invited them to a play session. I emptied boxes of different shaped blocks, little animals, people, and toy furniture in the middle of the floor and asked them to sit around the toys and do whatever they wanted.

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