

I Just Want Somebody to Play with: How early play has informed me as a therapist

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Bonhomme, bonhomme sais-tu jouer, bonhomme, bonhomme sais-tu jouer? Hey, good fellow, do you know how to play? So goes one of the songs I used to sing along in the car with my father and my sister, who are both deceased. They were my original playmates. I woke up the other day and while lying in my bed feeling discontent, my mind foggy, I searched through my usual mental dictionary for why I was feeling this way. I surprised myself by saying out loud and clearly: "I just want somebody to play with".

From the time I was born, my father would walk down the dark hallway with me in his arms singing me songs that had funny sounds in them to stop me from crying. When it came to play, his imagination was limitless. He could be an elephant swinging me by his trunk (his arm) to circus music on the record player, or we would listen to a marching band and march like soldiers in our pyjamas over beds and chests of drawers like that was a normal thing to do. My all time favourite was when he would teach my sister and I the jitter bug and swing us between his legs and over his shoulders and twirl us like tops, always making us look like we were the stars. He taught us how to skate pushing kitchen chairs around the ice. Those were the physical games. The mental games for example involved guessing the heads of states of every country it seemed imaginable, and their capitals. Card games like Crazy Eights got more and more complicated as the years went by with the addition of more rules and 'penalties', the kind that made the game last for hours.

My mother's thing was scavenger hunts. Every year she would get all the kids on our street to find items like a 1945 telephone book or a guppy. She did her research well and with all the neighbours involved she collected unusual items to put on those lists. Once a year she would organize a masquerade party for us with plenty of prizes for costumes and when I was six years old, she started an annual Oscar bash allowing me to stay up till the end eating chocolate whippets. She was also renowned for her election night parties where you had to bring your own home-made signs for the candidate of your choice. She would set up the living room with ladders so we could pretend to sit on bleachers to cheer as loudly as you could for your man. At every get together with the extended family, she would organize a game of Jeopardy. At least 20 people would have clickers and every time someone thought they had the right answer they would advance at full speed towards the moderator clicking right in the poor person's face. At any given time, at least 12 people thought they had the answer and would click away.

My sister and I were the queens of make-believe. We would play together all day and well into the evening because we shared a bedroom. We would whisper making up word games like trying to come up with the names of all the fruits that started with a certain letter. Sometimes we were like psychics trying to guess what the other was thinking. We were always making up games. During the day we were secretaries, dentists, doctors, patients, nuns, teachers, models, movie stars, girlfriend and boyfriend, with a different script every time. We played a million tricks on the telephone including phoning the operator to get Allan Ladd's phone number in Hollywood. I could go on forever; it feels like we played so much.

The tradition of play has continued in the third generation. I know I was an excellent playmate for my daughter. We invented our own games and songs and read many books together.

As I was experiencing this flood of memories, I pondered what all this playing had given me. My family was my first culture and play was valued and upheld without fanfare really: the need for play, the love of play was always there, just under the skin, ready to erupt.

When we play with someone we have to come outside of ourselves. When alone, we hold our own imagination, but in play we have to bring it out to meet someone else's imagination and from there, in the middle field we start to dialogue around accommodation and adjustment of that field. Our imagination is rooted in both our world reality in terms of every day events and also in our subjective reality which can involve fantasy. When we fantasize, we sometimes are protecting ourselves and giving ourselves a means to try to figure out and heal our spirit and our wounded self. So when we play as children this can be what we are taking out of ourselves to bring to someone else's imagination (subjective world). In most children there is an innate trust to play with a peer and if lucky enough with a close adult.

My sister and I learned to know each other through the perspective of imagination games, by dialoguing easily from one's imagination to another. It was a way of sharing our conscious and unconscious landscape, our fears, and our dreams for the future in the subtlest of ways. And best of all it was for our health because it was our way of unconsciously figuring out and dealing with places within ourselves that were not seen and that could not be emotionally carried by each other and our parents.

It truly was an exploration of our own subjective world as well as a peek at the other's subjective world. Could this have given us a deeper understanding of each other? In other words was this a way of making an empathic inquiry into each other's soul (Buirski and Haglund, 2001, p.50)?

When my sister and I pretended to be teacher and student (interchangeably) in the hallway of our homes with makeshift desks and papers and pencils, how much information were we exchanging with one another? I remember for a fact that when I was the teacher I was exploring the difference between a compassionate and punishing response to my student. I remember the exploration of what was a rational or an irrational response. And of course I remember well the

feeling that I had all the power in this particularly dynamic in terms of the academic information because I was the eldest. It was also a way of teaching my sister how to write and read, which I needed badly to boost to my confidence (I had been labelled as having learning difficulties). My sister loved to act up as the student to see what I would do and we would quickly find out how little power I really did have since I could not make her do anything she did not want to. I would drag her to the corner for her punishment in the pretend cloakroom, which was really a cupboard and of course she would run a way. I wondered at the time what made my sister act like this and kept on exploring ways that could change the dynamic where I could actually do some teaching of letters and numbers because that was my favourite part. It was important to me. This curiosity was my first experience of exploring affect attunement. We were exploring our emotional, historical, behavioural and cognitive unfolding experience (Buirski and Haglund, 2001, p.50). One of the things that impresses me is that when my parents played with us they knew instinctively to play at our level and at whatever developmental level we were at. This was my first example of meeting a person at their own 'conscious value', a term which Barbara Dewar created as part of her own definition of meeting and working with a client within their own personal reality.

In playing with me, my parents were expressing that in this particular point of our lives, they felt I was worthy of caring attention and consideration. That is the healthy therapeutic stance that all clients hope for when they arrive in my office (Buirski and Haglund, 2001, p. 40).

It took me a long time to see how the thread of my early play is always there in my work, because in my adolescence I believed that with my learning disabilities I would not have a 'profession' like the rest of my family. My subjective experience was that all I was good for was playing and feeling. Believing that I had no intellectual abilities, the consequence of that inner belief was that for a long time I did not look at all the aspects of learning that came from my early play and how it had been there all along in my passion and profession.

Diane Ackerman, in her book *Deep Play* has the courage to share with us the sense of play she herself experienced as a client in a psychotherapeutic setting. She compares the mental and emotional place that she has experienced in play and that of her process in psychotherapy. "All play happens in a special mental place, with time limits and rules, beyond everyday life. It contains uncertainty, illusion, an element of make-believe or fantasy, and allows one to take risks, or explore new roles" (Ackerman, 1999, p. 14).

In sessions, I often feel in a trance-like state, which Adam Crabtree explores in his book *Trance Zero*. "Trance Zero is an effortless movement from trance to trance through the guidance of a deep intuitive awareness that comes from our own depths" (Crabtree, 1997, pp. 26, 27). It is a state that enables me as a psychotherapist to flow into that wondrous place of playfulness that my family nurtured in me and which now allows me to enter into the space that is in the room

between myself and my client. I enter that room with a sense of exploration and curiosity for what is there and what is hidden from us. It is an adventure we both embark on. When that moment is alive in the room, I experience my body and my sense of self in a suspended state where everything that is taken for granted as reality flies out the window and only our reality in the moment exists. It is a new moment for both of us that has never existed before. We become explorers, pioneers in a new intimate land!

As Winnicott states, "Psychotherapy takes place in the overlap of two areas of playing that of the patient and that of the therapist. Psychotherapy has to do with two people playing together"; Psychoanalysis has been developed as a highly specialized form of playing in the service of communication with oneself and others" (Winnicott, 1971, p. 38).

I would like to continue my exploration of the effects of play in the therapeutic field and in our spiritual realm combining both research material and my early personal experiences. I only wish as I do my research that Winnicott and other writers had chosen to share with me their experiences of their early years so we could have a deeper understanding of each other as human beings. This wish really is at the heart of our chosen vocations, passions and the theories that we develop from there.

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