

## INTERVIEW WITH VIOLET OAKLANDER

CHRISTIANE ELSBREE

### *Introduction:*

*I met Violet at the beginning of my career shortly after her first book was published. Sometimes when you are very close to someone you don't realize the magnitude of their acclaim, your own relationship with them remains the same — you still go to movies together, have lunch, hang out, share holidays and special occasions. Eventually it sinks in that your dear friend is now viewed differently throughout the world. This is what happened for me with Violet. While she has remained the same friend to me, she has become a world-renowned master clinician. There are personal sacrifices that come with this kind of dedication to work and to heeding the inspiration within. I hope that the excerpts chosen here will inspire you as she has inspired me.*

*Violet's level of productivity in her teaching and writing show her dedication, and speak to the demand for what she has to offer. Her work, the Gestalt therapy approach to work with children, offers a humanistic alternative. Her approach allows space and time for self-discovery. It is directive, in that it is not passive, but it is not an imposed program or curriculum. It allows each individual child to blossom. She responds to what is emerging in the child and remains ever vigilant about maintaining contact. Those who have trained with Violet know that she says, "I don't fix kids." Yet her delight in each child,*

*her I-Thou approach, supports the child's growth through facilitated contact and awareness helping children find who they are and their own rightful path, their emergent path, their own organismic self-regulation and well-being.*

*Her books and her trainings have supported therapists around the globe in their work with children. Her skill in articulating the application of Gestalt therapy theory to work with children is a major contribution to the field. Her work is bridging cultures globally, providing tools for people helping children throughout the world. Over the course of twenty-six years, her two-week training programs in Santa Barbara and Hermosa Beach brought together therapists and counselors from more than twenty-five countries and six continents to form an intensive learning community. Hers is not a dominant culture approach. The interest in Violet's work brings to light the widespread interest in the theory and practice of Gestalt therapy and what it has to offer worldwide in the field of health and well-being.*

Christiane Elsbree: Violet, I first met you in 1979 shortly after *Windows to Our Children* was published. During these past thirty years, I've witnessed the expansion of your work, your prolific writing of chapters and articles. I've witnessed the demand for you to travel worldwide to speak and to teach. I've watched the production of several audiotapes and videotapes describing your work with children and adolescents. I've seen the development of your two-week training program, from the first training program to the last training program, and the publication of Peter Mortola's book based on his study of that training program. I've seen the interest in *Windows to Our Children* give rise to translations in fourteen different languages.

Violet Oaklander: Thirteen.

Chris: Sorry, thirteen different languages. There's probably another translation underway as we speak. [Laughs] The number of translations is mentioned often. But, what is most telling to me about the breadth of the impact of your work is the languages in which *Windows* appears. So, I'm going to take the time to note those languages here: German, Portuguese, Spanish, Hebrew, Russian, Croatian and Serbo-Croatian, Italian, Chinese, Korean, Czech, Lithuanian, and the English language edition appears in South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, the British Isles, and of course, North America.

Now, today, I'm here with you in "The House that Martha Built," to which you have retired after writing your second book, *Hidden Treasures*, which already, in this brief time that it's been out, has been published in Spanish and Lithuanian, and is being translated into German. We're here surrounded with mementos from your travels. So, tell me how it all began.

Violet: [Laughs] How did it all begin. Well, it wasn't planned. I'll tell you that much. My work sort of evolved. Well, let's say I started working with children maybe even as a teenager when I worked in camps for several years as a counselor. And, even after I was married, my husband and I worked in camps. So, I've had quite a bit of experience even then working with kids. I was an arts and craft counselor. I used to lead all the singing. I was the swimming counselor. I did a variety of things like that. I taught nursery school briefly, in Denver for the Jewish Community Centers for about a year. Of course, I've had three children of my own.

I went back to school when I had three young children after we moved to California because it was so easy to go to school here. I'd only had one year of college when I got married and I went to work, so my husband could go to school. I thought I would be a teacher so I could be home with my children when they were home. After I graduated, I got a job in Long Beach, California as a teacher. It was not an easy thing for me. I didn't think I was cut out to be a teacher because, I guess I was an alter-

native teacher before I knew what that meant. I used to do a lot of different things with the kids. The principal asked me why I didn't go into recreation instead of being a teacher. [Laughter] He actually did.

I could write a book about what I did in those days. It was really pretty interesting. But, the counselor of the school that I worked in said, "Why don't you look into teaching emotionally disturbed children, you'd be really good at that, and they're just starting these programs." It was pretty new. This was in the middle of '67. So, I went to visit those classes, they had just started them. They didn't have teachers who would do it. But, I thought it was wonderful. I mean, you could do whatever you wanted, and there were twelve kids and an aide. So, I transferred into doing that, and it was amazing. After I did it for about . . . for six years. I won a United States Office of Education Fellowship to get my Master's in Special Education with emotionally disturbed children. So, I did that at Cal State University at Long Beach.

At just about that time, I started training at the Gestalt Therapy Institute of Los Angeles. I thought at some point, I might leave working in the school system and go into private practice. So, I trained for about three years, I became certified. While I was training, I noticed, they never talked about children. There were a couple of books. One was George Brown's *Human Teaching for Human Learning*, but it was, mostly about Gestalt awareness in education. There was another book by Janet Lederman, *Anger and the Rocking Chair*, which is almost like a lyrical poem about her work with disturbed children.

But, there really wasn't anything about doing psychotherapy with children. So, I started doing a lot of thinking about applying Gestalt therapy to children, the theory, and the philosophy. It really seemed to fit for me. I brought that into my classroom with emotionally disturbed children. I did a lot of experimenting with some of the practices and techniques with the theoretical foundation in my mind of what I was doing. It was so successful. I could give you a couple of stories if you want . . .

Chris: Sure. Go ahead.

Violet: At one point, I had a group of boys who were eleven, twelve, and thirteen, very disturbed boys. I had them finger painting, because I felt that they needed that sensory experience. They had very little sensory experience because they were so disturbed they weren't allowed to do many kinds of things. Their lives were so structured. In fact, they weren't in school until these classes opened up. . . . I had these trays that I took from the cafeteria and I would put colors, and they experimented. They realized that if you put red, yellow, and blue, it became brown. [Laughs] So they learned that by experimenting. But, they would finger paint and talk to each other, and make contact in ways that they had never done before. [Before that] mostly, they would hit each other. So that was an amazing experience.

The other thing we used to do that was so amazing was work with wood — and the same thing. They had never been allowed to touch saws and hammers, and we had all that. I saw the other classes order a toolkit, like a cart with all these tools. I thought, "Why not us?" So, I put in my order and in came this wood and the cart with all these saws and all that and sawhorses. They used to have to share a sawhorse, and we had strict boundaries, strict rules. If they swung the saw, they had to sit down that day. So they never did. They loved this. They talked to each other. They shared. There was so much mastery in this activity, and good feeling and contact. We did it every day.

Anyway, we also had two empty chairs in the room, as one of the things that were always set up. They would have a fight with a teacher or another kid on the playground, and they'd come running, "I need to use the empty chairs." They would put the other kid in the empty chair, that old empty chair technique. I sort of guided, and after they finished they would feel so calm and relaxed. It was something that was always there for them to use.

So that kind of thing, I would try out various things and began to even write some of this stuff down . . . what I was doing. So that was like you might say the beginnings of my ideas, of thinking about using things with children, getting them to express themselves.

Chris: I want to underscore something here. I think that the effort that you put in your presence and your contactfulness, to put out the extra effort that it takes to make boundaries, to be clearly active and present is what makes that successful.

Violet: Well, that makes me think of one of the things that happened during this time was I took a leave for about six months because one of my children became very ill. He was in the hospital for a long time, and then he died. Soon after he died, he was almost fifteen, soon after he died, the district called me. They begged me to come back, because a teacher had walked out. She couldn't control the group, and I came back. These were kids around early adolescence. I came back, and they were so wild. I could see why the teacher had walked out. I mean they were running around. They were knocking chairs over, throwing books. They were totally wild.

I sat there watching them. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. The aide kept saying, "Should I call the principal?" and I said, "No, no." I just watched, until one of the boys came over and he said, "How come you're not mad?" [Laughs] I said, "Listen, I just lost my son. Why should this upset me?" "What do you mean?" and they wanted to hear. They gradually all came over and I told them what happened. They asked me lots of questions, and I talked about it, and this brought up a lot of their own issues with loss and grief, and it was amazing. I never had any trouble with them after that, never.

I also had ideas, and I don't know really where I got these ideas. The traditional idea at the time was when you worked with kids like this you had to have to have an environment that had no stimulation. In fact,

some classes had cubicles so the kids would not be stimulated. Well, my room was just the opposite. It had all kinds of interesting things in it, and hanging, all kinds of stuff, a lot like this.

Chris: Like your home, colorful? [Laughter]

Violet: Yeah. I felt that if you didn't provide these things, they tried to make it on their own. Like if you put a kid in a cubicle and there is no stimulation, he makes his own stimulation and distraction. So what we would do is, when I would bring something in and I would hang it up or whatever, we'd all look at it. If a plane would go by outside and a kid would run to the window, I would invite everybody to run to the window and look at the plane. We would kind of focus on whatever was foreground at that time. And after a while it was there, and it didn't disturb them or distract them whatever it was. We always did that. We sort of made the distraction foreground.

I did some off-the-wall things like that. The principal I had at that school appreciated it because of what I had done with those kids who were so wild. Then he thought I was a miracle worker. All I was was genuine. All I was was contactful with them. But I did set boundaries, and they believed me because I followed through.

But that was the beginning. What happened was also I had a group. A Gestalt therapist was working with men in the Navy. Long Beach, where I lived, had a big Naval base. She said, "There are a lot of kids who are children of these men, and I would like to start a group but I don't know anything about kids." So she said, "Would you be willing to lead the group?" And I said, "Sure." [Laughs]

So I had this group of actually twelve, again, of all ages. I broke all the rules of groups. I think I'm a rule breaker. They were from eight years old until sixteen, and there were some siblings in the group. Some of them would come and go because they'd move. [Laughs] And others

would move in. They met in my living room, right in my living room. For two years I had that group. You would think, if you walked into that group after a few sessions, when we got really going, that you were walking into an adult Gestalt therapy group. We worked on dreams. [Laughs] We worked with clay right in my living room. We drew pictures. We did all the things I actually eventually wrote about.

Here's one story. We worked on dreams, and this girl was about thirteen. She said, "Oh, I had this dream last night." That was something we sometimes did, so she tells the dream: She was lying in a coffin, and everybody thought she was dead. They were crying, and they were grieving over her. She said, "But I wasn't dead. I kept saying, 'I'm not dead! I'm not dead!' but they didn't hear me. [Laughs] So that was my dream. It was so frustrating because they didn't hear me or see me!"

So I said, "OK. Well, we'll act out the dream. So you lie on the rug. Make believe you're in the coffin, and we'll be the mourners." All the kids got up and surrounded her. [Laughs] I sort of acted it out, and they followed me. We grieved and we cried. And she's yelling, "I'm not dead! I'm not dead!" [Laughter]

And I'm saying, "We don't hear her. We'll ignore her." And that's what we did. And then we talked about what does that tell you? She said, "Sometimes nobody does hear me. They don't pay any attention to what I'm saying. They're not listening to me." And all the kids, of course, could connect with that. And we had the most incredible discussion about how they don't get heard, and what could we do about it? How can we get ourselves heard? That's the kind of thing we did.

Or we did clay and had them make something with their eyes closed, and then be that thing they made. I remember one girl said, "Well, I'm the sun." She made a happy sun. We dialogued a little bit, and I said, "What do you do?" "Well, I warm people and I make people feel good. People like me." I said, "You look happy." The kids could give their comments.



It was all really done in a very nice way. Then I said “How does that fit for you in your life?” She was not a happy kid, and she said, “I don’t let myself be like that sun. I’m not like that sun.” I said, “How come?” She said, “Well, if I am, people will think that everything is good and it isn’t. And I don’t want them to think everything is good, so I don’t smile and be like that sun,” which was exactly her process. That’s the kind of thing that we would get out of these activities, and right in my living room. [Laughs]

Finally, I left the school system. My marriage broke up, and I decided I didn’t want to stay working for the school system. I hated the bureaucracy of the school district. I left and went back to school because the Board of Behavior Sciences accepted my Masters in Special Education, but I needed more hours. I went back to school; got another Masters, in Psychological Counseling, did an internship at the American Institute of Family Relations, and got a lot of the hours.

And in that internship we got a lot of kids, not just me but also the other students. Nobody knew what to do with them except me [Laughs] because I already had tons of experience. So they asked me to teach a class on working with kids. “Counseling with Children” they called it, and for two years I did that. That was through Chapman University. So I wrote a very long paper about my ideas, and I gave it out to all the students. It turned out to be somewhat of an outline of *Windows to Our Children*. I didn’t know it at the time.

Because I was so naive, I didn’t even have my address on the paper. One of the Gestalt people heard about this paper. He was teaching psychology at Cal State Los Angeles. He gave that paper out to all his students. Then the paper kind of spread around. Somebody said to me, “You know, I’m a social worker, I work for the L.A. social services and we were all given your paper as an orientation. I didn’t even have my phone number on there. [Laughs] Nothing. That was so interesting. I realized at

that time, too, that there's a tremendous need for how to work with kids. Nobody seemed to know how to work with kids.

Chris: What I was thinking about, that what was popular and that what was available at the time would be things like Virginia Axline, with *Dibs in Search of Self*, Anna Freud, all of the psychoanalytically oriented child psychotherapies.

Violet: Of course, I have read all of that stuff. One of the things that happened in my Masters in Special Ed., there were four of us who won this United States Office of Education fellowship, three guys from L.A., and me, from Long Beach. It was at Long Beach State. We didn't like the program and we fought to get a better program. We had already worked in the field and we already knew what we needed. They fought us, but because it was the United States Office of Education fellowship they finally gave in. One of the things that I wanted very much that I finally got — two things — one was to visit all kinds of mental health programs for children all over L.A. County. They let me do that and I met with one of my professors to talk about it or write it up. Another was to read all the books about child therapy — which wasn't part of their program. I would meet with the professor and talk. So I read all of those things.

What I realized later is that they don't really tell you how to work with kids. They're fascinating, especially like *Dibs*, or Clark Moustakas' work, it's fascinating. I love it. Play therapy, the old play therapy, which is what Clark Moustakas and Virginia Axline did, where the child plays and soon they're going to play out what they need. It takes a long time. I decided, the kids I worked with, I didn't have that much time. I had to be more directive, as I've often said, "A kid doesn't come in and say, 'I have to work on my stepfather who molested me.'" "Never will a kid do that. So, you have to become more directive in terms of what you provide in an interesting way.

I started giving workshops through the Gestalt Therapy Institute of L.A. There was a period when they offered a lot of workshops in Los Angeles for the public. I started doing some of that. Then I worked for the L.A. schools system as a consultant with psychologists and school counselors and I gave workshops. People would come up to me and they would say, "I have a Ph.D. in child psychology — in clinical psychology, I'm a child psychologist — what do you do with the kid?" That became such a phrase that I was going to call *Windows to Our Children, What Do You Do with the Kid?* But, the publishers thought people would misunderstand the title. I heard that over and over, "What do you do with the kid?"

So I would give these workshops about my ideas about actually what you do, and I gradually developed the therapeutic process, which in the beginning I really hadn't thought through. It took me a while before I developed — in fact it isn't even written about in *Windows to Our Children* — the therapeutic process. Which I'll talk about maybe a little bit later. In a sense, I was doing it, but I hadn't articulated it theoretically. That was the beginning of actually writing, you might say.

What happened was, that after that I got my license, the marriage family therapy license, and I went into practice, and worked with a psychologist. He was in Long Beach. I worked with him because at that time if you were on Medi-Cal, which was for poor kids, and poor families, you could see a therapist if a licensed psychologist supervised you. So I worked with a psychologist who had an office and I rented a room, and he hated working with kids. He'd get all these Medi-Cal referrals and he just sent them over to me. Of course, I was at the time so broke that I would see anyone for like a dollar [jokingly]. I was very happy. He didn't like doing it . . . besides he didn't know how to work with kids and they paid so little.

I saw many kids under that Medi-Cal thing. Which was wonderful because I had such a variety of children that I worked with. I was very

compulsive, I had to take notes a lot, because you had to have the paperwork. I had all these files, and I kept everything for a long time. I was still giving workshops. I had adults, about half my clients were adults, and half were kids, children, teenagers, from even three all the way through eighteen. I loved the work, and I did a lot of it. This work is very powerful. You can't really do anything without having a relationship. It can just be the thread of a relationship, but it has to be something, and there has to be some contact between us.

Chris: So there you were, you're practicing with your Marriage and Family Therapist license, you don't yet have your doctorate. How did that come about?

Violet: What happened was that I was also giving workshops around Los Angeles, Long Beach, Orange County, and people would always say to me, "Do you have any more information?" "Do you have any more?" "This is great! Do you have anything else?" [Laughs] "Do you have anything written?" [Laughs] "Something I could take with me?" So, I got this idea that maybe I should write a book. Of course, I had that paper I had written, and my cousin Ruth, who had done a lot of writing said, "You know, Violet, that's an outline of a book." I looked at it and thought, "Well, yeah, that could be." I didn't think of myself as a writer. I decided I would write this stuff up, but I wouldn't tell anybody because I'm not really a writer. [Laughter]

I secretly worked on it for a year and I had all these files and stuff. I started writing, and I really didn't know how to write a book. I didn't know where to begin, where to end. I know now that there are so many books you can buy about writing and all of that stuff, but at the time . . . or maybe because I didn't share it, I kept it all to myself. I worked on it for about a year.

What happened was, I was supervising some students who were at Goddard College, there's a branch that used to be, I don't know if it's still

here, in Los Angeles. I would go down to their office to sign some papers, because I have a Master of Science in Special Education and a Master of Arts in Counseling I would write “M.S., M.A.” They’d kid me and they’d tease me and they’d say, “You know you should trade that in for a Ph.D., all those letters.” I’d say, “I don’t want go back to school. I just can’t go back to school.”

I was writing this book, and I got this idea that if I could find a school that would let me write this book for a dissertation, that would be good, so I started asking around, especially at Goddard, and I looked around. I kept hearing about this one place — a lot of people mentioned it to me — called International College. It was started by some guys at UCLA who wanted to start a graduate program equivalent to the European tutorial system. In Europe, you work with tutors, when you’re working on your Ph.D. So they started this school, called International College and it was a graduate program. The tutor had to approve you, accept you, not the school, the school, too, but the tutor.

I went down to talk to them and they had all these cards, or a book, of all the different tutors and what the requirements were. I discovered there were two tutors who did an interdisciplinary group. The group met once a week on a Saturday, for the day, and their requirements were, for your eventual dissertation, that it be part of the work you are doing, not something different; that it never had been done before, that it make a contribution; that it would be not an experimental, but a qualitative work. Whatever it was, it fit exactly what I was trying to do. It had never been done before. I knew that because I kept looking around for a book like that to help me and I never could find one, and I thought, “I’ll have to write it.” It was part of my work, and I felt it would make a contribution. It had to be a creative work, that was the fourth thing.

I entered that program and that’s how I wrote *Windows to Our Children*. Although, the dissertation is much bigger, you do the review of a literature and a lot of other stuff. It’s two big, fat volumes. I had two tutors;

they were John Sealy and Peter Marin. Peter Marin, especially, had written a number of books, so he was very helpful to me in terms of writing. John Sealy was the one that would say, "What do you mean by this?" "What do you mean when you say this word?" "What do you mean by that?" "This looks like bullshit to me." [Laughter] He was the one that really got me paying attention to my writing, so that I wouldn't write to impress, but to write from my heart. Peter was very supportive. At one point, I said to Peter Marin, "I don't know what to do, I could be doing this forever because John Sealy is always saying something." "You have to tell him when you feel done. When you feel done, tell him that." That's exactly what happened. I said, "I think I'm done, John." And he said, "OK."

Chris: What was it that made you feel done?

Violet: Well, I felt like I had written, at that point, as much as I wanted to. It felt like this is enough right now. They gave me a lot of suggestions, especially Peter, about what I should include and that kind of thing. They were really wonderful, when I'm thinking back. At the time, I was under a lot of stress.

What happened was before I was done, I got a call from a publisher, Real People Press. John Stevens called me. It turned out I had given a workshop in Berkeley, a Gestalt Therapy Workshop, and in my workshop was John Stevens' girlfriend, who he later married and took her name, Connie Andreas. He was the editor, he still is, of Real People Press that had published some Fritz Perls' books and others. Barry Stevens was his mother; he published a couple of her books. Anyway, he said, "I heard you're writing a book on Gestalt therapy with children, and I'm interested in publishing it." I said, "I'm just writing my dissertation." He said, "Well, when you finish the first draft, could you send it to me?"

I sent him the first draft and he sent it back and he said, "I'd like to publish this, if you would . . .," and there were pages and pages of yellow

legal pad stuff, "...on page 63, add more examples; on page 82, take out that Ph.D. window-dressing, I don't want any Ph.D. window-dressing." It was a lot of work, really, pages and pages of stuff. How can you not do it? I didn't care about the Ph.D., I was really interested in the book. I agreed to do it. I went and met him in San Diego, and signed the contract. I remember I had a headache for two days. I met them at a hotel and signed the contract.

So, I had to put my dissertation aside, and work on what he wanted. It was very hard work. I did it, and, I mean, I had to work to support myself and help Sara, who was still in college, and even help Mha Atma. He was in chiropractic school, and they had a baby. But, I borrowed money left and right. I had to stop working. I stopped working because I could not do this while I was working. And I, somehow, had faith, and I didn't know it was going to be like that.

But, it was so important to me. It was like the most important thing in my life. I can honestly say that. At that time, I was living in Hermosa Beach. That's all I really did was write, and I'd go for walks on the beach.

Chris: How long did you not work? How long of a hiatus did you take?

Violet: Maybe nine months or something, a long time. I had three adult clients who came to my office. I wrote this book on a little Hermes portable typewriter. I wrote *Hidden Treasure* on a computer. That took me a long time because it wasn't the most important thing in my life.

There were two theoretical chapters or three that John Stevens, Steve, took out, because he wanted the book to be something that people would use. He said, "We have enough books where people get bogged down in theory, and then they get tired. They're working hard." I didn't know he was right. He was, absolutely right, because that's one of the things that made the book so popular. It was almost like a handbook, you might say.

In fact, that used to bother me, that people thought it was more like a cookbook or a handbook.

It became very popular underground. It was not like a big bestseller, but I got hundreds and hundreds of letters. I have scrapbooks with these letters. They were all from therapists or students, not from parents . . . occasionally. It became this underground, cult book, you might say. It spread underground. There wasn't a lot of publicity for it or anything. It was before I was traveling. I mean, I started traveling, and then that helped the book in terms of giving many, many, many workshops. But, it, totally, changed my life, totally. You hear that, and it changed my life because I started traveling. I mean I was on a plane every month somewhere in the United States or Canada or Mexico. Then, about, at least once a year, if not twice, to Australia or Europe. I started going to Germany every single year, and other countries in Europe and Israel.

I mean, I was traveling a lot, plus maintaining my practice. Plus, I started doing the two-week training program. I had a group at night of adults. I was still working with adults as a Gestalt therapist, you know. I love doing that. I was doing a tremendous amount. Then, I started the Center for Child and Adolescent Therapy, when I met you. I went back into practice in Manhattan Beach. I guess, the first office. I would have so many referrals. I don't know why, I didn't even have business cards yet for my new address. I don't know how that happened. I started getting a lot of referrals, and I knew I needed people I could refer to.

Chris: I think, you were talking with Judith Wygal, Judith Coreman. She asked you, I think, also to bring in Janet Graham Ross. You invited me to come in.

Violet: Yes, and Ariel [Malek] and Ivan.

Chris: Ivan Diamond and Helen Sherry.



Violet: Yes, and we rented this office together, which was so wonderful. That was a wonderful experience, too.

Chris: We opened the Center, I think, maybe in June of '80.

Violet: Yes. So, I went back to work because was in terrible debt. I had to just work. I was getting a lot of referrals, which I took. I was working really hard. But, it was all worth it. So, the book was out, there was this book! Now, of course, since that time — I mean, it's been 1979, it came out, '89, '99, 30 years, 2009 — it's been out thirty years, and it's still there. It's in thirteen languages.

They call it "the Bible," I'll say something about that. I first heard that expression in Brazil. I worked in Brazil, in Sao Paolo. People told me they call the book "the Bible." They say, "Did you bring 'the Bible?'" It's not like a cookbook, which describes what they do, but it's a book they carry around with them. It's a book they need at all times. It's a book, without the book, they say, they don't know what to do.

I began to be self-conscious about the fact that I wanted more theory in the book. So, when I started doing all these workshops, I was traveling and doing workshops, I began to include a lot of theory stuff about what the book represented. I mean, if you were a Gestalt therapist you recognized it. When you looked at the book, you recognized the Gestalt therapy behind the book, but never, specifically, talked about it. So, that's when I started doing the tapes on my book. My nephew, Max Solomon, had a sound studio. So, my brother, Sidney Solomon, who was very supportive of my work, got this idea that I could make tapes with Max's sound studio.

The first tape was about Gestalt therapy with children. We did it as a question-and-answer format. My sister-in-law, Phyllis, who had been married before my brother, her daughter, Ellen, was the questioner. She has a very nice voice. So, we made that tape, even though I worked . . . I

mean that first tape I just wrote over and over. I kept writing and changing it and writing and changing it. Then I finally did it.

But, I realized I really hadn't thought of writing another book because I was working so much. I just couldn't even conceive of it. But, it seemed like I could write a tape even though that first one took a lot of work. After that, I relaxed, and I didn't actually work as hard on the next tapes. But, it was my brother who decided to start this tape company and other people got involved in making tapes, too, for him. Most of them were about working with children. We even put out a whole catalog.

Chris: You also did some videotapes for him?

Violet: That came a little bit later. I did another tape on the therapeutic process. I had worked a lot on developing this therapeutic process. That was an important piece of work for me; it made a big difference in terms of explaining what I do. To me, that therapeutic process is the core of my work, starting with the relationship and contact and moving on from there.

Then, Sidney got the idea of my doing videotapes. So, we had to rent a studio. Max had a sound studio, but it wasn't a video studio. We didn't rent the studio at first. We came to my office. There was a lot of traffic noise. But, we did that tape with Abram who at that time was twelve years old. That was the first tape on anger. Then we did a second tape. When we did the second tape, I'd already moved to Santa Barbara, and we decided to do a tape on the sand tray.

Then, I was invited to come down to San Diego at a child abuse agency to work with a child. They would watch through a two-way mirror. I don't quite believe in two-way mirrors, frankly. I've had lots of people observe my work, but the child knows they're observing. I think it's kind of sneaky to get behind a two-way mirror and do it. I worked with this

boy and I told him right away there were people watching us. Anyway, that's the Carlo's tape.

Chris: Yes.

Violet: Really, I like that tape a lot. We got permission to use it as a video, and he gets a royalty for every tape that's sold. So does Abram, still, to this day, get a royalty for every tape that's sold.

Chris: Then, there's another tape done as well.

Violet: Well, the other tape was not through Maxsound Tapes. This company, Allyn and Bacon Publishers — they're in Boston, asked me to do one of the "Child Therapy with the Experts" series. They had seven people, and I was the Gestalt person. That was interesting and they did it in Chicago. I had to postpone it because I got breast cancer, and I had to go through radiation treatment, seven weeks. They couldn't postpone it much further than that. They had me work with four children. They wanted me to work with five, but I ended up working with four. Then, we watched them all to decide which one we would use for this "Child Therapy with the Experts" tape. The one I chose, I felt — the others were really wonderful — but I felt that this one fit Gestalt. It was easier to see the therapeutic process and the Gestalt process with that tape.

Chris: I could ask you about your therapeutic process, the therapeutic process, but actually I won't because that you've written about and it's in your book.

Violet: It's in my new book. A whole chapter of it is in my new book.

Chris: So, people will find that there, but I want to talk more about your family. This was a family that was supportive of your work.

Violet: Yeah.

Chris: So, tell me more about how your family has influenced your work.

Violet: I don't know about influencing my work. I didn't know I was going to do this work when I was growing up, [laughs] but I had a wonderful family. I had wonderful parents. They were extremely nurturing and loving. They were Russian Jewish immigrants and they were, I think, pretty unusual.

My mother, for example, when I was doing this work, when I was grown up, I couldn't think of, I still can't think of one thing she ever did that was wrong in raising me. I thought everybody had parents like that until I talked to my friends and I realized . . . my husband, my friends . . . they didn't have parents like that. And it was, I guess, pretty unusual.

My father was a tailor. My father was a feminist before they ever heard the expression. He always told me I could do anything I wanted to do. I think I disappointed him when I quit school after a year and got married when I was very young and went to work so my husband could go to school. But he did live to see me finish when I went back to school and I became a teacher. He was very happy he saw me do that.

He didn't know that I went further and that I've written books, but I think of him. I hear his voice often in my head telling me I can do anything I want to do. He was, both my parents were, very supportive of me, and loving and wonderful, and they were very involved in social action.

They believed in peace and justice and equality and that's how I grew up with those values and they were very involved with that kind of work. They were not religious Jews, but very much cultural Jews. So, I grew up knowing a lot about Jewish culture. I had two older brothers. I was the younger one, my brother Sidney, who I mentioned was nine years older than me, eight and half years older, and my other brother was seven years older than me. That brother's name was Arthur Solomon. As a kid he spent a lot of time with me, especially, did things with me, took me plac-

es. I just adored him and he was killed at the end of World War II as a soldier, in Germany. That was heartbreaking for my whole family and for me, and had a great effect on me to this day.

And, so that's something about my family. I really had a wonderful childhood, in that way. I had some trauma. I was badly burned when I was five years old, just turned five. Boiling water fell on me at a neighbor, at a relative's house we were visiting and it was a terrible experience. I was in the hospital a long time with skin grafts and that had a big effect, maybe, on my work.

I've often thought what it would be like if I'd had a therapist come in and talk to me when I was a little girl. I still remember the doctors and nurses saying to me, "Be a good girl. Stop that crying." I still hear that voice and because they used to, it was before penicillin and they used to have to clean me every day and it was so painful, you know, the burn areas. It was really a bad experience.

I think that, I often say that we blame, a lot of the work we do, on parents. We blame everything on the family and the parents when we work with children. The fact is there are other systems that affect children, the medical system being one. The school system, the court system, the religious system, many systems affect children.

I had other traumas. When I was seven my ears became badly infected and, again, it was before penicillin. I had to have surgery on both my ears. It was due to the measles actually. They became infected and they removed the bones in the back of the ears and the canals collapsed, so I'm hearing impaired. I gradually have become more and more hearing impaired starting at age seven and moving on until now. I have to wear very powerful hearing aids. It's a difficult thing to go through, but it's OK. [Laughs]

Chris: I'm stumbling and feeling like I'm not replying, responding to that piece. I want to pick up the piece you said about your parents being social activists and very involved and interested in social justice. I'm thinking about the fact that your book is a global phenomenon. It's impacting children's lives globally. I'm curious about what you've seen, what you've noticed that children need worldwide. What are some of the global concerns for children? What are the therapists saying to you about what children need in their countries?

Violet: It seems like the problems are the same all over the world. I hear the same things everywhere I've been. There are certain cultural phenomena that we really do need to understand and pay attention to . . . I always feel that the development of the child is the same everywhere in the world. It's what you do with it that becomes different. That's what I have found and that's why I think the work, the book and the work, appeals all over the world.

I worked in South Africa in three cities, and there were 500 therapists that came to these workshops, and they were two-day workshops each. They told me a lot about the effect of the work and why the work is so important. They find that the work is powerful enough that they find they achieve results much faster than any other kind of therapy they've tried.

I think the work we do, using a lot of creative, expressive techniques, is very powerful. It's important to remember that cultures all over the world have used expressive techniques to express themselves, whether it be drawing, movement or singing or clay. Clay has been very important, storytelling, all of this has been used by cultures all over the world, so it appeals to many different cultures, in their own way. They pick what fits best for them.

Chris: I'm hearing from everything you've said that Gestalt therapy has been very congruent with who you are and fit with your upbringing, your

philosophies, your values. But how was it you got to be involved in Gestalt therapy instead of some other therapy?

Violet: I mentioned earlier that one of our children became very ill, Michael, and he had systemic lupus, and it attacked his kidneys. He was given a year to eighteen months to live, which is kind of a horrible sentence for any parent to hear. My way of dealing with it was to attempt to save his life, and Harold went into grief, so that had an effect on our marriage, actually. What happened is that the last six months of his life, he became very ill. He was in the hospital, and I began to see that he was failing. As Harold would point out to me, "He's dying." I had a lot of trouble dealing with that of course, and I became very depressed.

This was maybe two months before he died. At the urging of some of my friends and Harold, I decided I needed to see somebody. I went to a couple of different therapists, and it was useless. They cried. There was no help whatsoever from them.

A friend of mine was going up to Esalen to do a workshop with Jim Simkin, and he encouraged me to go, so I did. My mother-in-law came to take care of the kids, and I went up to Esalen to work with Jim Simkin. Fritz Perls was there that weekend, but I never got to work with him. I did observe him, but I was in this group with Jim Simkin for a week, and it totally changed my life. When people say that, you wonder, "What does that mean? It changed your life?" But I can say, honestly, that week with Jim Simkin changed my life.

He got me working on my grief, on my anger, on my avoidance, on everything, my denial of what was happening, everything, but at the same time he was always with me. Talk about an "I-Thou" relationship, he was with me. Outside the group, he and his wife, Anne, were very compassionate and I really enjoyed their company. In the group, I did a lot of work. He really got me working. When I say it changed my life, I mean it somehow transformed me.

When I left, my son is in the hospital, he's dying, and as an example I went to a grocery store to get some groceries. I saw a neighbor I hadn't seen in quite a while, and she said to me, "You look so wonderful. What's happening in your life?" I had to tell her about Michael, and she backed away. She couldn't even talk to me.

It was a very strange thing. When I went to the hospital, Michael started to get better. He actually responded to me. We were pretty close, we were very close, and he responded to me, to the point where he was sent home. The doctors could not understand it, because there's never been a remission with what he had. This lupus attacks all of your organs, which it was doing.

Up until now, he couldn't even sit up anymore; he couldn't eat. He was eating. He was walking. He came home for six weeks. We went to the movies. We went to Japanese Deer Park which had all these animals. He loved animals. We went to all these different places. We went to my cousin's for Thanksgiving dinner. It was unbelievable. It was a real gift. He even started school. He was starting high school, and he was going to be fifteen in just a couple of weeks. They sent a cab for him because he was pretty weak still.

It seemed like he was gaining his strength, and then he started coughing one night. We went to the doctor, and he cried all the way. He said "I don't want to go," and the doctor wanted him to go to the hospital. He had pneumonia. He said, "Oh, it's not serious. It's just a light case, but to be safe, let's put him in the hospital." Michael cried all the way to the hospital. He said, "I don't think I'm ever going to come out." And, of course, I couldn't hear that, and he died the next day. So, it was pretty bad.

It was after he died, I was in literally terrible grief that the school district called me and said you've got to come. This teacher walked out, and we've got this class. It was that time I went in and told the kids I had just



lost my son. He died December 12, his birthday was December 20, and I went back January 4 or 5.

Chris: It was right on the heels of his death!

Violet: Yeah. I was impressed with what had happened. We had that gift for six weeks of Michael being home and I have those memories. They're so wonderful. I was impressed with Gestalt therapy and Jim Simkin. So I decided, they had just started this training program in Los Angeles, I decided I would, with the encouragement of my husband, Harold, enter the program. That's how I got into Gestalt therapy. Even though Harold had been in it, it was his thing, it wasn't my thing. It became my thing.

Chris: Did you continue training with Jim Simkin at that time?

Violet: I did go to a couple of workshops with him, and in fact my whole training group went up to his house for a week.

Chris: And you observed Fritz Perls?

Violet: Yes, but I never actually worked with him, even though Harold had actually trained with him.

Chris: And what about Laura?

Violet: Well, I went to a couple of workshops. I was impressed with her because, especially, because she seemed so human. I still remember, there would be this group, and maybe there would be a person in the corner who never said a word, and after a while she'd say, "How are you? Are you OK? You haven't said anything."

Fritz Perls would never have done that. You were responsible for yourself, and that was it. I admired that about her. I had that same experience with another one of my trainers, Allen Darbonne. He was like that, too,

very loving. I found out you could be loving and be a Gestalt therapist.  
[Laughter]

Chris: Which you are!

Violet: Thank you. I also learned from another trainer, Bob Martin, that you could be creative, because Bob was very creative in the groups. I learned that you could do that, and it was a good thing. You could say I was greatly influenced by Jim Simkin, Allen Darbonne and Bob Martin.

Chris: People sometimes refer to your work as the “Oaklander Model.” Is that a term, a phrase, that you use yourself?

Violet: You know, I think everybody has their own way of working. I developed the therapeutic process. It’s not part of — even though it is based on — the theory and philosophy and practice of Gestalt therapy, it’s my model. It’s really connected to Gestalt therapy as well as child development theory. So I guess that is the Oaklander Model.

Chris: You’ve talked about how powerful this work is.

Violet: Yeah. Well, it is. In play therapy, they talk about how play is the child’s language. Well, it’s the same thing with these techniques. We use some play also, of course. And when we use drawings, these are projective techniques. They are techniques [in which] the child is projecting something that’s inside, outside, so that it’s safe. It’s a way of talking about things that is very safe, and then gradually bringing it back to themselves, where they can own the feelings. We use all of these techniques to give [children and adolescents] experience with parts of themselves that they no longer own or experience.

We might do a lot of sensory work, even with adolescents, in order to help them get back in touch with their senses — the touching, and looking, and listening, and tasting, and smelling — and to feel their senses,

which is such an integral part of the organism, the senses. And so we give them experiences with parts of themselves, and we also use it as projection. And they're fun, they're fun to do. And as I said, people have used these techniques for thousands and thousands of years to express themselves.

So we use every kind of projective technique you can imagine, and out of this will come who they are, expressions from their inner selves, then out of that we could begin to talk about it. And they could then own the feelings. If I say, "Does this ever fit with you in your life? Or does that remind you of your life? Or you or anything." And they can't own it. If they say, "No," then I may say, I might say something like, "Well, you know, in this scene that you made . . ."

This was a twelve-year-old boy. And I said, "In this scene that you made, the surfer drowned. And you, the other surfer, who you said was you, could have saved his life, but he didn't. I'm wondering if there's anything in your life that you feel you're responsible for, that's not . . ." And he burst into tears. And he said he was talking about . . . his parents were in a bitter custody battle over him. "It's all my fault. It's all my fault." And this was a boy who had said, "I don't care what they do. It's their problem." And was in total separation from anything that he was affected by, except his grades were falling, and he had headaches, and stomachaches — retroflected kind of behavior.

So, once he was able to own his place in this, then we could really deal with it, you know. But, I helped this child cope with his parents, which is another part of that question about seeing children individually. Sometimes you have to help them cope with their family situation, you know, and find ways to be OK in that family. And we do that a lot, too.

Chris: Is there anything else?

Violet: I know there was a question that I felt that work with children is not that accepted and respected by Gestalt therapists. For many years I have felt, maybe it isn't even just Gestalt therapists, for many years I have felt, particularly in the Gestalt community, that they never really gave much recognition to working with children. It was like, "Oh, that isn't much of anything. You're just with the kid and you play games or something." [Laughs] But, I hope that is changing. I hope that is changing.

Chris: I know at one time I used to hear people say you can't do Gestalt therapy with children because their ego has not developed yet.

Violet: [laughs] Yeah.

Chris: And I know even today, now in the field of psychotherapy broadly and generally the whole field of infant mental health has opened up.

Violet: Yeah. And working with the brain. ...I strongly believe that Gestalt therapy is so organic that it stands to reason that it fits the development of children. I talk about how you look at a baby and the baby is very sensuous and Gestalt therapy talks about coming to your . . . as Fritz Perls used to say, "Lose your mind and come to your senses." And, the baby is very sensory. And then the body movement as the baby is developing becomes a very important part of growth and development. And, then the expression of emotions and the use of the intellect and development of the child. It's all so organic and it's all basic to Gestalt therapy. So to me, how could it not be? So that's in terms of working with kids and assessing, making an assessment, if they're having difficulty expressing emotions. It's all part of their development. It begins, even with adults, it begins in childhood. You don't suddenly block your ability to express emotions as an adult. It starts way back. So, it seems to me very essential and organic and obvious that the development of the child is much akin to Gestalt therapy theory.

Chris: So, Violet, there's a lot of discussion in the therapy literature about bipolar disorders in children, addictions in adolescence, autism, impulse disorders, attention deficit disorder, how do Gestalt therapists who work with children think about therapeutic approaches with these children? Or I should say, how did you think about therapeutic approaches with children manifesting those kinds of symptoms?

Violet: Well, you know it doesn't matter who you work with. It doesn't matter who you work with, the main thing is to establish a relationship, make contact, and meet them where they are. I mean you could work with three-year-olds or thirty-three-year-olds or adolescents. It's the same thing; you meet them where they are. You make contact with them where they are and you . . . if they are unable to establish a relationship, I've worked with some autistic kids, they weren't severely autistic, but they were not present most of the time. But, the focus of the therapy was to keep them in contact and for me to be in contact with them. And in that way we began to establish a relationship, and it doesn't matter who I work with, it's the same thing. It's making contact; it's being present with them, meeting them where they are.

Violet: I just want to just add that the self-nurturing process is written up originally as an audio tape which is distributed by Maxsound Tapes, and then I rewrote it somewhat, and it appears in my second book *Hidden Treasure: A Map to The Child's Inner Self*. It's a chapter in that book if you're interested in learning more about it. In that book, also, appear a number of chapters that reflect some of the thoughts I've had and work I've done in all the years since the publication of *Windows to Our Children*.

Chris: Violet, I know that you've lived in a lot of places. Could you tell us where you were born and where you've lived?

Violet: Sure. I was born in Lowell, Massachusetts in 1927. I grew up, though, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. We moved there when I was two.

I lived in Cambridge until I was about seventeen. I lived in Miami and Miami Beach, Florida. I lived in New York City for eight years, and went to New York University for a year. Lived in Denver, Colorado; Albany, New York; Long Beach, California; Hermosa Beach, California; Santa Barbara, California for twenty-two years; and, finally, I'm here in Los Angeles, California.

Chris: I want to thank you for all of the time. It's been wonderful to sit here with you and hear these stories that even though I've known you for these thirty years, there were stories that I heard today that I hadn't heard before. [Laughs] In the midst of what's been pressing from time to time, or in the immediate foreground, there wasn't space for these stories to come forward. And, I thank you for taking the time to do that. I'm glad that, and hopeful that, this interview will be available for people to hear for years to come.

Violet: Thank you it's been a pleasure, my pleasure. [Laughs]



*Interviewer's Note: I was privileged to be able to sit with my friend and mentor for this interview. This is a condensed and edited collection of excerpts from more than three hours of recorded interview that I did with Violet over two days in June 2009. The complete recording of the interview is included with this issue. If yours is the printed edition, a CD containing the interview was included with your copy. If yours is the digital-CD version, the recording is included on this disk. I encourage you to take the time to experience the interview material in its entirety. First of all, you'll be able to **hear** Violet's voice and stories directly, but also you'll find more information about Violet's work with children around self-nurturing, her use of music in her work with children, her years of work in Santa Barbara, the founding of the Violet Solo-*

## INTERVIEW WITH VIOLET OAKLANDER

*mon Oaklander Foundation, the ways that Violet has been honored previously in the Gestalt community, her connections to the Gestalt Institute of Central Ohio, her perspective on individual versus family work with children, and more. The questions in this interview were chosen by me and by Felicia Carroll, who worked with Violet in Santa Barbara and who is the editor of this issue.*