Hidden Treasure: A Map to the Child's Inner Self
Book Review by Michael Petracca, MFT

If you have ever attended a Violet Oaklander training, you have had this experience. At some point in the proceeding - either at the beginning, when we are going around the circle and introducing ourselves, or during a break for herbal tea, or at the post-training pizza feast - one or several participants will describe the evolution of their psychotherapeutic practice. They will describe their early interest in therapy, their undergraduate major course sequence, their internships and practicums, and eventually will narrate in detail the time they first read Violet's first book. The latter event has taken on for many - myself included - the significance of a major life passage: a happy wedding, the birth of one's child, the end of armed conflict. In virtually all of Violet's workshops - at least the ones I've attended or helped conduct - somebody will utter this phrase: *"Windows to Our Children* is my Bible." They say this not with the fervency of the idologue, but more with the clear, calm radiance of one who has found a meaningful life path: one they would not impose on others, but would share willingly with those who might benefit. We therapists who practice Violet Oaklander's work with gratitude and rigor share this feeling about *Windows to Our Children,* because reading Violet's first book changed our professional and personal lives forever.

Now, after almost three decades, Dr. Oaklander has come out with a book of revelations (to stretch the Biblical metaphor to near-snapping) about certain aspects of the Oaklander method that *Windows* did not cover in great detail. Violet has made it clear that she intends the current work not to be taken as a direct sequential follow-up to the material presented in *Windows*. Rather, *Hidden Treasure* presents detailed information about a range of psychotherapeutic areas of particular interest to professionals working with children and adolescents. The first two chapters set out the central trope of the book: the child's inner essence as a wonderfully rich buried realm to be carefully, lovingly and mindfully approached and revealed through systematic process work. In a recent discussion with Violet, she elaborated on this point. "The child keeps a lot of things to him/herself," she told me, "and in our work, kids present a range of unique problems. The way we work forms a bridge to the child's inner self, and that's what I mean by treasure. Each chapter presents a kind of map to accessing that self ... but keep in mind that there's not one static hidden self, because the child is always changing and growing." Violet's point here is a subtle but important one: in our work as Gestalt therapists we move always toward a deeper understanding of "what makes children do what they do," to use Violet's phrase ... but we never completely arrive at "the" answer, because the child is always changing. There are always deeper truths - treasures, as the book articulates - to be uncovered.

The second chapter continues to pave a theoretical ground for the entire work. Violet poses a rhetorical question - "What brings children to therapy?" - and replies with a twofold answer that forms a central thesis, both for this section of the book and for the strategies she presents in subsequent chapters. First, she observes that troubled children, the ones who visit us in our offices, have a hard time making contact with significant others around them: "teachers, parents, peers," and even the authors/narrators of the books with which they come in contact. Second, she observes that these young persons "generally have a poor sense of self," meaning that children who are "emotionally disturbed due to some trauma or other reason ... will anesthetize their senses, restrict the body, block their emotions, close down their minds." These conditions that arise spontaneously in response to a variety of traumatic events can be addressed by methods outlined in the rest of *Hidden Treasure.* Of the latter, Violet comments that these "techniques are powerful projections and provide a bridge to the inner life of the child ... They can provide experiences to help the child become familiar with these lost parts of self and provide opportunities for new, healthy ways of being..." Furthermore - and not least importantly - she adds ... "They are fun."

The chapters following these initial theoretical chapters set out a broad palette of therapeutic concepts and tools that Gestalt therapists can employ with working with young people. Areas covered in succeeding chapters include methodologies for enhancing the sense of self in the youthful population; dealing with anger in children; approaches to making contact with adolescents; helping children cope with issues of loss and grief; fostering a sense of self-nurturing in this population; doing therapy with very young children; conducting therapy groups for children and adolescents; working with kids diagnosed with ADD/ADHD; and the use of music throughout a range of age groups. Each of these sections is developed through some theoretical discussion connecting the subtopic at hand with the two central theses as outlined in the first chapters, and illustrated with a wealth of compelling examples taken from Violet's years of working with children. In a recent discussion with Violet, she explained her goals in organizing the latter chapters of the book in this way: "I want to stress to potential readers that this is not a book you have to read starting from beginning and going through to the end." Violet thinks of *Hidden Treasure* more as a therapeutic reference, a compendium of observations, examples, suggestions, and methodological modelings upon which therapists can draw as they encounter situational questions and challenges with their clients.

When I talked with Violet about *Hidden Treasure* immediately after the book had been published, she told me that - despite the exhaustive list of modalities covered in this book - there are still more topics she was not able to cover in this volume. "There's a lot of stuff I didn't put in, because I had to stop somewhere," she said. "No matter where I stop, I'll never feel totally finished." Certainly, Violet's far-ranging and synthetic intellect and deep well of memory contain enough material to write a third volume on the Oaklander Model, and perhaps many more beyond that. However, Violet has other plans: to write a book containing a stringing-together of individual autobiographical narrative pieces that will add up to a compelling and engaging memoir. As one who has had the privilege recently to read some of her memoir, I look forward to the creation and eventual publication of this work ... which may, in time, come to supersede the original Oaklander Bible, at least for this humble reader.