"It actually reveals things to me about myself": How Play Becomes Real in the Oaklander Approach

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ABSTRACT

Freud's game-like use of associations was intended to get his patients thinking laterally and not literally. Perls's use of the "empty chair" aimed to help his clients engage in "as if" scenarios, akin to the make-believe play of children. Yet, playfulness has lost ground over the years to the bullying forces of logic, language, and outcome-based measures that permeate our therapeutic field. In this article, the work of Gestalt play therapist Violet Oaklander is analyzed to provide a much-needed model of how play helps therapy become real for both adults and children.

"People tend to forget that play is serious."
— David Hockney

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Introduction

From the start, there was something playful at the center of this serious business of psychotherapy. From a psychodynamic perspective, Freud's game-like use of associations was intended to get his patients to think laterally and not so much literally. From within the Gestalt tradition, Perls's use of the "empty chair" aimed to help his clients engage in "as if" scenarios, akin to the make-believe play of children. Yet, playfulness has lost some ground over the years to the bullying forces that permeate our therapeutic field. The adult-like tendency to prioritize the logic of both words and numbers has pushed playfulness aside in favor of highly rational approaches based on outcome measures and cognitive interventions.

This article will use a logical and verbal argument to help reinstate playfulness into its rightful and important place in the therapeutic encounter. First, both developmental and evolutionary theory will be employed to help make visible what play is, and why it is important to us in our helping roles with others. The author will lean on play theorists in order to explore the places where play takes place, a "hallowed" ground that is both at the edge of and between worlds and realities. Examples of how to facilitate play in therapy will be presented, based on the work of a "Master of Play," Violet Oaklander. The paper will show how her approach to Gestalt play therapy can help our clients, both young and old, dive deeply into the enlivening pool of play, coming out with the kinds of new perspectives and insights that only play can provide.

What Play Is and Why It Is Important

Though we tend to think of play as something light and fun, something children do before they grow up, the role of play in human experience seems to provide something much more substantial and fundamental. Play, in fact, may be so serious that we as adults defend ourselves against it by trivializing it and delegating it to the realms of recess and sports teams. Reptiles, in contrast to humans, do not play. They hatch out of eggs with a predetermined set of responses to the world and spend their lives pretty much taking life as it is. They do not create societies based on revolutionary ideas like democracy nor social clubs with distinct values and beliefs and members. They also do not develop unique identities in adolescence with distinct haircuts and complementary fashions and accessories. In short, reptiles deal with the reality they find and do not consider playing with alternatives to that given reality. Humans, on the other hand, do.

Erik Erikson (1977) describes how Plato saw the true model of playfulness

in the ability of young creatures to jump: “To truly leap, you must learn how to use the ground as a springboard, and how to land resiliently and safely. It means to test the leeway allowed by given limits; to outdo but not escape gravity" (p. 17). In this analogy, Erikson highlights a primary aspect of play in humans: in play, we press against the edges of a given situation and ask, “what if?”

In this testing of perceived limits, play in humans becomes a vehicle for growth, change, and, essentially, evolution. Brian Sutton-Smith (1977) asks why the brain must “fabulate” in both nighttime dreams and daytime fantasies and arrives at an evolutionary explanation: “if the brain didn’t keep itself labile, it might rigidify in terms of its prior specific adaptive successes” (p. 60). Sutton-Smith goes on to describe play as a “halfway house between the night and the day, the brain and the world” and asserts that the presence of both dreaming and playfulness is associated with general mental health and their absence is “associated with dysfunction.”

Through such theoretical lenses, play then becomes something much keener than just “goofing around.” Play, as Piaget (1950) states, “is the answer to the question: how does anything new come about?” Other than procreation, reptiles are not in the business of creating anything new. Humans, on the other hand, clearly are. “The evolutionary significance of play is not that it maintains an already existing reality,” states Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1979), “but that it provides alternatives to it” (p. 21).

In many ways, therapy can be seen as serving the same function of providing an alternative to existing reality at the individual level that play serves for humans at the collective, evolutionary level. Winnicott (1971) describes how playfulness and creativity are the stuff that make life worth living. Contrasted with creative aspects of play, he argues, “is a relationship to external reality which is one of compliance. . . something to be fitted in with or demanding adaptation” (p. 65). From Winnicott’s perspective, play serves the function not only of helping the individual differentiate from the demands of compliance to external forces but also of integrating all the internal aspects of the individual: “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).

Yet, play does not just happen internally as one discovers and integrates aspects of the self. Several play theorists describe play as occurring at a “border region” or edge, a place between. Winnicott states: "The playing child inhabits an area that cannot be easily left, nor can it easily admit intrusions. This area of playing is not inner psychic reality. It is outside the individual, but it is not the external world" (p. 51). This special zone of play is where a child can “test the leeway” of given limits without suffering the true consequences of such

behavior in the "real world." Sutton-Smith (2002), in fact, uses the analogy of a circus tent to describe the kind of place where play can occur: "The animals symbolize the possibility of danger, the clowns symbolize the disruption of conventions, while the acrobats symbolize the disruption of physical safety. Yet all of this takes place in a circus tent, where it is known that nothing really dangerous or disruptive will happen" (p. 19).

Huizinga (1949) also describes a special location for play within which exploration can occur and the rules for ordinary reality may not pertain:

> All play moves and has its being within a playground marked off beforehand, either materially or ideally. . . . The arena, the card table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court. . . are all in form and function, playgrounds. . . . isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. (p. 10)

This description of the location of play brings us back to what should be the "hallowed" space of therapy: a place where exploration, possibilities, and a different set of rules about what can be said and done should, in the best case scenario, exist. In many ways, then, therapy is closely related to play in both form and function. Yet, how do both allow and facilitate play in our therapeutic work with others, especially when there are so many "given limits" we must recognize? How, in fact, can we take play seriously in therapy? Following is a description of the creative ways in which Violet Oaklander's method of Gestalt play therapy provides a model for us as therapists to facilitate a place, a special location, for deep and engaging play in our serious work with others.

How Play Became Real in the Oaklander Approach

It is hard to tell if Oaklander first took the idea of the "empty chair" from Gestalt therapy and ran with it all the way to the playground, or if she first took her deep understanding of child development and play and informed her practice of Gestalt therapy with those insights. Gestalt therapy already had playful aspects in it, including the empty chair, experiments, and roleplaying, but in her seminal book, *Windows to Our Children: A Gestalt Therapy Approach to Children and Adolescents* (1978/2007), Oaklander took steps toward bringing the playroom into the therapy room. Instead of talk therapy with a few side trips into fantasy, Oaklander made fantasy and play the centerpieces of her work, filling the hour with sensual and imaginary engagement and making sandtray, puppets, and clay the heart of the therapeutic matter. It is perhaps ironic that her predominantly nonverbal

approach to therapy has "spoken to" so many people in so many languages around the world. *Windows to Our Children* is now translated into thirteen languages (including Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Serbo-Croatian, Croatian, Russian, Chinese, Hebrew, German, Korean, Czech, Lithuanian, Romanian), matching or exceeding any other published Gestalt-based text, let alone any focused on therapy with children.

My interest in her method was based not only on my curiosity about what she was doing, of so much interest to so many people around the world, but also on the magic of her playful approach that I had seen first hand. As a student in training, I had seen Oaklander work with a volunteer in front of a large audience using a "Rosebush drawing" as a conversation piece that suddenly came alive in rich metaphors and images that related to the volunteer's life in significant ways. It was like watching a magician at work: How did she do that? How did she make something so playful and imaginary become so real? How did that volunteer start out talking as if she were the rosebush in the drawing and end up describing her own life in both specific and metaphoric ways, especially in front of so many people?

Much later, I realized that her serious commitment to the realm of play allowed such real work to happen. I saw that Oaklander created the "hallowed" playground—as described above by Erikson—every time she worked with a client. She framed off a "magic circle" in which new rules applied by using a consistent four-step set of prompts to play identified by this author (Mortola, 2006). First, she invites her clients to engage in a relaxation and imagination exercise (e.g., "Imagine you are a rosebush or some kind of plant. . ."). Then she prompts them to engage in some kind of sensory play (with pastels, clay, sand tray, etc.) and to make something ("Draw yourself as this rosebush. . . "). After the client is done creating the artifact, Oaklander adds a further prompt that appears to be crucial to the process of creating a "play space." She gently pushes her clients to ignore reality for a moment and to pretend that they *are* the artifacts they have made (e.g., "I want you to talk as if you are this rosebush. Say, 'I'm a rosebush. . . '"). What happens next appears somewhat magical. One can observe her clients almost literally step into the realm of play: they leave behind the limiting conception of themselves and their world for a moment and engage in a kind of fantasy play that soon, and however paradoxically, helps them to see in new ways what is real. In short, Oaklander's clients temporarily lose themselves and, in so doing, come out with a richer sense of themselves in the process.

As an instructor of the Oaklander method to Counseling Psychology graduate students over the past seventeen years, I too have witnessed how play becomes real using the four-step Oaklander method described above. I, like Oaklander, invite the students to draw themselves as a rosebush or any

kind of plant; I demonstrate the work with a volunteer in front of the class; and then I encourage the students to try it out in triads (therapist/client/observer) in class. Even with the strange constraints of demonstrating this work in front of a class of 30 students with an understandably shy volunteer, I know that if I commit to the process Oaklander has laid out, play will become real. In the following transcript, I ask one volunteer to describe herself as the tree with in a park, complete with the fruit of apples and pears she has drawn:

Volunteer: I like the rain. I visualize this in Portland. So I like the rain. This currently is in early summer and so my leaves are sort of green. I have a very lush plant with a lot of leaves, so I provide great shade. I'm a large tree and birds like to nest in the tree. I also provide fruit for people that come to the park. And I offer a home to birds and other animals and sort of a safe haven for them to get off the ground. I am near other trees, but I sort of stand on my own.
Peter: You have two different kinds of fruit. Tell me about that.
Volunteer: I chose two different kinds of fruit because I assumed that some people would prefer one or the other; that way, I could offer two different kinds.
Peter: What does it mean that you have two different kinds of fruit available?
Volunteer: I can be a better provider to the residents and visitors of the park.
Peter: It's kind of a happy tree, isn't it?
Volunteer: [laughs] It does seem like a happy tree. After I drew it, I realized that.
Peter: Are you, as the tree, feeling happy, or is that my imagination?
Volunteer: No, I do feel happy, yeah.
Peter: Providing for others, in sort of full bloom, and in a park. . .
Volunteer: Yep. Hmmm. [pause] I guess if I were to compare the tree to myself, I'm probably a little bit more of a. . . I mean I love people. . . but I'm a little bit more of a solitary person. So, I think that's why I maybe envisioned the tree sort of out in nature, somewhere really beautiful. But if I were to think of it in very simple terms, people are what matter. So that's why I ended up choosing to place the tree where it could be with people, and it could provide benefit to people.

After helping her clients step into the rich imaginal world of play, Oaklander usually uses a fourth step that signifies a kind of "stepping out" of the play experience—the "hallowed space"—and back into reality, as it were. At a certain point in the exploration of the "be it" phase, she will typically ask something akin to, "How do any of the statements you made fit for you in your own life?" With this prompt, the client normally begins to, or chooses

not to, own aspects of the self that were projected onto the drawing, sand-tray, clay, or other medium. Sometimes, clients step out of the "play state" on their own and talk about what has been said while playing, as my class volunteer did in her last statement above ("I guess if I were to compare the tree to myself. . ."). This has been described as a kind of "sense making" that involves the client in a reflective process of sorting out what fits and does not fit for them (Mortola, 2006). Often, there is a bit of surprise expressed by the client (or, in this case, volunteer) about what happens in this process of therapeutic playing, and how close to reality aspects of that play became. Toward the end of my demonstration session with the student, I asked her how it was to do this exercise with me in front of the class:

Peter: How was it to do that?
Volunteer: A little uncomfortable, you know, in front of a class. . . and sometimes aware, I'm a little bit aware of, "this sounds really simplistic," or "I know what this means as I'm saying it." But nonetheless, I think it's a good process. It actually reveals things to me about myself as I'm saying them. Sort of like, "Oh, I can't believe I'm saying this, I know what this means" but. . .
Peter: Would you be willing to share one or two of those things?
Volunteer: Um. Sure. Just that the tree is a little bit solitary and just out there on its own. . . . I can extrapolate, and that means that I'm a little bit more independent. . .
Peter: When you were saying that, you realized, "Oh that's me!"
Volunteer: Yeah. Yeah, I did.
Peter: Was that surprising?
Volunteer: It was surprising in the sense that it was just so obvious and so telling. But nonetheless, I was saying it, because that's how I viewed the tree.
Peter: That's an interesting phrase: "It was surprising because it was so obvious."

How Play Becomes Therapy

How does it happen that, once clients are inside the "magic circle" of play, such real insights about the self can occur? How do the rich potentialities and alternatives to given realities described by theorists emerge in play, especially in relation to play therapy? There is a parallel between play and therapy relevant to this discussion, which has to do with the central Gestalt notion of "contact." Hughes (2013) highlights how, through deep sensory engagement and contact with the environment, a child learns about the world:

> When we see a child playing with a flower, or in the dirt, or skipping

> or playing tag, we should remind ourselves that what we are looking at is the child-like result of a deep and irresistible urge to interact with and have knowledge of the world and everything in it. (p. 13)

From this perspective, the child's irresistible urge to learn about the world and all its parts is what drives play. The child makes contact with aspects of the world in a somewhat controlled way through play in the "border region," the zone where the child and all her facilities meets the world in all its complexities.

In a parallel way, from a Gestalt perspective, clients cannot help but project aspects of the self onto the "rosebush" once they start speaking "as if" they were the rosebush. Two people could speak "as if" they were the same drawing of a rosebush, but they would necessarily bring their own experiences, their own unfinished business, their own process of figure formation, into that projective work. In this way, the projective work with the rosebush drawing and the "dialogue of parts" that Oaklander facilitates in her work is also a "border region" where the client is in fact coming into contact with, exploring, and even discovering differing aspects and realities of the self. In our normal "nonplay state," we are habitually constraining which aspects of the self we are willing and able to engage with at any given moment, as we negotiate the roles and responsibilities of a normal day. In the process, we are a bit like a horse with blinders moving forward down the road, except that in our case we are blinded to much of our own experience, to aspects of ourselves that we do not, or cannot, allow expression of in our regular reality. These parts of ourselves, as a variety of "unfinished Gestalts," find voice through the unconscious choices we make in what we draw, what we add or leave out of the drawing, and what we say and do as we enter the "play state."

In play, then, we not only meet and try to make sense of aspects of the world, but we also meet aspects of ourselves. Oaklander expresses this aptly: "When I let go and can allow myself to imagine these things, I'm actually coming back to myself because they're always projections. . . . Fantasy gives us an access to our own real experience" (p. 11).

This paradox of play becoming real is central to the "surprise" that often arises when working in the Oaklander method. There is often a kind of surprise when, in the work, clients meet aspects of their authentic selves, though just a moment before they had been "pretending" to be a rosebush. There is a moment of surprise when they recognize themselves in what they are saying, but did not expect to. This sense of surprise relates to Erikson's (1977) assertion that "wherever playfulness prevails, there is always a surprising element, surpassing mere repetition or habituation" (p. 17).

When Oaklander gets people to play in the way she does, she is encouraging a playful process of contact and integration. She is inviting her clients to play

in a border region where parts of the self can be encountered, played with, tried out, met, discarded, or integrated. The possibility of bringing or allowing such parts of the self into contact, giving them a voice, allows the possibility of ownership, of new action, of an integration of a more complete whole of the self. Yet through this playful work, as Oaklander (1978) states, the self ultimately grows and develops: "I work to build the child's sense of self, to strengthen the contact functions, and to renew her own contact with her senses, body, feelings and intellect" (p. 59).

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