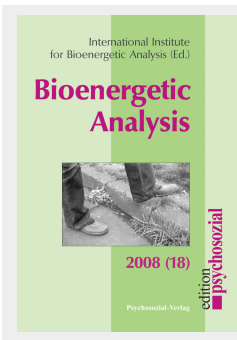


Vincentia Schroeter

Book Review of: McCarthy, D. (2007).
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“If You Turned into a Monster”

Transformation through Play: A Body-Centered Approach to Play Therapy. By Dennis McCarthy

Book Review and Reflections by *Vincentia Schroeter*

This book about play therapy with children combines the energy-oriented techniques of Alexander Lowen with the attention to symbolism of Carl Jung.

How is it relevant to us? Many Bioenergetic therapists are looking for techniques that are applicable to children and this book has many clinical cases full of specific Bioenergetic diagnostic and treatment techniques for children.

Why is it in the journal? Dennis McCarthy was in supervision with Lowen in the 1980's. When McCarthy would begin giving him diagnostic background on the child client, Lowen insisted the author tell him how the children moved in order to assess the blocks in the energetic flow. McCarthy states that this way of observing became his most powerful diagnostic tool, and an effective means of working with the child toward reclaiming their natural spiritedness. Parts of the first chapter in his book were previously published in our clinical journal, *Bioenergetic Analysis* 8, 1, pp. 99–105.

I used to think it was not useful to do Bioenergetics with children because they still need the character defenses they are erecting in order to cope with the family system they are still growing up in. However, McCarthy believes that if you help the child, along with motivating the parents to get help, a shift toward health can occur both in the child and in the parents, which can transform those negative family dynamics. Through out the book the emphasis is in the specific treatment of the child, and not on the parents. In fact, the parents in his book, seem to respond well, just to the suggestion from the author that they become more gentle, or understanding, or tolerant, or less abusive, less dependent, or whatever they need to better the situation at home. I found this

unrealistic from my experience. While parents often wish to improve they are also attached to their defenses and offer resistance to change. This is not explored in this book. The author gives a rationale for his stance in chapter 14, where he admits that parents have been, “conspicuously absent from these pages.” He goes on to say that he wishes to illuminate the power of a child to transform on a psychic and energetic level through play therapy.

Theorists often advocate treating only the child, as did Melanie Klein, who developed the technique of play therapy and ignored the parents to focus on the role of fantasy in the life of the child. She believed that children through play and drawings projected their feelings in the therapeutic sessions revealing infantile fantasies and anxieties. Through her methods an attempt was made to relieve the child of guilt by having them direct toward the therapist the aggressive and oedipal feelings they couldn't express toward their parents. (1) John Bowlby, who developed attachment theory, emphasized the actual history of the relationship and focused on the attachment patterns in the family. Following Bowlby's lead and congruent with attachment theory, are current theorists and clinicians whose techniques involve both the parent and child. A few of the notable ones are Alicia Lieberman's “parent-child psychotherapy”, Stanley Greenspan's “floor-time” and Robert Marvin's “circle of security”. (2) Having taken workshops with all three of these child psychotherapists and having done research based on attachment theory myself (3) I have not been a proponent of the more Kleinian style of treating the child without the parent. So it was with some skepticism that I approached reading McCarthy, who treats the child and not the parents.

McCarthy feels that “too little is known and understood about what a child is, separate from their family system.”(p. 137) He feels we overemphasize the power of the parent, and boldly states, “Most of the children I work with have made huge changes often with their parents making very few.” (p. 138)

Whether you insist that the parents must be treated for a child to improve, as Dan Siegel promotes in his book, *PARENTING FROM THE INSIDE OUT*, (4), or you believe a child can prosper without much parental shift, McCarthy's book will show you case after case of children using their own energy to transform into healthier and happier beings. I admit I was surprised and inspired by these cases where each child wielded the power, fairly independent from parental influence, to make their life better.

I will review some of the aspects he taps into in his chapters full of diverse

children he has helped. One of his first requests to a new child client is, “Draw a picture of what you would look like if you turned into a monster.” (p. 19) Here he shows his Lowenian roots as he says, “Children come to therapy with monstrous feelings-monstrous grief, monstrous rage, monstrous longing.”(p. 20).

McCarthy says that from early on we dream and imagine monsters, and writes about the importance of monsters both as an untamed energy and an unintegrated symbol. “Children speak in the immediate language of the body and the imagination, their symbols being a composite of the two, body and mind” (p. 29). This emphasis in chapter two, of the importance of symbol reminds me of Guy Tonella’s paper in this journal, where he writes about the importance of the representational in our self development. Guy also writes about the interface of representational and energy, which McCarthy also deals with in chapter three.

In chapter three we go from symbol to energy and follow treatment of children over time as they transform their monsters mostly through sandtray scenes that they create. The author works with the anger children manifest with the Bioenergetic understanding and processes of charging, meeting a block, discharging and integration.

Chapter four is entitled, “Energy” and is a clear exposition of Bioenergetics. McCarthy mentions what is lost when therapists he supervises do not understand the Reichian concept of pulsation, which the author describes clearly in his work with children. All the cases in this chapter are based completely on Lowen’s work, as he works through the Bioenergetic lens of energy, pulsation, grounding, the importance of expression, and the importance of active discharge.

“The Power of No” is the title of chapter five and is full of familiar Lowenian concepts such as needing to say no before you can say yes, and that self-assertion is the basis of self-identity. McCarthy states that most of the children he has worked with are either unable to say no, or unable not to say no. (p. 62). Children whose defense systems organize around saying no loudly in an oppositional or provocative way express it by being disruptive, stubborn, resistant or violent. As McCarthy explains it, they are stuck and in pain because “no” has lost it’s discriminatory function, and therapy involves surrendering the battle once it becomes safe to do so. What kind of monsters do you think these children create? I found it fascinating that kids who say no too easily

make monsters that are not violent or grotesque but helpful. McCarthy tells us why, “For them it is the noble, heroic part of the self that is repressed and turned into something conflictual.” (p. 63). This chapter ends with the case of Michael, a six year old still in diapers. The situation is complex, the therapy is presented clearly and the outcome is strongly effective.

In chapter six the author writes about his supervision with Lowen and also states his belief that transformation through play may be “more monumental” (than adult transformation), because it may spare the child years of internal struggle and pain.” (p. 75). This is a compelling reason for putting suffering children into therapy.

The rest of the chapters are equally as interesting and I recommend the book for Bioenergetic therapists, and any other therapists interested in new ways of understanding and transforming the lives of children through these methods.

In mythology, monsters have the power to destroy and create. They provoke change on the heroes and heroines in stories. By forcing change they make things happen, they make life happen. After reading this book I was eager to ask a child to draw a monster and here is what happened:

My eight year old niece was spending the night at my house by herself without her older sisters for the first time. I asked if she would participate with me in this experience and she agreed. I asked, “If you turned into a monster, what you would look like?” She eagerly got to work drawing a green growling monster with horns and holes all over it’s body. She named it, “Arain” and told me all about her.

“She steals anything; she eats anything. She has a horrible singing voice. When she talks she has a growly voice. She eats people, leaves the bones and throws their heart into the ocean.” (In the drawing she has added three hearts and made an arrow directed away from Arain and made an energetic gesture with her own arms of throwing the hearts away.) “If she eats a heart she will die, and that is the only way you can kill her. She will eat anything but hearts and avocados. The devil doesn’t have a heart and she belongs to the devil. If she eats a heart she will be gone forever, destroyed, her spirit won’t even be alive. She used to be an angel but she listened to the devil. She hates people. Tonight she is going to steal the whole grocery store and eat the manager.”

I wrote all this down as she was talking. She appeared somewhat scared of Arain as we took a walk, and she put out both arms with wrists bent and said, “I feel protected by God from Arain.” She made growly voices and practiced

symbolically throwing hearts into the ocean. She began laughing and appeared relaxed after that discharge of energy. When we came back in the house she went over to her drawing of Arain, painted a black dress on her and put her in my room on a footstool. She had me call her mother so she could tell her all about Arain, warning her Arain might rob a grocery store tonight, then told me to send her Mom all the information I had written about Arain. Then she got ready for bed, asked me to read her three books and she fell sound asleep for the night. When she left the next day, she took her Polly Pocket dolls, but left her monster, Arain.

I am less interested in interpreting the meaning of the story she told than I am in the fact that she drew eagerly and without hesitation created an elaborate narrative for her monster. The monster possessed aspects she found scary and she expressed the anger energetically by growling and throwing hearts away making her tiny voice loud and her little arms powerful. She appeared more self possessed afterwards and able to demand a comforting structure for bedtime.

I am reminded of what McCarthy says Lowen told him in supervision, "Just tell me how they move!" (p. 72). Lowen would say this emphatically when McCarthy would attempt to present a child by focusing on pathology or diagnosis. Through this Bioenergetic influence as well as Jungian influence Dennis McCarthy has written a book describing his thirty years of work helping children transform their private pain into energized personal power. It was fun to read and I got absorbed in the stories. The book is a clear exposition of effective treatment and I recommend it for the fascinating journey through cases with specific details and impressive results.

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