
Play, the Therapist and Associative Thought

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Abstract

If we do not totally cast out the concept of left brain / right brain with the bath-water of New Ageism, we can examine what may be useful in the concept that different parts of the brain are used for different ways of thinking. I want to show that the right brain processes are essential for associative thought, which in turn is essential for play, and play, of course is the way we are able to transform ourselves.

"Psychotherapy is done in the overlap of the two play areas, that of the patient and that of the therapist. If the therapist cannot play, then he is not suitable for the work. If the patient cannot play, then something needs to be done to enable the patient to become able to play, after which psychotherapy may begin." (Donald Winnicott, 1971: 54)

"The client writes themselves on the fertile ground of the therapist."
(Joseph Zinker, personal communication, 1997)

A Little Science – And Myself

Neurology recognises that a bleed into the left hemisphere of the brain usually results in the loss of speech, writing, and what is considered rational linear thinking. A bleed into the right hemisphere results in visuo-spacial agnosia, constructional apraxia (or inability to order the world in three dimensions), loss of musical ability, and loss of prosody in the voice (emotional expression and lilt). A sculptor with a right-sided bleed would not be able to sculpt, a painter could not paint, and a musician could only play mechanically. Whether a musician could play at all depends on whether she is a professional or not. When a professional musician is played a piece of music and their brain is

examined under positron emission tomography (PET) the *left* side of the brain is activated, but when another person is played a piece of music the *right* side of the brain shows activity. A musician friend of mine laments that for years after leaving the orchestra, she could not enjoy music, because she was too busy analysing it.

When I play on my harp music learned by ear, my learning is swift and seemingly effortless. I can add accompaniments and variations with panache. When I am given a sheet of music, yes, I can play it. It takes me seeming ages to learn it, and it is always correct and a little wooden.

For many years, I believed the difficulty I had in making myself understood was because I now needed to express myself solely in English. I overcompensated by talking too much, paraphrasing myself again and again, hoping to obtain understanding in the bewildered hearer. My Gestalt colleagues put me right. They told me that they now understood that my seeming obtuseness arose out of my associative thinking. They thus gave me a key to myself and to the many difficulties I experienced in my own journey.

I do have some mastery of left-brain, linear thought, or else I could not have passed my medical exams. I remember, however, as a registrar attempting to present a case to the Professor of Psychiatry, being told that “you will fail your clinicals, not because you don’t know what you are doing, but because of how you present the material”. Thought provoking, indeed. I went away and tried to understand this. I did not have the words to say it then but I realised I was trying to present associative thought to a linear thinker. I was assessing the patient as a topographical map, with mountains, waterfalls, forests and villages. What was required was a two-dimensional AA map of the main highway. I could do this. I passed my clinicals on my first attempt.

All of us doing psychotherapy are capable of in-depth associative thinking. This is part of the job description. It is evident in Freud’s use of free association and in Jung’s ‘active imagination’. It is not, however, a skill that is necessarily rewarded highly in this culture.

Other cultures seem to conceptualise more associatively. Consider Chinese characters, particularly in the banner “Chinese Splendour” hanging all over the city, the radicals that make up the last character.

Wang: 'King'

王

Put a small 'stone' with it

丶

We have yu: 'jade' (royal stone)

玉

Place it under a 'roof' safely

宀

We have bao: 'treasure'

宝

From this one is tempted to hypothesise that, with such associational language in its symbolic form, the Chinese have developed a different integration between left and right brain hemispheres.

Introduction To Play

The complete working through of therapy is not possible without play. By play I do not mean "to occupy oneself in a game or other recreational activity; to act light-heartedly or flippantly". That is a current dictionary definition which is not adequate for us. Play is not just kids' stuff. It is the key to what makes humans human.

Play is the ability to tangle with existence both manifest and sublimely transcendent, concrete and intangible, logical and fantastic. This ability to play in the broadest sense is the mother of invention, the passion of Shakespeare, the emotive capture of Picasso, the exultation of Beethoven. It is also, in its darker aspects, the lusts of Auschwitz, the threat of nuclear capability, and the killing fields of Cambodia. These latter are definitely not 'child's play'. But they can be thought of as the same energy, before perversion.

Empathy is essential for therapy, and on its own is not enough. Insight occurs with therapy, but can also occur with experiential understanding alone or where very little cognitive integration appears to have taken place. I however believe, with Winnicott, that therapy cannot be completely *worked through* without play.

Consider a new concept of play in the therapeutic sense. Here play is really a state of mind, a state of being where everything is fresh and new and everything potential. Nothing is analysed, labelled or set out in a logical left brain fashion. Instead, right-angled, right-brained associative thinking is encouraged, and thoughts, words and objects in both the real and imaginary world can at any moment take on new meaning, grow and metamorphose. In this state of being, there is often excitement, liveliness, creativity and spirituality, and feelings of delight, anticipation and novelty. Sometimes there may be a more savage side. A cat 'plays' with a mouse. One must never forget the darker side of play.

The state of mind that goes with play can be quickly recognised.

Experiment 1

Close your eyes. Put your hand out in front of you. Imagine that I am placing some fairy dust in your palm.

Now open your eyes and 'look' at it.

Are you open to a momentary feeling of delight at these brightly coloured stars that are part of 'fairy'?

Now experience that space inside you where you are open to this, where there are little sparks of colour.

This feels for me similar to being in touch with my life force. Although I remember this as part of my childhood, it is also part of my adult self. I can listen to a sparrow chirp and suddenly 'hear' it. I can pass a very small and simple daisy in the grass with as much delight as I would look at an orchid. It is in this space.

Experiment 2

To explore the extent of this space in yourself.

Take a tissue, and simply 'go with your energy'.

After 5 or 10 minutes, stop and consider your experience.

Did you become preoccupied in your own space in making something with the tissue? Did you become angry or irritated, feeling that this was foolish or silly and a waste of time? Did you become competitive, aggressive, or physical? Rude or 'unseemly'?

What did you discover about yourself with this very simple stimulation and freedom to explore?

This is often our clients' experience when they are ready to start exploring their world and being themselves in the world. This has the feeling of something new and untried. This is also a place where there is no 'right' way to be. Winnicott (1971: 41) says that this experience has place that is "neither inside nor outside", and makes the point that playing is doing and doing things takes time.

The essential feature of communication is this; that playing is an experience, a creative experience, an experience in a space-time continuum and a basic form of living. (1971: 50)

When he was talking about a mother and a baby, he called this 'potential space'. I suggest that there is also such a space between you as therapist and your adult clients. This is not the early stage of therapy where the potential space is sacred and where, some therapists would have us believe, the therapist must not intrude. This is a space into which the client will often *invite* you. This is the kind of playing that leads into relationships and is a form of communication.

Winnicott says that unless the therapist can play then he or she is not suitable for the work. I understand this to mean that unless the therapist can engage with the client in this state of mind for the working through of therapy, therapy will not reach a conclusion which is life giving. Winnicott acknowledges that the client must be enabled to play. The earlier part of therapy is devoted to engendering some sense of self in the client. The client now feels relatively secure with the therapist, and engaged. Some of the insights have taken place and patterns are starting to emerge. This is when play is important. Now the client starts to spring themselves from the prison of their past into the potential of their life for the future. Here the therapist who may have been shadowy or in the background needs to be available as a potential playmate for the client, both to maintain safety and to provide the boundaries, as well as being a sounding board and mirror for the client. This therapist provides timing and containment. It is essential that the therapist enjoy this stage and not be frightened by it, and be able to enter this space where there are really no rules, where everything is potential, in flux, where the outcome is uncertain and apart from safety and overall containment, the therapist is not necessarily in charge of what emerges. This is where it is possible for the unconscious of the client and the unconscious of the therapist to work together. All of you will have had experiences where you may have an image, tune, bit of poetry, or a story that is very similar to your client's and triggered at the same moment. I take this to be when I am in tune with the client's unconscious. We have now a reciprocal feeling of understanding at the associative rather than the logical level.

Anxiety

Experiment 3

Imagine, at the end of your working day, taking some body glitter and putting some on your face.

Imagine leaving your place of work, travelling, entering your home, being seen by your nearest and dearest, hearing what they say as they comment on it.

Depending on your experience of exposure, and boundaries, you will probably have felt, to a greater or lesser extent, some anxiety. In Gestalt, we think of anxiety as excitement arising but with blocks to following through.

Winnicott reminds us that “playing is inherently exciting and arousing and precarious”. Playing, while essentially satisfying, is therefore often anxiety provoking because it is new. There are no rules. Even though it is satisfying and life giving it also involves the body and therefore in clients who have had traumatic body experiences (such as in sexual abuse) playing may be particularly anxiety provoking. In order to play, the client must then trust the therapist to keep the play space safe.

As therapists, we must be very careful while playing not to interpret, lest the client become confluent and go along with the therapist, therefore losing the essence of unique creativity that is part of play. Interpretation certainly takes the anxiety away but it may take away the vitality as well. The client needs to learn to tolerate the anxiety of chaos as they may have good reason to be anxious

The Dark Side of Play

Terry Pratchett (1997) says “It was nice to hear the voices of little children at play, provided you took care to be far enough away at play not to hear what they were actually saying.”

All playing has a shadow side, just as human beings and indeed the whole world have both light and shadow. To enter into play without being aware of the possibility of shadow in oneself, in the client, and in the potential space between, is to take an unacceptable risk.

To listen to the words of children at play is to quickly discover that there is a very dark side to play. It involves emotions and behaviour which society identifies as less acceptable. Yet it may be important to “mine the shadow for gold” in Jungian terms.

These are energies which may need to be recognised and expressed, lest they become perverted in the client's life. The therapist really needs to know themselves in this as well.

(a) *Competition*

This hardly needs explanation. Anyone who does not enjoy winning in a competition with others really needs to see a psychotherapist! This is a biological given, that we strive with each other to be better than the other. If we do this playfully it does not become aggressive or destructive to the other. Rather it is a pitting of one against the other, a refinement of the life-giving skills of both. This is the transcendence of what could become a perversion—envy, spoiling and destruction of the other in order to triumph.

(b) *Tricking, lying, cheating*

The Nordic God of play is Loki, the trickster. Recall the film *The Mask* for its reminder about the dark side of play.

Remember the card game called liar poker. You take cards from a deck and in turn declare your hand in poker terms. You can declare anything you like. If you are challenged and you have declared falsely, you forfeit. If you have declared accurately and are challenged, the challenger forfeits. There is great tension and glee in the playing. Who is tricking or lying? Should you challenge or not? What should you declare your hand to be? Because it is contained in the ritual of a game, there is safety in exploring your responses to the feelings you are having.

We are most at risk in play when we cannot recognise these sorts of aspects in ourselves. When we recognise them, it brings them into our awareness and makes it possible for us to modify our actions if we choose.

Creativity

When we have the anchor of awareness we can be free to explore. How well do you know yourself? Do you know whether you are mainly visual, or kinaesthetic, or do you hear things? Do you sing, paint, make up poetry on the spur of the moment, tell stories? Do you know how to find out which of these is important for your client? I believe that when Freud was asking for free association, he was actually inviting the client to enter into a play space with him and was responding to the words in a playful fashion, albeit very seriously. I sometimes ask the client what their favourite fairy story is and explore that

with them. When a client brings a dream to work on they are bringing me into that area where there is the associational quality of playing. Sometimes, when I am working with a client, I will sing a song or play a game. When I feel they are challenging me, I will lie on the floor and ask them to arm wrestle with me.

Whatever I do in this state, I loosen myself up and make myself multi-potentially responsive to the client. If a situation of reasonable trust with adequate boundaries has been built up with my client, I can risk being my non-logical and playful self with them.

A Client

A professional man in his late twenties presented with crippling depression and loss of motivation. He is highly successful, but the success is like ashes in his mouth. His mother was not a 'good enough' mother, she was a 'too-good' mother who gave her all to this son to "enable him to achieve his great potential", or at least, her version of what she thought it should be. As we have worked, especially with the transference, he has been facing what Gestalt therapists call the Creative Void: namely, what fills this seeming emptiness if my mother (or my therapist) won't fill it for me?

One day, he arrived full of energy and ideas and talk. My inner psychiatrist had her button pressed—was he manic? Then I realised that the grandiosity he seemed to be expressing was the grandiosity of the omnipotent two-year-old. We talked for some sessions about his delight in this, and his fear that he would get out of control. He also started to play with me as a playmate. Previously, he had been unable to use the sand-tray, or metaphors, without cognitive deflections.

Recently he bounced in, giving me a leaf that had been caught in the grill of his car, with the injunction "Brace yourself". [Both: "Do not let me destroy you by your getting caught in my grill" and "I fear I/you cannot control me".] He told me of his uncharacteristic acting out the previous weekend. He had become drunk at a pub, and had 'enjoyed' himself. What made him curious was his wife remarking that he would front up to people with his right hand extended, fore-finger and little finger straight, and the others bent, like a bull's horns. He had no idea what it meant. I invited him to play with me; to do this in my face. I had no idea what would emerge. My only thoughts were of the Italian sign for the cuckold. I was wrong, as it turned out. After a minute he said it was about control—he remembered the movie *Crocodile Dundee*, where wild animals and dogs were controlled by the gesture. With laughter and

excitement we explored this. I shared my image of the hero in *Dune* riding the huge worm, after he made reference to messianic feelings. We talked of the discipline ['control' becoming 'discipline'] of the Benegesserit [female priests] in the book. At the end he was clear that instead, he was aspiring to the sureness of an Indian chief, 'sureness' replacing 'control'.

I believe he is playfully on his way.

Conclusion

Terry Pratchett (1997) writes: "Humans need fantasy to be human, to be the place where the Falling Angel meets the Rising Ape." With play we rise to meet ourselves.

I am sure I have not presented anything new. My hope is that I have reminded you that psychological work is not just anguish and pain, but can also be play that is full of humour, creativity and challenge as well.

Bibliography

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