A Senior Therapist's Observations and Concerns

CLINICAL EDITOR'S COMMENTS:
The author urges play therapists to (re-)consider their motivations for practice.

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When I started my professional career, my primary inspiration was a desire to be of service to others, plain and simple. That desire burned in my heart from the time I was a young child. These days, we talk about teaching children empathy. When I was a child, no one mentioned the word but, somehow, I learned it through my father's example. I do not remember much about him anymore, and I rarely mention him, but what I learned from him was to have tremendous compassion towards others. Clear memories include watching him give his sandwich to a poor person sitting on the sidewalk and give his umbrella to a woman and a child getting soaked by the rain. He treated everyone around him with respect and tenderness, and I am so grateful to have seen the things he held dear to his generous heart.

From Humble Beginnings: Volunteering

I also had a Catholic upbringing, and those Christian principles resonated with me. Like my father, I was constantly aware of those who were struggling around me. As soon as I could, I volunteered to do community work on the weekends. I looked forward to this more than most things in my youth. The nuns accompanied a handful of students into the poor sections of Washington, DC. They would go into the houses to speak with the parents or caretakers and we stayed outside playing with the children. We did very simple things: threw balls, drew on the streets with chalk, played hopscotch, blew bubbles, ate snacks, listened to music and danced, sang funny made-up songs, and jumped rope. I was oblivious to all the stressors in these children's lives, and I was disinterested in what the nuns were doing inside. I was just content to be present with these little ones, to enjoy each other's company, and to participate in a little laughter and fun.

This is where I first knew that I wanted to work with children and that I wanted to be of service to them and their families. I had no concept of what shape that would take or that my chosen profession would value play as much as I did. My career has been completely gratifying.

As I sit back and watch a new crop of professionals finding the work they love, I find myself beset with pleasure and pride. I have had so many students eager to learn, passionate, in fact, to give the best of themselves to others. I hear amazing stories from therapists all the time that demonstrate how invested they are in helping, how much they worry about doing everything they can to make a positive difference. I feel that there is an army of warriors equipped with love and willingness to connect with and provide to others. I am so proud to be a play therapist and to belong to the Association for Play Therapy! And, from my vantage point, I see other trends developing that cause me concern and a desire to ask people to pause and rethink some new trends that are emerging.

Concerning Trends: A Shift in Motivation

I see a rush to self-promote, to "brand," to set one person apart from another. I see models and certifications popping up everywhere, actually diluting the very meaning of these distinctions. Individuals are now certifying people in their often new and untested models. Certification always has been something that demonstrates that someone has obtained additional knowledge and experience in a specific area, but also that someone has been accountable through a process of supervision. Certificates are conferred by formal entities that set standards and regulations and enforce those.

As Registered Play Therapist/Supervisors (RPT/S), we became eligible for the credential through the Association for Play Therapy (APT) only after obtaining a master's-level degree in a mental health field and a mental health license to practice independently, documenting specialized play therapy and child development instructional and practical requirements, amassing thousands of play therapy clinical hours under a licensed mental health professional's supervision, and receiving play therapy-specific supervision. We understood that were accountable to others, and we got the guidance we needed after we learned the basics.

Many current offerings of individual certifications are usually didactic (without experience or supervision requirements). There is little

accountability, and the inferred expertise may or may not be properly transmitted, received, or verified. The more individuals certify others, the less significant certifications become and the more pressure new professionals feel to keep up with the sheer quantity of certifications they can put behind their names.

We are at a stage in the development in the play therapy field where very few original theories will be created: Most approaches will fall under a seminal or historically significant theory that already exists. Models are best proffered after they have been established for a substantial amount of time, and after the approaches have been tested with hundreds of clients, not just a few.

> ***"I also remain convinced that our peers are quite generous in their receptivity of original and creative work, and they are quite willing to applaud those whose notoriety is well-earned and deserved."***

A few years back, I read an article on "branding," and the author rightfully encouraged therapists to become more business-minded. Mental health programs do not typically offer courses on how to run private practices and/or how to market ourselves in our communities. Yet, my observation is that social media has created opportunities for some to simply flood the air space with self-promotion, and this is very unbecoming in those who have not yet earned the right to promote themselves so aggressively. When I see posts not-so-cleverly designed to promote something personal, like a product of some kind, I notice how turned upside-down marketing and promotion has become. In the past, people set out to help others and, sometimes, if they were believable, credible, and had something worthy to say, others took notice of their work and inquired about it. Now, it seems, tooting one's own horn creates enough noise so that the real questions are not asked:

- Is your primary goal to be of service to others?
- Are you giving yourself enough time to test your hypotheses and approaches with a substantial number of clients?
- Although many of us are not in academic settings where we can do formal research, is there some way that you collect data about how people progress as a result of receiving your services?

And, I guess I just have to ask: Whatever happened to humility? Whatever happened to earning your right to be heard? Where is this "rush to fame" coming from? And can we reverse these trends before it becomes intolerable? These trends range from off-putting to downright dangerous, and I hope we can all pause and consider the basic question of why we do what we do!

A Cautionary Account

Play therapists whose major motivation is to become a presence in the field of play therapy by presenting, traveling nationally or internationally, or writing books in the hopes that they are widely cited, may have mistaken goals in striving for this popularity. I have seen literally thousands of clients, and I feel confident that I can share my experiences with the caveat that all children are unique and what works for one child or family may not work with others. I hold myself to a high ethical standard: I will not give speeches on a topic I have not worked directly on for a minimum of five years; I will not write on a topic unless I have had direct and substantive experience in the topic area.

Many people have asked me how I got where I am today, and this question feels uncomfortable to me when it seems to come from a place of vertical striving, or trying to get ahead for the sake of personal notoriety and/or financial gain, rather than horizontal striving, or sharing acquired knowledge with others so that the whole profession advances as a result of the conversation. This question, and the concern I have over the recent trends I have noticed, inspired me to write this piece as a cautionary account.

Personally, I just wanted to help children and their parents. That's all I set out to do. The rest just followed. I was really lucky in that I enjoyed talking about my work and people seemed to find what I said useful. I never set a goal to be a speaker or a writer or a big deal in any field. I set out to help kids, and that remains my goal to this day.

I realize that some people may be offended by something I have said here. Although it is not my intent to offend, condemn, or pass judgment on anyone, it is simply my goal to encourage reflection on these topics, and to share my discomfort with the individualized trend of shifting towards "what the field can do for me," rather than the collective spirit of, "What can I offer others to help them?" I originally titled this "Musings from a Cranky Old Lady," but in re-reading it, I felt that I needed to document legitimate concerns I have about the profession I love and value greatly.

I also remain convinced that our peers are quite generous in their receptivity of original and creative work, and they are quite willing to applaud those whose notoriety is well-earned and deserved. They are most eager to praise, applaud, and elevate their peers. Maybe trusting that recognition will happen rather than trying to create it, would be a more simple and earnest goal to which to aspire. I hope that the legacy each of us leaves is one of pride in what we do for others instead of pride in our individual accomplishments.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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