

Manikins, Nursery Rhymes' & Secrets

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Commentary

C G Jung tells how as a child he had a hoard of secrets including a stone and a small manikin, which he would sneak to look at when there was an undercurrent of trouble between his parents. Similarly as a family therapist I sometimes found the children referred to the Family Therapy Service, and it was always the children, would connect with me using these various means to explain their unexplainable.

Jung's analytical psychology set him apart from the mainstream, for him the diagnosis was important only for the doctors and not helpful to the patient. He studied the deeper aspects of human psychology through the study of religious beliefs, dreams, myths, symbols and the paranormal. The following cases are just some of the many interactions which I think have resonance with Jung.

I have not included in the case reports that follow the details of treatment. The focus of this brief article is intended to share the importance the children gave to manikins, symbols, nursery rhymes and secrets. I hope the paper conveys and also underlines the very intuitive interaction with which the children engaged in my intervention within the family. It goes without saying there is a special relationship in which sanctity and trust plays a crucial part when the therapist engages with families.

However all families were discharged successfully within six months of referral: The children appeared to become secure through an intuitive appreciation that someone had taken on their burden. In all cases the behaviour of the children in terms of attention span, hyperactivity, and general wellbeing improved quite rapidly. I should also note that working in cooperation with the schools was vitally important – teachers appeared to punish the children for what was merely the child's reaction to extremes of family turmoil and intolerable circumstances. Naturally teachers needed to appreciate what the children were experiencing out of school and even educated themselves to look at the children with new eyes and view them with kindness and understanding not punishment.

Referral to Family Therapy from a General Practitioner

Referral 1

Please can you take this referral - James 6 year old - his parents are in serious disagreement as to the way forward. He is now in trouble with the police for stealing.

I contacted the mother to arrange to meet the family but the father was at sea and the remaining sons [three] had left home.

The mother wanted to see me alone. When I met her she was distraught: James had been caught stealing small objects from shops

on numerous occasions. The local police had been asked to threaten him and teach him a lesson by the father.

The mothers view was that James was a lovely little boy who acted as her protector while his father was away at sea but when his father came home they didn't get on.

She didn't know why James despite knowing the threats and risks he would continue to steal. His brothers were all doing well and loved James but this was something, which had never been encountered before – a thief in the midst of a very law abiding family - they were very ashamed.

I met James alone and we formed a mutually warm and trusting relationship. Like so many little boys of today he had become the surrogate husband to his mother. He didn't understand the family dynamics and certainly was too young to enunciate his emotional turmoil.

While his father was at sea James and his mother were supportive of each other, but when the father came home he had to revert to being a little boy. When we discussed what he stole he told me he stole little men and tiny cars, and then kept them in a secret place. And when in trouble he would go to this secret place and play with them and handle them. They had no value and he could have easily have brought them with his pocket money.

When the father came back from sea he joined his wife on the appointment she had with me. He told me he was against his son and his wife having outside help - that what I had to offer was waffle. In his opinion his son needed a good beating.

I listened and suggested he give me some time and that I could guarantee we could resolve James unacceptable behaviour.

Referral 2

GP Please can I refer this child: The mother is requesting a Bell & Pad for her 8-year-old daughter Veronica to stop her enuresis

The mother has a heart condition and her second husband who is an epileptic has recently fallen from a ladder while working as a painter. There are 4 children ages ranging from 4 to 8 Veronica is the eldest. The children have different fathers.

I took the referral and followed the usual procedure: A telephone call to make an initial appointment to visit the home.

The family lived on an estate in local council accommodation. First impressions were the neatness of the house and garden in comparison with those of the neighbours. I decided to walk to the back door, which I could see was open at the top being a stable type door. Further up the garden there were many sheets billowing in the wind.

I tapped on the door and Mrs Smith looked up from her ironing.

"You from the social?" she asked.

"Cause if you are you can go – I don't want anything to do with you"

"No I'm from family therapy I've come because you requested a Bell & Pad"

"I just want it I don't want advice or talking or anything else"

"I'm sorry but I can't just provide one without knowing more about Veronica".

"Look at that line every day I'm washing and ironing it aint right"

"She's a filthy child she should be put in a home," she said fixing me with her eyes.

I was sympathetic we talked about the problem of drying the linen and she said how social services had provided a clothes drier.

"Would you like to come in and have a cup of tea" she invited.

"Well that would be nice but will it interrupt your ironing"? She unlatched the door and let me into her home, which was spotless. I listened while she told me about herself. She was very angry because the only holiday she got was when she went into hospital to have a baby. That luxury was now denied her because:

"They tied my tubes when I had my last without me knowing - because of my heart" "The nurses will be upset because they enjoyed having me in hospital"

Over the tea she told me her troubles and how she had to cope with her husband recovering from the fall with no prospects of getting work.

Before I left I said that I would need to see the family together. She had by then warmed towards me and I was able to tell her what would happen i.e. sitting in a circle without the TV or any distractions and understanding the family. I could see that Mrs Smith was basically a very good and devoted mother – she had high standards for running the home.

The day of the family session arrived it was beautifully prepared: there were chairs arranged in a circle with the husband lying on a couch at one end. The younger children were doing handstands in the middle trying to dissipate the seriousness of the occasion. They took their places on the various chairs and waited expectantly. That is with one exception - one child –I noticed a little delicate girl outside the circle hovering behind me like a shadow - excluded.

I began the session by going round the circle interested to hear the family talk about school and home life whatever they choose to tell me.

Then Mrs Smith asked if everyone would like a drink and biscuits? 'Yes' they all shouted - as if it was a party, and Mrs Smith went to the kitchen.

The little girl who I decided was the patient - Veronica tapped me gently on my arm with a book in her hand, which coincided with Mrs Smith returning with a tray of drinks and biscuits.

"The lady doesn't want anything to do with a filthy girl like you she said viciously" the remaining three children all reeching and pretending to vomit followed this.

"She smells her sister added". The little girl Veronica retreated.

Sometime later as we were disbanding and by which time I had reached my own conclusion Veronica persisted once again tapping me to show me her book – it was Cinderella.

I followed this session with a visit to the school where Veronica attended – she had been placed in a school for the 'educationally compromised'. I suspected that she was just retarded unable to thrive due to harsh environment of being the scapegoated victim, and that she should never have been sent there in the first place. The teachers were not so sure. However as the family dynamics changed this indeed turned out to be true.

Veronica's father had abandoned Mrs Smith. Veronica was very beautiful quite unlike her mother and step – brother and sisters. Mrs Smith projected all her own problems and perjuries onto the child. Believing that if Veronica were removed all her problems would be solved. Veronica was Cinderella.

Referral 3

From a GP - Please would you see this little boy - nursery school is worried about his behaviour

I rang to make an appointment to see the family together. The family turned out to be a girl aged 6; a boy aged 4 and his mother living together in a very nice bungalow. The father had left to live with another woman. The daughter was at school but the little boy was at home with his mother when I called.

The mother said she was beside herself with worry, as the husband wanted to sell the family home. When he had first told her he was leaving her he had said she could keep the home. She was clearly depressed: limp and pale and trying to put a brave face on the situation. The bungalow was cold and bleak she had to turn down the heating to save costs. She apologised to be telling me of her own predicament when I had come about concerns with her little boy.

The little boy had the tell-tale-hollowed eyes of a troubled child: pale but lively and hyperactive. He was very intent on what was happening unusually in his home he wouldn't play he just listened intently.

His mother asked me if I would like tea and as this is always a positive suggestion I generally accept.

While his mother was in the kitchen making the tea the little boy became very active and purposeful: he went out of the room and returned with a ladder. Somewhat alarmed I tried to caution him but very quickly he climbed the ladder, felt along the edge of a bureau, climbed down and quickly gave me a small box. At which point his mother came in with the tea.

"What on earth have you been up to"? She asked him clearly both bewildered and embarrassed.

In the box was his mother's wedding ring! It was no longer on her finger!

Referral 4

The school doctor referred the child of 5: This child is behind in his usual milestones can you assess

Following the same procedure I arranged to meet with the family: The mother: a hairdresser, the father a draughtsman, a girl of 10, and the little boy 5. Once again the boy appeared delicate, pale and withdrawn. His mother took the lead and the father agreed with what

she said, namely they were shocked that he had been referred and very worried.

I decided to return and see the mother on her own some days later. She told me she hadn't left the house since she had had the little boy because she was agoraphobic for which she had been prescribed Valium by her GP. The little boy had spent a great proportion of his early life constricted at home sharing his mother's fears and limitations.

I was amazed at how skilful the mother was: she had a rota of friends who would enable her to remain in the home by shopping, doing errands etc. The husband had become so accustomed to this unusual situation that he didn't question how restricted family life was.

I started visiting her and once the process of her treatment was started the family started to readjust – the little boy very quickly attended school and far from being retarded was very bright.

The mother would relate to nursery rhymes to explain how she felt, such as being the 'farmers wife' in the playground game The farmer wants a wife! Another example was the Billy goat gruff and the three little pigs and the wolf.

Our sessions were spent relating the dynamics of the games and rhymes to her own position and the alternatives.

Four months later into the treatment the mother had decided to stop taking Valium. Despite suffering very severe withdrawal symptoms she persevered. She was also walking to the hairdressing salon where she has worked five years previously and working for 2 hours a day.