

FROM WINDOWS TO OUR CHILDREN TO HIDDEN TREASURE: A SPAN OF 25 YEARS

By Violet Oaklander

Over 25 years have passed between the publishing of *Windows To Our Children* and the writing of *Hidden Treasure*. What happened in between those years? Well, I was so busy traveling the world giving workshops, seeing clients, doing my annual two-week training program, that I just didn't have time to write another book. But the events of the passing years have made it essential that I commit myself to writing.



The need for good work with children is astounding. It seems that the problems children face have increased exponentially over the years all over the world. In spite of the popularity of *Windows To Our Children*, I was continually asked for more and more. I was deeply moved when some years ago I received a letter from a medical doctor working with children in a refugee camp in the former, war-torn Yugoslavia. She said that the children were so traumatized that she needed to address their emotional issues along with the medical ones, and that without my book she would not have known what to do. She pleaded for more information.

To think that my work would be used to help children in the war-ravaged countries of the world is astonishing and deeply humbling to me. (That first book is now in 12, almost 13 languages.)

At first I made an audio tape describing my Gestalt Therapy based approach. I realized that this was much less time consuming for me than writing a book. Of course my work has evolved, as have I. Over the years I have had new insights and have developed new concepts and approaches. So I gradually made a series of tapes—five after that first one-- describing my work with children and adolescents—work not discussed in my book. These audio tapes have been very popular but I came to the realization that the distribution is limited compared to a book, and that I had even more to write about than what I had written for these tapes. So I decided to write a book I called *Hidden Treasure: A Map to Child's Inner Self*.

I think that what appeals to practitioners about this work is the experiential component. Through the use of drawings, metaphors, clay, puppets, music, the sand tray and more, children will divulge that inner self that they so fiercely protect. When this happens, healing can begin. The work involves the use of imagination, sensory expression, metaphor and narrative—all developmentally important and appropriate skills.

What was not so surprising to me was that adults respond to this work as well. In my two-week intensive training program, people come from all over the world to learn this method. Since I strongly believe that therapists need to experience for themselves what they ask children to do, the program is equally balanced with didactic material and experiential work. The results are astounding. Though I emphasize that this training is not designed as a therapy, the participants have powerful experiences and learn quite a bit about themselves. I believe this makes them better therapists.

The most gratifying aspect, for me, of the work is its cross-cultural relevance. In my original writings I was not conscious of this, merely writing from my own experience here in the United States. When so many people from so many places around the world responded to my work with book translations, letters, e-mail and attendance at my trainings, I realized that this appeal stems from the basic, organic nature of the work. All children, no matter where they are from, go through the same kind of developmental experiences. When basic elements of development are blocked, trouble begins. When I worked in South Africa, therapists reported to me that the appeal and success of the work related to the fact that it is drawn from universally shared aspects of both child development and basic childhood experience. Every culture of the world has made use of fundamental and ancient modes of expression: music, drawings, clay work, puppets, sand and miniature figures, storytelling, creative dramatics, body awareness and movement, sensory experiences. These expressions are a universal language.

In my work I have often used as my model the development of the healthy infant. The infant comes into the world as a sensuous being. She sucks to live, must be held to thrive, looks at everything, touches everything, tastes everything as she develops. Her body is in constant motion and as she grows she does not restrict her body movements. She crawls, walks, climbs, runs exuberantly and zestfully. She expresses emotions congruently: you know when he or she is sad, or frightened, or happy or angry. Her intellect thrives: she learns language, explores, asks questions. Her organism, made up of senses, the body, the intellect and the ability to express emotions is functioning in a beautiful, integrated way as she grows.

But then something begins to happen to interfere with this wondrous phenomenon. The senses become anesthetized, the body is restricted, the emotions are blocked and the intellect is diminished. Why does this happen?

Certainly various traumas like abuse, divorce, rejection, abandonment, and illness, to name a few, can cause the child to cut himself off in some way. He does this instinctively to protect himself. Further, there are a variety of developmental stages and social factors in the child's life that also cause him to restrict, block and inhibit himself. These behaviors, in the service of protecting himself, can, and often do, follow him through life.

In the process of life and growth, the organism makes every attempt to regulate itself. Paradoxically, it is this natural, important process that begets difficulties. For example, the young child learns early on that it is unacceptable to express angry feelings. She learns that it is not only unacceptable, she is not entitled to this dangerous feeling. So she holds it in and pushes it down. But the organism, in its quest for health, expresses it in some way: outward as fighting, punching, hitting, or inward as a headache or stomachache, and so

forth. Every behavior that brings a child into therapy has as a root cause the inability to express deep feelings, and this, in itself, diminishes the self.

I have found that once the child has cut off and restricted aspects of the self, she does not know how to gain it back without help. So in my work, experience with aspects of the self: the senses, the body, emotional expression, the use of the intellect, is vital. This is the basis for the numerous projective, creative, expressive tools we use.

In the book, *Windows To Our Children*, many suggestions for this process are given. In *Hidden Treasure*, I have elaborated on these suggestions in more specific ways. I have included two theoretical chapters giving the framework, the underpinnings of the work, as well as the general process of the therapy. Each of the other chapters focuses on a different topic: the adolescent, the very young child, working with anger and loss and grief, helping children and adolescents become self-nurturing, working with groups, treating children with attention deficit hyperactive disorder, enhancing the sense of self, and finally, a description of an unusual way to use music in therapy. I found that as I wrote, I had more and more to say. But I finally did let go.

Now that I am facing retirement, I find it difficult to stop in general. Life evolves and changes and many new ideas come to the fore. I hope the readers will continue the process.