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A Fairy-Tale for Correcting an “Out-of-Conscious” Sensory System

A psychotherapist is often richer in theories than in creative ways of applying them. This article is designed as a train of thought taking us from an abstract (and unproven) theory to a final product—a fairy-tale to be used in a real therapeutic process.

Working with children with behavioral problems, I ponder a lot about their use of their sensory systems. There is a fruitful approach derived from the work of Milton Erickson which is being developed both in NLP (Cameron-Bandler, 1978) and in Ericksonian therapy (Mills & Crowley, 1986). In essence, it claims that one or more sensory modalities may “fall” from conscious control and become “out-of-conscious” (Heller & Steele, 1986). As a result, a child (and later the adult) loses the ability to function consciously in this sensory system and to access the processes going on within it. For instance, with an out-of-conscious kinesthetic system, a child is not in touch with her feelings in both the physical and the emotional senses. Such a child has a poor sense of her body; if she develops psychogenic symptoms, they are likely to be of a corresponding nature, such as bedwetting or diarrhoea.

This is the theory. Let us look at what we might do if we gave it credit. We would probably like to “pull” the “out-of-conscious” system back, i.e. make it accessible and controllable. This can be done in a variety of ways. Body-oriented therapy, art therapy, or hypnosis can all prove their worth here. And all of them will use metaphors, in one way or another. Pure metaphors make fairy tales.

Fairy tales have at least three magical features which I should

like to take advantage of. First, they display a particular behaviour from its inception to its distant, but logical, end. It takes the child by the hand and, if the beginning matches some of her experience and the presentation is honest, she has to follow. So, at the beginning of this tale there will be three scattered modalities. One possibility is to show how unhappy they become if they do not stick together. But that is too universal a message for my purposes. I want the message to be more specific.

The second very important feature of fairy tales is identification. This makes the tale more powerful than a plain presentation of options. A feeling, a thought, any form of behaviour (what we might generally call a “subpersonality”) can be identified with a character in a tale and then share its destiny. A foolish passion (like blind anger) might be killed, and it is not cruel, but logical. Actually, once an identification is created, the character is pushed to its fate, and this process is quite active. So I will not only suggest to a child some new way of processing information, but will actually try to push her subpersonality, with scattered logic, into integration. I will explicitly bring the modalities together.

And the third feature I will take into account is that fairy tales are created out of words. And words contain more than just coded information. What is important in my illustration is that the words have a sensory coloration. In order to understand them, the child will have to turn on her different sensory systems, and so will be trained in exactly what I am trying to achieve—accessing, operating and integrating all her sensory modalities.

And so we have the tale.