The house was trashed. Stairs upended, furniture out the window, people strewn all over the garage. After a lull, while the cars sank deep down under the sand, the house got turned upside down.

No, it wasn’t a tornado or some kind of natural disaster. Nor was it was a trauma scene, or not the kind people would classify that way. But it is what happens sometimes in the world of a 3-foot high wooden house, home to life and loss and change, along with the extremes of emotional weather.

The house has lived through scenes of settlement too – all of the doll figures in their beds, each piece of furniture in its place, the floors washed down, and the extra people removed to the closet. The last kid who created that still perfection was living in the bad weather of her parents’ hostile divorce. Little in her real life stayed the same. Not her room, not her residence, nor the relationships of those around her. The dollhouse held an antidote, a world of no conflict, no movement, no risks stirring. She had crafted her own “still point in a turning world.”

And the kid who threw everything out the window? He was hurling out emotion in the form of furniture, giving life to feelings that had made him unable to speak. His play took up where words wouldn’t go. It told of high velocity fear and anger that no one could read on his sweet four year old face. Home scenes had surely found their way into the soup of his feelings– his father walking out the door, his mother frightened, loud voices, doors slamming. No one felt safe. The sounds resonated and rebounded in the wooden house.
Two years later he didn’t look at the house. Not because it was upside down, but because he had moved on to create different scenes - small silver balls eating lunch at a school filled with thumb sized chairs, thin wooden blocks that became a hiking trail for clay people. His tamer play came as his inner world quieted and his outer world became less threatening, rather like the sky after a long storm.

Two years later the child who created that still perfection in the house had left it too. She alternated between paper and sand. On paper, she drew diagrams of shifting alliances, people together and people crossed out. In the sand she buried objects for us to find. On the other side of her still point was the struggle with continuing shifts - in her feelings and her family. Our job in that process was to find the lost objects in all senses of the word. Hidden is not gone.

RE-PLAY & RE-VIEW

Trashing and repair are themes of play, and themes of life too. We replay that process in psychoanalysis, re-viewing life’s moments and themes until the pain is worn out of them and the meaning shines through. In play therapy, we re-play them, letting them shift forms until fresh air moves in. Materials are props in the process of sharing what is too hot or too huge to fit into words.

How does this work? Here is a mini example:ii

“Do you think he’s over it by now?” Max’s mother asked me.

“NO TALKING!” Five-year-old Max threw a 10 inch truck across the office. It crashed into the door.

‘It’ meant the car accident that landed him in the hospital. After six months of fears and tears, it brought him into therapy too.
The truck answered the question (NO!), while alluding to the topic (a crashing vehicle). In the same throw, he also conveyed his feelings (huge and hot). But Max did not want to talk about that.

Fortunately, he didn’t have to. He could play out his story in the safe confines of my office. He mired action figures in clay, getting them so stuck to the desk chair that they were lost from view. Was that a version of Max, stuck in the hospital with casts on his legs? Or was it another aspect of what he went through, of Max refusing to leave home, holding on and hiding out from view? Or was it both of those at once, in the nonlogical way that play can blend anything, shift forms, and vanish.

After some months, the action figures escaped from the clay and started hanging on high wires he strung across my office. As they moved from being mired in clay to doing stunts, Max became less frightened in real life. But don’t ask Max about that - “no talking!”

Before he came to play therapy, the only forms he had for his fears were tears, nightmares, and refusals (not getting out of the car/ not going though the school door). Play gave him a different language, one out of the glare of reality, where he could grow his own way back to his life.

TRANSIENCE & PERMANENCE

Transience and permanence live together in paradox. We all wish for permanence, yet it comes through transience. When things get fixed in place, they don’t grow. Fall tells it best. Out the window of my car, I see a soft flow of orange leaves, moving with an afternoon breeze. In another month, they will have vanished. Dark branches will be what I see instead. But vanished is not gone. As long as they are not carted away, they will become the mulch of the ground beneath them, feeding the new growth of next years buds and leaves. Their tree will be dormant, not dead.
In human life we mix with life’s changing states, for better and for worse. Some of the better comes from a human touch, the ways we can breathe life into a problem through human exchange. Sometimes the worse emanates from a desire to fix a problem – but we may ‘fix it in place’ by seeing the symptom as separate from its roots.

In an era of categories and labels, play brings a process where problems can shift forms without anybody calling them names. So do forms of psychotherapy that take their time.

LABELS

Name-calling has reached a height of status and convenience in this era of 24/7 access to so-called information. Anyone can look up the label for a child’s problem while he sleeps. But it might be wrong. Or it might even be a diagnosis that fits, but misses the struggle and meaning underneath.

That can drive the real problems underground, while it fixes in place the behavioral label. ADHD is a rather glaring case in point. I don’t need to repeat the numbers. It’s common knowledge that the diagnosis keeps increasing with each decade in this county but nowhere else. A recent N.Y. Times article came to the logical conclusion that culture adds to biology in creating that spread.iii But the authors left out another critical cause – feelings in disguise.

The same behavior might come from a sheer desire to move, as a way to feel fully alive. It might also be a language for feelings. It could be an outlet for anxiety, a way to shed through the limbs what can’t be said. Or it might be a response to mourning, a way to not drown in feelings. Each of those states needs understanding, each of a very different kind. Yet when we assume we know the answer without taking the time to understand, we miss the deeper message. Here is an example of that:
Six-year-old Justin’s teacher asked his parents in for a meeting. She handed over a checklist when they arrived that showed something striking. In a twenty minute time period, Justin fiddled with his pencil sixteen times, turned around to talk to his neighbors seven times, and got out of his desk twice. Could they show this report to their pediatrician? In other words, would their pediatrician please prescribe something that would keep Justin in his seat?

But there were things she didn’t know about Justin. She didn’t know that he had moved from Chicago to New Orleans to California to New York, making this new house his fourth home in five years. She didn’t know that his mother had left when he was two, dropping back in and out at times no one could predict. She didn’t know that his grandparents, the next people to care for him, got left behind in New Orleans.

She may have known his dad was often overseas on business, and that his new mom was busy caring for the new baby. But, she had no idea that would affect how much he moved around. She is not alone in missing the links.

Justin was stuck in motion, just as another kid might be stuck without any. His motion was not a form of flow, nor was it inborn pathology. It was a manner of speaking. To get unstuck, he needed another way to tell his story.

The outer form of a problem can cause distress to others. But that may hide inner distress, which goes further underground when the focus is on its outer form alone. Play gives turmoil a chance.

The opposite can be true too. People can get stuck in patterns of problems that resemble a “normal life.” Boredom, low energy, or lack of ambition can be clues to a disconnect between inner emotions and the self
in action. While that is most common in adults, it can happen to kids too. Pseudo-permanence can hide lost emotion, lost struggle, and lost memory, at a personal cost. For that kind of permanence to turn transient, it needs to find a way to wake up, be felt in spite of its pain, and be shared.

FLOW

In nature, change is a constant that creates a kind of moving order. Sometimes it’s invisible, or literally underground, as in changes in the earth that we only know when they reach the surface. Sometimes it’s right before our eyes, like a tree that crashes down in a fierce storm. Each change brings another. The waves erode the rocks, making more space for water to flow. A downed tree feeds the soil, serving as mulch for new growth.

Everyone recognizes the temperature changes that come as the months go by. But inside the months are inner forces – the sap in the tree that goes dormant, only to come back to life months later. The leaves lose their chlorophyll, in a sequence of green, orange, yellow, brown and gone. Seasons are a slow moving version of flow.

In human life, there are different kinds of obstacles to flow. Some, as in nature, simply happen, as in illness, loss, or violence. Other obstacles happen through invisible forces, such as when aspects of the self collide, and damn up energy in a stew of symptoms.

In therapy, our job is to open up flow, moving through a process of trans-form-ation. That is the way the same feelings and dilemmas can gradually shift form, from those that cause frustration, symptoms, and pain into a creative process. The entry to that route is to find a shared zone, one that begins when we synch up our inner energies with another’s, using empathy as a guide.
Play therapy and psychotherapy with adults takes such different forms that a spy would conclude they are different processes. Kids may meander the room, settling into an activity that absorbs and expresses their feelings, or sometimes by turning the room into a gym. Adults usually sit in a chair and talk. But there is an inner, invisible process that pervades them both. That is about finding a way to simultaneously express and connect.

The journey through is mired with old routes, and detours designed to keep the action away from the hot spots. Trans-formation begins when the old ‘hot spots’ become a fertile ground.

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i T. S. Elliott (1943) Four Quartets: Harcourt.

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