

Editorial 1 - *The Reading Loft* – Introduction to the Therapeutic Use of Literature.

Reading Your Mind

by Hermann A. Peine, Ph. D.

The clinical psychologist in me is anxious to share with you insights gained over the last ten years in the therapeutic use of children's literature, while the child in me is looking forward to simply having "fun" in writing this column.

My experience has been that many adults frequently dismiss the books of their childhood and fail to see their lasting impact. The emphasis is focused on the negative outcome of divorces, drug and alcohol problems, and the pervasive influence of the media and peer groups, making the whole task of living in this world about enough to make anyone depressed. It is into such a world that many thinking adults cautiously, but more often with reckless abandon take on the role of parenthood. Second thoughts frequently arise when adults become the parents of teens. Thousands of parents each day go to experts for help with their kids. I believe that much of what many parents and children require is as close as their nearest library. This column will explore how the content of the books, the way they are processed, and the setting in which all this takes place, can have lasting impact on all those involved in the activity.

Current models of family counseling and adult psychotherapy emphasize the heavily weighted influence of our early childhood experience. Even Sigmund Freud and B.F. Skinner would agree to this. Both "good" and "bad" comes from childhood with its countless models and examples of how the young child might learn to adapt to the complex world he finds himself in. The noted psychologist, Bruno Bettelheim said it so well in the

introductory pages of his book, *The Uses of Enchantment*:

"If we hope to live not just from moment to moment, but in true consciousness of our existence, then our greatest need and most difficult achievement is to find meaning in our lives."

Dr. Bettelheim believes that the wealth of models and images found in children's stories, specifically fairy tales, offers this hope to the child. In his opinion the task of reading should go far beyond the ability to read, even to read for enjoyment. He continues:

"For a story truly to hold the child's attention, it must entertain him and arouse his imagination; help him to develop his intellect and to clarify his emotions; be attuned to his anxieties and aspirations; give full recognition to his difficulties, while at the same time suggesting solutions to the problems which perturb him. In short, it must at one and the same time relate to all aspects of his personality-and this without ever belittling, but, on the contrary, giving full credence to the seriousness of the child's predicaments, while simultaneously promoting confidence in himself and his future."

Taking liberty with the above quote I use it to look at the therapeutic change process. If therapy is going to be effective one must get to the often painful process of growth and change. In this situation the therapist must stimulate the patient's imagination; help him develop skills of creating positive images; help the individual to use all the intellectual skills they have to make some sense out of their emotions; help them to deal with stress and overcome their phobias and bring some positive goal setting into their life; the therapist must be supportive to the patient,

and help him find some meaningful alternatives for dealing with the problems. In short, therapy must relate to all aspects of his personality, without belittling, giving full credence to the seriousness of the patient's predicaments, while promoting confidence in himself and his future.

Skills learned in childhood through the use of a rich literature experience may be just the ones the adult needs. For if the adult is in pain and requires change the observation by the psychotherapist Sheldon B. Kopp, in his book *If You Meet the Buddha on the Road, Kill Him!* comes into play.

"And so, it is not astonishing that, though the patient enters therapy insisting that he wants to change, more often than not, what he really wants is to remain the same and to get the therapist to make him feel better. His goal is to become a more effective neurotic, so that he may have what he wants without risking getting into anything new. He prefers the security of known misery to the misery of unfamiliar insecurity."

Such insights into the human condition are humbling for adults yet not fully applicable when dealing with children. Change is the name of their game. For many that read to them, counsel and process with them, "good books" have the potential of not only helping adults enrich and nourish the next generation, but also to heal the current one. The goal may not be to just feel better, but to explore, adapt, and enrich one's life with natural highs leading to higher human potential. Be thinking of ways to get children away from the T.V. so that next month in this column we can start the therapeutic journey through books.