

Beyond Words:

A story of connection between a play therapist and a little orphan girl

by Lisa Dion, LPC, RPT-S

I sat down in the middle of the room and waited. I wondered which child would come to me? She came. She was about 6 years old and I don't even know her name. She had a very large bow in her hair on the top of her head making her look younger than she actually was. She approached me in an overwhelming disorienting kind of a way, blowing bubbles from a bubble maker right in my face. I tried to respond, but remembered that I don't speak Russian and she does not speak English. I got nervous for a second. How was I going to do play therapy with this little orphan girl if we can't understand each other. I took a deep breathe and reminded myself that the magic of play therapy has very little to do with the spoken word and everything to do with the level of attunement between the therapist and the child.

I also reminded myself that a mother and a baby do not speak the same language, but somehow they communicate. I took another breath and then engaged back. We began to play. She approached me fast, from all angles, left little room in my space and I began to feel her internal chaos, her struggle to be able to predict her environment, and her challenge of staying grounded. I used my entire body, sounds, and facial expressions to let her know how I was feeling. As this interaction continued, she began making eye contact with me and saying, "Dah, dah, dah" repeatedly. I later learned that she was saying, "Yes, yes, yes".

And so our dance of attunement went on. I looked around the room at the other children and noticed that she and I were the only ones connecting. All of the rest of the orphan children were in their own little worlds seemingly oblivious to what was happening around them.

She grabbed a baby doll and put it in a stroller and brought it towards me. I was quickly able to say hello to the baby and then it was taken away from me. This little girl stood there overwhelming me while she rocked the baby forcefully in the stroller. The baby fell out and lay there neglected on the floor. "Oh, the baby..." I thought. My body filled with sadness and I felt helpless. Just as that feeling began to sink in, she was back in my face with the bubbles, but this time she wiped the bubbles all over me. Slowly the feelings of this experience began to peak through the cracks in my overwhelm. More sadness and a feeling of yucky emerged. I again gestured back to her in whatever way I could to let her know how I was feeling and once again she looked in my eyes and said, "Dah, dah, dah."

I noticed that she was starting to calm down and that she was crawling on her hands and knees. She let go of the baby and crawled towards me and like a baby she crawled into my lap and allowed herself to be held for just a few seconds. I took a deep breath. My

overwhelm and my sadness started to transform. For a split moment, I felt deeply connected to this little girl. I felt grounded.

She gestured for me to stand up and so I did. She wanted to be held and so I did. I started to rock her and I could feel her little body trying to relax. And then out of nowhere, she had reached to the side and grabbed a large dinosaur right off of the shelf and was now overwhelming and scaring me again. Here I was standing in the middle of this playroom at the orphanage holding a 6-year-old girl that so desperately wanted to be a baby and so scared to fully connect. I understood...in her world, it just is not safe to do that. I looked into her eyes, took another breath, grounded myself and with every ounce of my being tried to let her know that it was ok to relax. We repeated this cycle a few times- we would attempt to connect and then the dinosaur would come and scare me.

I heard an internal voice, call it intuition that said, "Hum a song". I thought, "What the heck, I will give it a try." I began to gently rock her back and forth and hum a little tune (the tune that I used to hum to my own daughter when she was a baby) and magic happened. She put her head down in my arms and closed her eyes. I felt her body give way and for about a minute she completely relaxed and for about a minute I completely relaxed. I had been in Russia for just a few days surrounded by new sights and sounds. I did not speak the language and had to rely on a translator for my needs to be met. I had been highly dys-regulated, having a hard time finding my bearings, a little lost in many ways, but in this moment holding this little girl I found myself again. I could feel my center, I could feel my clarity, I was so in-tune with this little being that it was hard to know who was grounding whom. Dan Siegel refers to this as affect attunement- the deep level of attunement that occurs between a mother and her infant.

And then she opened her eyes, grabbed the dinosaur and scared me once again. We continued to do this dance until it was time to go. When it was time to go, she grabbed onto my finger like a tiny child and would not let go. An orphan caregiver came over to help with the transition. As I was walking away down the hallway, I turned around and there she was standing at the door blowing me kisses. I blew her once back and sent it straight to her heart.

I can't stop thinking about her and I can only hope that our exchange impacted her just as much as it impacted me and that somewhere in her little body and mind, she was able to register what it feels like to be seen, heard, and cared for on the most profound level. In 15 minutes she showed me her world and I let her know that I understood without being able to use a spoken language. The healing that occurred for both of us that day was simply, Beyond Words.

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