



# IL-APT • On The Go



## A Play Therapist's Haitian Experience

Charles E. Myers, Ph.D.

January 12, 2010, a 7.0-magnitude earthquake struck Haiti, 17 miles southwest of Port-au-Prince. In 35 seconds, the earthquake decimated the area, resulting in over 316,000 deaths, 300,000 injuries, and 1.5 million homeless. As I watched the news, I felt a profound sadness for the Haiti's loss and responded by volunteering as a field hospital crisis counselor, working primarily with children and families. Following are some of my experiences, the lessons I learned, and how it has impacted me both professionally and personally.

I arrived in Haiti knowing I would be working in a field hospital as a part of a mental health team, but knew little more of what to expect. The hospital consisted primarily of two large tents containing an emergency room, surgery, Intensive Care Units (ICUs), lab, pharmacy, radiology, and beds for 300 patients. After the earthquake, it was largest hospital in Haiti, and the only one with a crisis care unit and Neonatal/Pediatric Intensive Care Unit (NICU/PICU).

I made two week-long trips to Haiti and served

on a multi-disciplinary mental health team consisting of counselors, psychologists, and social workers. While there are many overlaps between fields, each of us brought a different perspective and focus. This provided us a well-rounded team capable of responded to a myriad of needs, including crisis counseling, psychological assessments, referrals for the Haitian patients and their families, and support for the volunteer medical staff.

As a child specialist, I was drawn to the pediatric ward and NICU/PICU. I saw children and babies with various injuries and illnesses, including amputations, broken bones, severe burns, malaria, tuberculosis, and more. These little ones were in pain and scared. I knew immediately that this is where I would spend the majority of my time.

As play therapists, we know children express and explore their worlds through their play and that play has meaning. While doing some play-based crisis work, I remember a quiet, expressionless Haitian boy playing by himself, picking up a Lego building and shaking it until it fell apart. He spoke not

a word, but his message was strong. In this short play interaction, he demonstrated three key posttraumatic play behaviors: an intense, literal quality; avoidance of interaction with others; and flat affect.

In preparing for crisis work, it is all theoretical until you are in the field doing it. Even with my training and my previous experience, I could not fully comprehend what it would be like to work in a hospital following such a major disaster. My first night, I provided support to the medical staff as they "humanely terminated" a man. Once the devices supporting him were removed, four of us held vigil. A nurse reached out and took his hand as he died. For me, she demonstrated such respect and compassion through her simple gesture. Her compassion moved me and I used her example over the next week as I witnessed 11 deaths, including six babies and children. Each death is forever etched into my memories, I share one here. One morning, a doctor told me that one baby would not survive the morning. After we told the mom this through a translator, I sat with the

baby and mom. The mom did not speak English, nor did I speak Haitian Kréyol, and even if we did, no words would have made a difference. We sat in silence for two hours while I held the baby's hand in one hand and the mother's hand in another. After the baby died, I held the mother as she cried. No words could express how she felt, how I felt, but we communicated those emotions through our eyes. Through this heart-breaking experience, I was able to support her and to use therapeutic touch to let her know she was not alone, that someone cared.

In our training as mental health professionals, we learn that counseling is an emotionally-intimate relationship. I met a 12-year-old girl who lost her father in the earthquake and her mother had just given birth. She followed me all week. Even when I tried to protect her by sending her away when a death was imminent, she would stay, comforting others. Initially, she spoke no English, but by the end of the week, she had learned enough to say, "Charlie, I love you. I want you to be my father." Counseling is an

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- An NIMH pilot study recently demonstrated that Parent-Child Interaction Therapy, a play-based model, led to better mental health and executive functioning in preschoolers, whereas non-play based parent training showed fewer effects (Luby et al [2011] at www.nimh.nih.gov).
- A recent experiment by Blanco & Ray showed that child-centered play therapy can improve academic performance in academically at-risk elementary school students (J. of Counseling & Development, 2011, 235-243)

**Resourcing You**

- On Facebook? You might be interested in signing up for the following groups: International Colleagues in Play Therapy, Animal Assisted Play Therapy, Attachment Parenting International.
- The 2012 APT National Conference will be in Cleveland, OH, and the 2013 site has been changed to Palm Springs, CA.

**Get To Know Your Officers**

**Mary Alice Wentling, President**

Hi, I'm Mary Alice (M.A.) Wentling and it is my honor to serve as the President of the Illinois Association for Play Therapy. I work for Lutheran Social Services of Illinois as the Clinical Supervisor/Clinician for the Foster Care Counseling Program in Rockford. Our program specializes in trauma and attach-

ment issues that are prevalent among families involved in the DCFS system. I became a counselor later in life after following several paths that naturally led me to be a play therapist. As with most everyone else involved in play therapy, I am very passionate about what I do. I am a prescriptive play therapist but rely

heavily on attachment, narrative, CBT, and object relations interventions. My sandtray is one of my most valued tools. My professional goals are to eventually work in a private practice and continue to work with chronically traumatized children and their families. Oh yeah, and to become rich. :-)

**Erin Brumfield Grima, Vice President**

I previously served as Secretary for the Association and am the newly elected Vice President. The duties of the Vice President include organizing the annual conference (with a lot of effort by the entire board), so please contact me with any questions you have about our upcoming conference. I'm a Licensed Clinical Professional Coun-

selor with a Master of Science in Human Services/Counseling. I work with adolescent males who have a history of sexually problematic behavior and am also a Certified Sex Offender Treatment Specialist. I've been employed for the past 6 years by the Larkin Center in Elgin, Illinois, working with adolescent males in both the group

home and residential programs. I utilize play therapy to address the extensive trauma and attachment interruptions they have experienced. The sand tray is my favorite play therapy material as it allows the client to manipulate their world in a way no other material does.

**Karen Robertie, Secretary**

I earned my Master's in Counseling at University of Wisconsin-Madison (Go Badgers!!). My initial specialization was counseling survivors of trauma in a variety of settings. After a few years of doing a little bit of everything, I found my home in residential treatment with adolescents. For the last 13 years, it has been my pleasure to bring Play Therapy

techniques to those who work with boys who have sexual behavior problems. I have presented trainings on this topic at two different Association for Play Therapy Conferences and at several conferences aimed at professionals who work with adolescents who have sexual behavior problems. Along with my colleagues from Onarga Academy, I co-

authored chapters in two different books related to play therapy. I am an RPT-S and I have been a member of IL-APT for approximately 8 years. I am most grateful for the extraordinary people I have met through my association with APT, at the trainings I have attended and the amazing people I have met through IL-APT.

### Charlie Myers, Treasurer

Hi, I am Charlie Myers, Treasurer for IL-APT. My connection with play therapy began in 2000 as a school counselor and continued to use it in my work with children in schools, clinics, shelters, and private practice. I earned my RPT in 2004 and my RPT-S in 2007. I have been very active in the promotion and support of play therapy, serving on several committees and task forces for APT. I am an active researcher in play therapy, primarily investigating posttraumatic play and the

effectiveness of Child-Centered Play Therapy (CCPT) and Child-Parent Relationship Training (CPRT) with a wide range of populations and presenting concerns. I share my research through several publications and national and international presentations. I earned my Ph.D. at the University of North Texas with a specialization in play and filial therapy and am currently an Assistant Professor at Northern Illinois University where I teach Counseling with Children with a

play therapy micro-practicum.

*IL-APT note: you can find a recent publication by Charlie in APT's academic journal:*

Myers, C. E., Bratton, S. C., Findling, J. H., & Hagen, C. (2011). Development of the Trauma Play Scale: Comparison of children manifesting a history of interpersonal trauma with a normative sample. *International Journal of Play Therapy, 20*(2), 66-78.

### Words from the President

Welcome to all veteran and newly recruited members of IL-APT. After a rocky start, the upcoming new year looks like it will be very exciting. \* Eliana Gil will be the presenter at our Annual Conference on February 23 -24, 2012. \* Officers and Board members are committed to providing introductory play therapy trainings across the state. \* We have a new website (see [www.ila4pt.org](http://www.ila4pt.org)) to help us maintain more effective communication with our membership while linking members to essential trainings and contacts within the play therapy community.

Other goals are: \* Provide better public relations to communities so play therapy is more recognizable as a professional organization, \* Provide at least one yearly advanced training to the downstate area, \* Recruit more members, and \* Recruit members who are willing to help IL-APT achieve these goals.

Please contact any Officer to let us know how you would like to assist either on a one time basis or more regularly.

### Cheryl Welsh, Membership Committee Co-Chair

Hello fellow play therapists, I am Cheryl Welsh, MA, LCPC. I live and work in the city of Chicago where I specialize in treating trauma within the child welfare system. I enjoy applying the power of play within my work with a variety of age groups from very young children to ado-

lescents and families. For the past two years, I have been privileged to co-chair the IL-APT membership committee along with Simone Schmale. I am expanding my role within the association to also include being the liaison for Master level students and the regional contact person for

Cook County. The one play therapy material I could not live without in my play room would be puppets. I have witnessed children and families' stories come alive through puppetry which is truly inspiring to me.

## Welcome, New Members!

IL-APT extends a warm welcome to new members. We're glad you're aboard!

- ◆ Jane Ballis, MA, LCPC - of Chicago, IL
- ◆ Jody Ideran, MSW - of Rockford, IL
- ◆ Thor Johansen, PsyD - of Wheaton, IL
- ◆ Catherine Kelleher, MA, LPC - of St. Charles, IL
- ◆ Victoria Outerbridge, MS, LCPC - of Champaign, IL
- ◆ Jean Weymer - of Roscoe, IL



## ***Haiti, cont'd (from p. 1)***

intimate relationship.

Many of my Haitian experiences were emotionally challenging. When dealing with death, debilitating injuries, life-threatening illnesses, and amputations on a constant basis, the need for self-care becomes very evident. While we dealt with many deaths, we also celebrated 10 births. For my self-care, I created "baby therapy." After witnessing a death and supporting the family in its grief, I would go to the NICU/PICU. As I held and feed those little babies, I felt my spirit repaired. Additionally, the mental health team met every night to debrief and support each other.

My final experience I would like to share is one of resiliency. The Haitian people have experienced centuries of human rights violations under a long line of dictators. Haiti is the poorest country in the western hemisphere, with 85% unemployment and over 70% of the population living on less than \$2 a day. Even after the earthquake, the extreme loss of life and propriety, they are hopeful and positive. Their smiles are warm and genuine. They care about others and are quick to help.

I am always going to carry part of Haiti in my heart. The people I met and the lessons I learned will always be with me. I know now more than ever: that counseling is about the relationship, about being fully present and caring; that counseling is an emotionally-intimate relationship; that therapeutic touch is a basic human need; that it is okay to cry with clients; that self-care is crucial, especially in crisis counseling; and that resiliency can happen in the darkest of conditions. I carry these lessons into my work with children and into my training of future play therapists.

### **Special Thanks From IL-APT**

The IL-APT Officers and Board would like to extend a huge Thank You to previous Presidents. **Amy Baur** was a long time president who helped the association keep going and thrive in its early years. **Mariellen Griffith** helped organize and expand the membership into the downstate area. Mariellen recently moved to Arkansas, so we want to note that Illinois' loss is Arkansas' gain. **Aimee Mictetic** took the presidency when no one else was willing to commit the

time and energy and kept it going through some very successful conferences. Then, most recently, **Gloria Cockerill** took on the onus task of organizing years of paperwork and leading us to our first Gold Branch status. As the current President, I truly appreciate everyone's hard work and want to give you all a personal thanks. On behalf of IL-APT here's a well deserved round of applause. **BRAVO!**

### **IL-APT Website Update**

One of the long range goals for IL-APT has been to develop a more professional web site. The Officers and Board reviewed many website providers and selected one who has been very helpful and cooperative, Leslie Caton. We have changed our website address to [www.ila4pt.org](http://www.ila4pt.org). Check it out. It will be under construction for a short while but you will still be able to access the important information. Thanks for your patience during this long haul.

### **Want to get involved in IL-APT?**

The IL-APT board is always happy to have our colleagues team with us to bring play therapy news and education to our state. If you are interested in participating, please contact president M.A. Wentling at [mawentling@hotmail.com](mailto:mawentling@hotmail.com).

**Have feedback, questions, and/or ideas about IL-APT's *On the Go* newsletter? Wish to contribute an article or other content to future additions? Contact the newsletter coordinator, Lisa Gassin, at [lgassin@olivet.edu](mailto:lgassin@olivet.edu).**