
Existential Child Therapy
In the World of Silent Dialogue
Eugene D. Alexander

In the World of Silent Dialogue

Eugene D. Alexander

e-Book 2016 International Psychotherapy Institute

From *Existential Child Therapy* edited by Clark Moustakas

Author

Eugene D. Alexander is Administrative Director and Chief Psychologist, Child Guidance Center, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

In the World of Silent Dialogue

Eugene D. Alexander

It is difficult to grasp in words the uniqueness of my relationship with Jerry. In fact, to use words almost does injustice to the relationship, for it was the wordlessness and the reaching beyond words that made our experience so special. The words that I uttered merely reinforced the communion already present. Jerry's own words, when they finally did come, seemed more a condescension to custom than a necessary aspect of our relationship.

With Jerry, there were no sharp encounters, no struggles between therapist and client. There was no testing of the limits of the situation or attempts to define the extent of the therapist's endurance. Jerry did not have to explore dependency feelings or to experiment with the possibilities of transference. Once our relationship was established *(the basis for it emerged from the first meeting)*, each seemed to sense the other's inner self; our relationship enabled Jerry to open up to the depths of potential inherent in our dialogue as two human beings. We became two friends walking down a path, together searching wider horizons. Sometimes I saw and sensed more clearly than Jerry. At other times, he clarified my doubts and my insensitivities. Jerry determined the level at which we shared our beings. At

times, he would take a sudden plunge into new and deeper feelings. At other times, he would pause and, for many meetings, savor and explore at one level until I wondered if our relationship had reached its limit. There were times when he touched on feelings that were too threatening or too painful, and he would make a hasty retreat. But eventually he approached depths that neither of us realized existed, and we found ourselves searching out new dimensions. There were few word symbols to clutter up perception and expression; thus, the more significant nonverbal occurrences could be fully experienced.

As I read over this introduction to our relationship, it does not seem possible that I could be talking about a boy who was diagnosed as mentally retarded. Jerry was not only diagnosed as mentally retarded, but spent a year in a class for "trainable-retarded" children, children whose I.Q.'s were evaluated as below fifty. It terrifies me that I, too, came precariously close to diagnosing ten-year-old Jerry as severely retarded.

Our first contact was in a testing situation. It was my responsibility to evaluate Jerry for admission to an educable-retarded class. Jerry struggled through almost the entire administration of the Wechsler-Bellevue with little or no response. Everything I said, everything I showed him, seemed beyond his comprehension, if not downright confusing to him. He was hard of hearing, but he did hear; even so, my gestures and examples appeared meaningless to him. Yet I could not stop. Something inside me insisted that I

continue.

He reacted with bewilderment and question to the demonstration of the Block Design, a test of abstract perception, just as he had with all the other tests. But this time there was a difference; he was able to copy the third demonstration. Then, with sudden insight, as if the capacity came by magic, he was able to complete the next five designs well within the time limits. With this success, Jerry appeared to be a different boy. He seemed to relax. I watched with fascination as he methodically worked out the intricate designs. His complete involvement and enjoyment were quite obvious. He was unable to complete the final two designs within the time limits, but constructed close approximations. As Jerry relaxed, we began to exchange smiles and share the joy of his accomplishment. I think we both felt a bond of closeness. The grin he gave me as he left was free and open. He knew that I realized his true abilities. He knew that I knew he had much more than most people had realized. From this point on, there was a silent understanding between us that nothing could shake.

As I look back to this testing experience, I ponder over Jerry's complete confusion with most of the test items. Perhaps, because of his unique experiences in life, he was unfamiliar with the abstract mode of perception. Because of his difficulty in verbal communication, he had developed his own unique way of experiencing reality. Perhaps, this enabled Jerry to be more

rooted in the concrete than other children. He had a greater tendency to perceive in wholes, and perhaps he was confused by the fragmentary, analytic demands of the test. Certainly, for someone who had been accustomed to encounter life directly, a categorical-abstract approach is far removed from reality. Why segment and disassociate a perception when it is obviously "there" in its totality? Why translate feelings into words when they are clearly sensed and understood in their genuine, unspoken form? Ours is a strange world for someone who is deeply in contact with the immediacy of the universe, who is in such close contact with life that he does not abstract and separate himself from the totality.

But why the sudden successes and better-than-average performance? What motivated me to ignore the rules and continue testing after all the preliminary failures? Did I unknowingly enter Jerry's world and respond to his beckoning instead of the directions of the test? I do not objectively understand my behavior. I can only recapture a vague feeling of being suddenly present in the unfolding life of the other. A sensitivity and awareness was demanded of me that was anchored in existence, not in the rubrics of cognition and language. In me was a sense of something forming, something being born; perhaps it was the uncertain courage to follow a path without knowing why or how or where I was going. As doubts arose, there was a counter feeling of wanting to reach out to an emerging creation. Did Jerry sense my earnest hope, my intense inner urge to help him, somehow, *to*

become? Did he sense my own inner experience of faith and conviction and concern, and did this help him to rally his own resources? Did he have to experience repeated failure in my presence to know the meaning of being valued, recognized, and accepted regardless of performance? To know the meaning of companionship, of relationship? Whatever the process, something happened to Jerry, to both of us, that enabled him to achieve, to accomplish what had not been possible before. Exactly what happened remains a mystery, but I believe it was more than the sum of Jerry and me. What happened was between us and beyond us—an essence, an existence that transcended each of us. A human meaning emerged in which two people struggled to reach each other at the deepest levels, a communion that occurs only when two persons are totally and completely alert to each other's being. Perhaps, at the moment of our struggle in the test, a spark of faith leaped from me to Jerry that allowed him to integrate and bring to expression capacities that had long been dormant.

In the hours of our therapy, the key to Jerry's emergence focused on his feelings of aggression and hostility. Yet these feelings were not the typical intense, aggressive feelings expressed in therapy. It was as though they were not really a part of him, as though he were standing aside wearing someone else's feelings. When he expressed aggression, he looked bewildered and smiled at me in puzzlement. His hostility was not restrained and deeply inhibited, not ready to burst forth violently in a moment of acceptance or

encouragement; it was worn on the surface of the skin rather than underneath it. It was a hostility completely alien to his nature. He had to discard these feelings, not in angry outburst, but as he might discard an outer covering to reveal his true self. His feeling of right and wrong was not embedded in a restrictive superego. His conscience was at a much deeper level. He had a way of expressing himself as if to say, "People should not be angry and hurt and destroy. It's not the human way." Jerry was so close to his humanness that his basic nature pressed beyond the conventional standards and expectations and reached deeper into a sense of justice.

In our first meetings, Jerry was reluctant to express aggressive feelings, though his approach to the toy figures implied a need to do so. One day, he set the soldiers in position to shoot the animals. He left them this way until I shouted encouragingly, "Bang!" Almost at the moment of my remark, the shooting began; the battle was under way. I continued shouting "bang" and "grrr" throughout his play, as he shot down the animals and knocked them over. These were our only spoken sounds for a long, long time. Jerry continued shooting until the battle ended with all animals downed. His further play evolved the same theme: he knocked over the soldiers with cars; then he knocked over cars with other cars. Again, he seemed to be expressing detachment or noninvolvement, a feeling that the items themselves were creating battle and war, were moving under their own volition. In a real sense, Jerry was noncommittal in all these actions. He was enacting a scene

that had been played many times before, but now he was the director and not simply one of the actors being pushed around. I was delighted in the sudden spontaneity he was expressing, in the release I felt in him. So I continued making sound effects to encourage and even enhance his actions. I made no long comments or reflections or interpretations aimed at promoting insight, just simple sound effects that complemented Jerry's play and added to his sense of courage and abandon. After many more visits, the play took a different turn: Jerry picked up toy people, gazed at them intently, and tossed them gaily into the air.

Another dimension of the world we shared centered in problem-solving situations. Through these experiences Jerry could strengthen his valuing of himself and his confidence in himself. As in the test situation, he initially experienced defeat, followed by struggle, and finally a sense of glory in accomplishment. For example, he worked desperately to put objects together in a particular shape, form, or construction. At times, he appealed to me with gestures, attempting to enlist my aid. But I did not assist him or solve problems for him. I sat by, feeling his struggle and expressing my belief that he could manage on his own. I sensed that his difficulty in handling objects was due to a predetermined attitude, an expectancy that I, the adult, would lose patience and do the task for him. His attitude seemed to be: "Why not fail in a hurry and let *him* do it for me. Eventually, big people get irritated with me and do the job anyway." When he saw that I did not and would not fit the

prototype, he was temporarily stopped; but he soon proceeded to tackle the problem on his own. His ability to manipulate objects and coordinate his efforts improved so rapidly that I realized my faith was not the main catalyst in his recovery. It was his growing freedom to be.

As problems slipped away under Jerry's deft fingers, I could feel a relaxation in his body and an expansiveness in his expressive movements. Once the challenge of problem-solving was mastered, a new dimension of Jerry emerged, a warm and intimate sense of humor. His first joke focused on the ridiculous presence of ten toy children and one toy bathtub. He solved this dilemma by putting all of the human figures into the one tub, and then he shared with me a lingering, full-faced grin. Another time, he became concerned about a group of toy soldiers that he had placed in a metal cage. His face lit up, and he smiled at me as he placed a toy toilet in the cage with them. In his silent manner, he had told me that, for the moment, their most pressing problem was solved.

In fact, Jerry spent several hours entertaining me with his "jokes." These episodes were a breathing spell following aggressive play and the struggles of the problem-solving situations. Jerry appreciated my acceptance, understanding, and encouragement, but he also wanted to enjoy the spontaneity and the warmth of human companionship. He wanted to share his light side, his own silent brand of humor. The sharing of the pleasant and

comic side of his nature was his way of cementing our relationship and not burdening our friendship with too much of the heavy and serious side at one time.

For some time, I wondered whether we would ever penetrate deeper into his feelings and experiences. But I had to learn to be patient, to wait, to respect his own timetable. When he was ready, he once again began to explore his aggressive covering and painful experiences. During one entire hour, he maneuvered a truck so that it would barely miss the figures of a girl and woman; he carefully and deliberately avoided hitting them. In his own way, he was telling me with whom he was angry. But he was not ready to own the feeling and commit himself to an unrestrained expression of hostility. Would I accept such a strong feeling? Could he dare express the feeling without endangering our relationship? Would he be rebuffed?

My calm recognition and acceptance of his feelings gave him the courage to take the next step. Following his hour of experimental probing with the female figures, he began to crash some of the soldier figures together. At first, I joined in with my usual sound effects. As his feelings became more intense, I said, “Sometimes I bet you wish you could crash real people together like that.” This remark precipitated an onslaught. He gritted his teeth and smashed figure against figure for some time. Soon all the human figures were involved in the assault. As the intensity of his feelings waned, I commented,

"Sometimes people just start fighting, and it's really hard to understand why they fight." This hit a responsive chord, and, in a concrete way, Jerry began to express what was bothering him. He spent the rest of the hour making a little boy figure and a lady figure fight each other. He had them engage in constant battle. I commented that the mother and the boy were really angry with each other.

Until this point, Jerry had not spoken a single word. I had used words only rarely. I think Jerry would have been very disturbed by too much talking early in our meetings. But now he was ready to follow his feelings more directly. He seemed to have developed more courage and self-confidence. I sensed this growing conviction and value and felt more at ease speaking to him. He reflected my words in his play, showing that they made sense to him. He could hear me expressing his feelings toward his mother and, at the same time, know that I understood and continued to respect and care for him. In referring to his mother in his play, he seemed to be saying, "This is the way life is; these experiences hurt; rejection is a part of my life; I have to learn to live with it."

From this point on, Jerry began to expand his world and to extend his field of exploration. He began to examine and use all of the toys and materials in the playroom. He eyed them closely, felt them, and experimented with them in his play. Once his field of vision and exploration had broadened, Jerry

became fully himself and was engrossed increasingly in his own becoming nature. When this began to happen, I experienced many exciting moments with him. But one day in particular stands out as thrilling and encompassing for me, the day that Jerry walked into the room and abruptly began a conversation. His speech was not entirely clear, but I could understand that he was describing a joyful experience with another boy. This was the first time Jerry had spoken to me. Up to this point, he had lived in a world that contained, literally, only silent dialogue. I guess that I was stunned and open-mouthed; but, at the same time, I felt that it was a perfectly natural thing for him to do, for him to speak words to me in just this way. To Jerry I must have looked dazed. His eyes met mine, and he laughed wholeheartedly, with his entire being. It was such a shining victory that tears came to my eyes. I went over to him and hugged him. I just felt I had to do it. “Oh Jerry!” For a moment, an eternity, we were in complete emotional contact.

After this, Jerry talked when it was necessary to communicate in words. His important feelings still transcended words, and many, many silent moments continued to exist. He expressed his feelings through his play, in his gestures and expressive movements, and in his inner bodily self, and I sensed his meanings without question or comment. He had the unusual talent of revealing his feelings in his very being. He had a way of forging beyond the barriers of abstraction so that anyone willing could perceive unity and meaning in his experience.

Our remaining visits were centered in different facets of our relationship and in Jerry's exploration and sharing of his potentialities and attributes. Jerry devoted many hours to drawing. At first, his drawings had a repetitive theme, but once he had gained a sense of freedom, they became quite varied and individualistic. On one occasion, he drew a clock, correct in all details, but he placed it in the sky among moving bodies. He studied his clock and seemed concerned. He looked puzzled for a while, and then, with a satisfied grin on his face, he proceeded to draw jets on the clock. Now it was all right. Now the clock belonged. Now it could stay in the sky in an active way, like the sun and planets. Some of his drawings were whimsical. He would personify objects. He put smiling faces on houses and sad faces on trees. Sometimes he drew without a concrete theme in mind, enjoying the pure experience of color and letting the shape and form flow from the sheer feeling of fun.

At times, he wanted me more actively involved, so he began to make up games that required two persons. We took turns hiding small objects in clay and then trying to find them. We filled up large sheets of paper with x's and o's. Alternately, we gave each other play money, neither of us wanting to keep the lion's share. He cooked and served me many dinners that I ate with delight. We hid objects in the room and spent joyful moments searching for them. Several times, I hid objects on my person. Jerry came in close physical proximity to me, adding to our feeling of closeness. During these hours, we

were completely relaxed, enjoying each other's company in a warm, human atmosphere. He learned to tell time, at least our time; without mistake, even to the minute, he always knew when it was time to visit me.

Since the beginning of the school year, Jerry had lived with his aunt and uncle. His mother had returned to her home and job in another state. When we had reached the peak of our experience in therapy, Jerry departed for a brief visit to his mother and sister. When he returned, he regressed to the hostile attitudes of our first meetings. But this time he was very direct in expressing his angry feelings. Among a group of children, he placed a female figure that he identified as a mother. He used her to push the children and knock them down. I said, "Bad mother." After the mother figure had pushed the children around for some time, he got a knife and stabbed her; then he shot her. I emphasized, "The boy is angry at her and wants to hurt her." Jerry put the mother in jail. I remarked, "She belongs in jail, where she can't hurt children. She can't get along with anybody." At this point, Jerry's attention shifted to the sister figure. He knocked it down and stepped on it. I accented his feeling, saying, "Sometimes the boy has angry feelings toward his sister too. Perhaps he doesn't want her around." Jerry continued to attack the mother and sister figures during the next two sessions, but the intensity of his feelings abated. Gradually these feelings disappeared entirely from his play; they did not return. He knew he would have to live with the reality of a mother and sister whom he felt did not care for him; it was a relief to him to

find someone with whom he could share this reality. Expressing his feelings openly and violently eased the pain.

Once again, Jerry returned to his free, expressive play, construction activities, and games with me. His conversations increased as he discussed his drawings and his play and as he involved me in games. Among other facts, he was curious about the denominations of money. He asked me about the different values. He played with the paper money from the toy cash register, calling out each amount and asking me if it were correct. He drew traffic lights, labeling the red light with an "R" and the green light with a "G." He asked me the correct letter for yellow but before I could answer, he said, with an engaging smile, "O.K., I'll use 'P' for pause." During these times, we had sustained conversations, particularly around Jerry's dramatic use of the puppets. We took the child puppets to the zoo and discussed life in the zoo. We went for a train trip and passed through "holes in the mountains." We took a trip to the North and South Poles. He talked easily and openly, using words to inform and question me.

When Jerry came for our last visit, I could hardly believe that he was the same fearful, silent boy who had first come to the playroom almost a year ago. In this final session, he conversed with me naturally and comfortably. Using the puppets, he dramatized in a humorous way various human scenes. We played our hide-the-object game. We had a phone conversation over the toy

telephone. As had often been his way, he surprised me by looking up and correctly locating the phone number of a friend. At the end of the hour, he wrote down my telephone number. I remarked that now he knew how to reach me if ever he needed me. It was a panoramic hour of events and a glimpse of our life in review. In our final moment together, we paused in silence. We parted with warm smiles, knowing that this would be our last direct meeting, yet feeling that what we had shared would continue to live.

Jerry's growth in therapy paralleled his growth in the classroom. Some of his first words were spoken in the classroom before he used words in therapy, but many of the changes that occurred in therapy did not show up in the classroom until sometime later. Jerry did not engage in real conversations in the classroom until sometime after our talks in therapy. One day, however, his teacher suddenly realized that one of the voices jabbering in a group of children was Jerry's. From this moment on, his life of dialogue included words. Jerry raised questions; he expressed his interests; he communicated his wishes in words. He did not talk often, but he did talk. His teacher wondered, as I did, how often Jerry's silence was due to his shyness and his need for privacy and how often it was due to his feeling that words were appropriate only at certain times, only when needed for meaningful communication.

In the classroom, he developed social interests and social

responsiveness. He began to play more and more with other children. He especially enjoyed quiet games rather than boisterous activities. He watched other children with interest and participated with them when the social situation contained a genuine value for him.

Toward the end of his therapy experience, Jerry began to read in the classroom. He learned to read by studying each word methodically. His progress was slow, but once he mastered a word it stayed with him. Jerry also developed an understanding of number concepts, using the same painstaking methodical approach in learning number facts.

How much of Jerry's growth was due to his therapeutic experience and how much was due to his stable life with his aunt and uncle and his rich relationship with his teacher? As I look back now, it seems impossible to separate these three major influences in his emergence as a confident, spontaneous person. For the first time, he lived in a home with an understanding male person. His uncle loved Jerry and expressed genuine interest and concern in their relationship. Both his uncle and aunt valued him, understood him, and gave him time and space and a stable family atmosphere in which to grow. Certainly his relationships with his teacher and with his classmates were important ingredients in his steady emergence as a real self, in his steady development of freedom and spontaneity.

What was my effect on Jerry's teacher? I did not offer her suggestions or advice. I did not guide or direct her. I did not provide her with an evaluation or diagnosis. We had many long talks, some about Jerry, some about the other children in her classroom, and some about life and human values in general. We shared our hopes and aspirations, our fears and worries, our disturbance over the mistreatment of children. We discussed the fate of the world and the crises facing modem man. About Jerry specifically? We did not discuss treatment or teaching or education of Jerry. We were concerned when other children manipulated him. We were at times bothered by his passive noninterfering philosophy of life, but we had infinite faith in his potential. We both believed in his individuality, in his being, in the importance of choice, in freedom, in Jerry's becoming. We beamed at his unique and creative expressions. We shared the thrilling moments we experienced with him in his successes. We strengthened each other's values and convictions; we each grew in awareness and sensitivity by exploring our intimate experiences with this unusually silent and perceptive boy.

About eight months after the completion of his therapy, Jerry's teacher wrote to me: "With the advent of the marble season, Jerry has become the life of the room. The kids line up to play with him, and he is having a great time being the center of activity. He laughs frequently and talks a blue streak. Incessantly, he is curious and seeking information. He asks me about maps. 'Can cars drive down here? Is this Africa? South Pole here?' He has five plant

experiments going in the classroom. He is filled with wonder and questions as he watches growing life. He asked me how much eggs cost, 'Not the ones you eat but from which baby chicks will hatch.' He is exploring in all directions: What's this? This? This? Read this.' "

So Jerry continues to grow and to emerge as a self in his thirst for new experiences, in his discovery of the wonders of life. His sensitive teacher waits and takes each step of the journey with him. When Jerry is ready, he shows her the way to open up new vistas for him. She follows the path and, at the same time, introduces him to new resources and opportunities.

I like to think that Jerry's therapy experience with me was a catalyst in his emergence, and I believe that it was. I know that from this experience I have become more sensitive, wise, and humble as a person. I am more reluctant to judge another individual on any basis, even in the face of so-called facts and objective evidence. I now understand the vast potential of nonverbal communication and the value of concrete nonverbal awareness. My experience with Jerry has shown me ways of opening up in myself feelings of which I had been only dimly aware. It has reemphasized the importance of patience in therapy, especially during the apparent plateaus and uneventful periods. It has again pointed up the need for patience concerning progress outside of therapy. Even when dramatic changes occur in therapy, comparable shifts may not occur in the school or home for some time. Most

important of all, our therapy experience enabled me to know intimately the being of Jerry, to savor his uniqueness, to have a deep relationship with someone special. And, like every human being, Jerry is someone special.

References

Burton, A. “Beyond the Transference.” Psychotherapy, Theory, Research and Practice, Vol. 1, No. 2,1964.

Butler, J.M. “Client-Centered Counseling and Psychotherapy.” In D. Brower and L.E. Abt (Eds.), Progress in Clinical Psychology, Vol. III. Changing Conceptions in Psychotherapy. New York, Grune & Stratton, 1958.

Gendlin, E.T. Experiencing and the Creation of Meaning, New York, Free Press of Glencoe, 1962.

Gendlin, E.T. “A Theory of Personality Change.” Chapter in Personality Change, Worchel and Byrne (Eds.), Wiley, New York, 1964.

Gendlin, E.T. “Experiencing: A Variable in the Process of Therapeutic Change.” American Journal of Psychotherapy, Vol. XV, No. 2,1961.

Gendlin, E.T. “Subverbal Communication and Therapist Expressivity Trends in Client-Centered Therapy with Schizophrenics.” Journal of Existential Psychiatry, Vol. IV, No. 14,1963.

Gendlin, E.T. “Schizophrenia: Problems and Methods of Psychotherapy.” Review of Existential Psychology and Psychiatry, Vol. IV, No. 2,1964.

Gendlin, E.T. “Values and the Process of Experiencing.” In The Goals of Psychotherapy, A. Mahrer (Ed.) In Press.

Heidegger, M. Being and Time, Harper & Row, New York, 1962.

Jung, C.G. Two Essays on Analytical Psychology, Meridian, New York, 1956.

Rank, O. Will Therapy, Knopf, New York, 1950.

Rogers, C.R. Client-Centered Therapy, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1951.

Rogers, C.R. On Becoming a Person, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1961.

Sartre, J.P. Being and Nothingness, Philosophical Library, New York, 1956.

Sullivan, H.S. The Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry, Norton, New York, 1953.