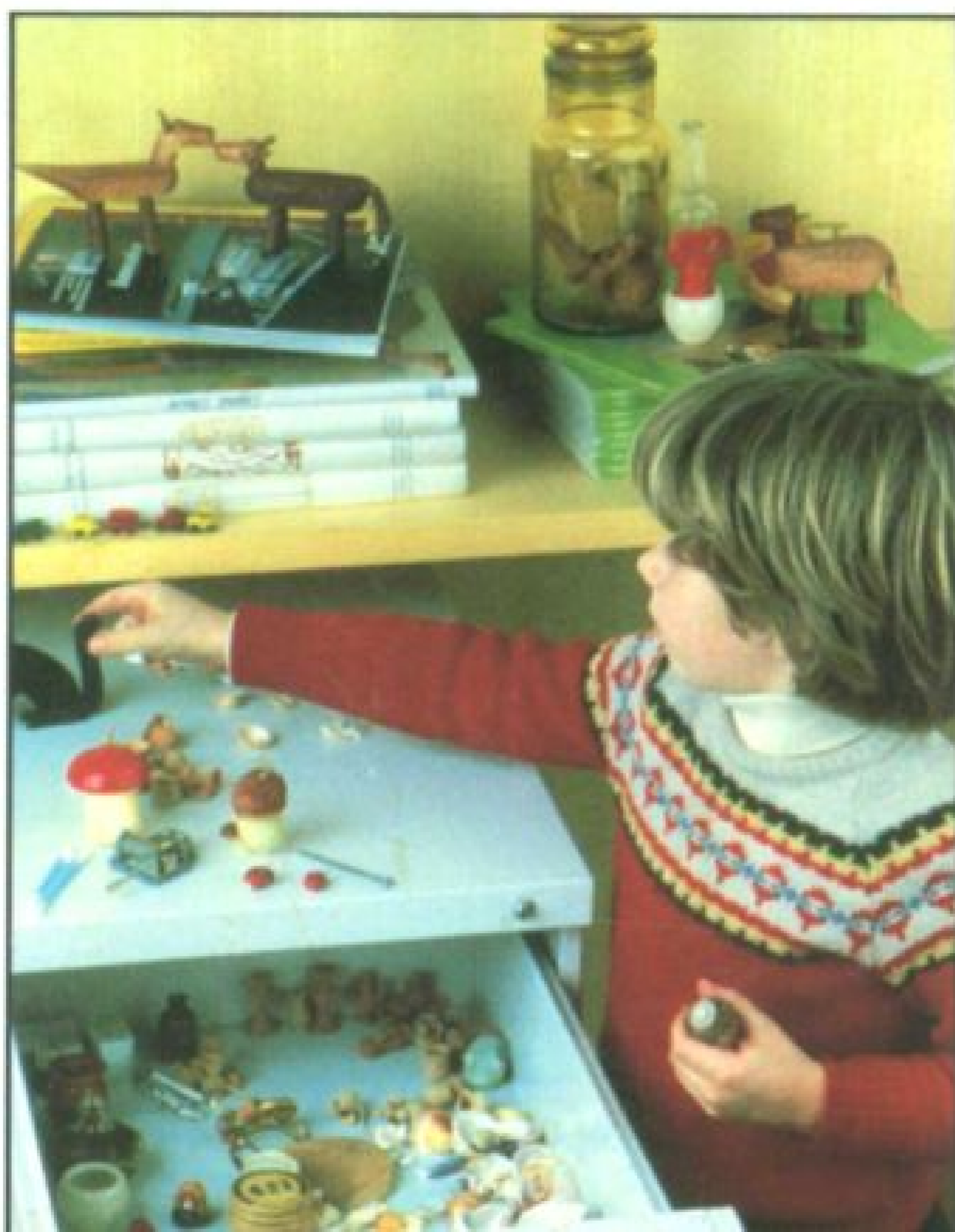


VIRGINIA M. AXLINE

Author of
DIBS IN SEARCH OF SELF

PLAY THERAPY

The groundbreaking book that
has become a vital tool in the growth
and development of children.



**THESE CHILDREN ARE
FIGHTING A DESPERATE BATTLE
Their enemy: Loneliness and Neglect
Their weapons: The Vivid and Liberating
Games of PLAY THERAPY**

PLAY THERAPY is a vital opportunity that is given to the child to "play out" his feelings and problems—his fears, hatred, loneliness, and feelings of failure and inadequacy.

The case histories in this book are true. As she did with *DIBS IN SEARCH OF SELF*, Dr. Axline has taken them from the rich mine of verbatim case material of children referred for play therapy. These children range in age from four years to twelve; and their problems cover the wide spectrum of maladjusted youngsters—*the hostile child, the withdrawn child, the dependent child, and the handicapped child*. This is an intensely practical book that gives *specific illustrations* of how therapy can be implemented in play contacts; and tells how the toys of the playroom can be vivid performers in this drama of growth.

Although directed especially to psychologists, psychiatrists, and case workers, PLAY THERAPY is an important and rewarding book for parents, teachers, and anyone who comes in contact with children.

**"The best in the field"
Dr. George L. Keppers
The University of New Mexico**

Also by Virginia M. Axline
Published by The Random House Publishing Group

DIBS: IN SEARCH OF SELF

PLAY
THERAPY
Virginia M. Axline

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To the memory of my father

ROY G. AXLINE

Preface to the Ballantine Edition

A seven-year-old boy, in the middle of a play-therapy session, cried out spontaneously, "Oh, every child just once in his life should have a chance to spill out all over without a 'Don't you dare! Don't you dare! Don't you dare!' " That was his way of defining his play therapy experience at that moment.

An eight-year-old girl suddenly stopped her play and exclaimed, "In here I turn myself inside out and give myself a shake, shake, shake, and finally I get glad all over that I am me."

In play-therapy experiences, the child is given an opportunity to learn about himself in relation to the therapist. The therapist will behave in ways that she intends will convey to the child the security and opportunity to explore not only the room and the toys but himself in this experience and relationship. He will have the privilege of measuring himself against himself. And as a result of this experience in self-exploration, self-in-relation-to-others, self-expansion, and self-expression, he learns to accept and respect not only himself but others as well, and he learns to use freedom with a sense of responsibility.

There is a frankness, and honesty, and a vividness in the way children state themselves in a play situation. Their feelings, attitudes, and thoughts emerge, unfold themselves,

twist and turn and lose their sharp edges. The child learns to understand himself and others a little better and to extend emotional hospitality to all people more generously.

Bit by bit, with extreme caution, the child externalizes that inner self and states it with increasing candor and sometimes with dramatic flair. He soon learns that in this playroom with this unusual adult he can let in and out the tide of his feelings and impulses. He can create his own world with these simple toys that lend themselves so well to projected identities. He can be his own architect and create his castles in the sand, and he can people his world with the folks of his own making. He can select and discard. He can create and destroy. He can build himself a mountain and climb safely to the top and cry out for all his world to hear, "I can build me a mountain or I can flatten it out. In *here* I am big!"

He learns that in his search of self he has opened the door to a broader understanding of all people.

VIRGINIA M. AXLINE

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PART ONE

Introduction

1.

Some Children Are Like This

I

"IT'S FIGHT, FIGHT, FIGHT—ALL DAY LONG!"

THE DISTRAUGHT TEACHER hurried down to the principal's office a few agitated steps ahead of Tom, who followed with sullen resentment.

"Wait out here," she informed him crisply, while she went in, on a teacher's priority, to present her complaint to the principal. This defiant, disobedient twelve-year-old boy was driving her to distraction. He kept the class in a constant state of turmoil. He was continually reminding her that she was "just a substitute teacher" and remarking that "no one could boss him around."

Tom was bright enough to do satisfactory school work, but he refused to apply himself to the assignments. If he had his way he would read all the time. He resented criticism. He was antagonistic toward the other children—complained that they "picked on him."

And now the group had just come in from recess and there had been another fight. Tom said the boys had all ganged up on him; and the boys said that Tom had spit on the American flag. When they had returned to the classroom, Tom showing signs of having been severely beaten by the gang, the teacher had reprimanded them for fighting on the playground. The other boys had said they were sorry and had related the flag episode. But Tom had glared at her in defiance, had swept his book off his desk

with a gesture of utter contempt and anger, and had said, "I'll do as I please! *They* started it. *They* ganged up on me. I hate the whole bunch of them. I hate their very guts and I'll get even. Damn them all!" His black eyes blazed. His voice trembled. Yes, he even cried—big hulk that he was—and scenes like this were so upsetting to the class and made her so nervous she was all shaky and could just cry! She couldn't stand it much longer. She just couldn't!

Then, after she had finished her complaint, Tom was summoned into the inner sanctum.

"Miss Blank tells me you've been fighting again."

"Well, they ganged up on me."

"She tells me you were disrespectful to the American flag."

"I *really* didn't spit on it. I just said that."

"She says you were disrespectful in class, threw your book down on the floor, and swore."

"I can't stand this place any longer!" Tom cries out—and once again the tears come to his eyes. "Everybody picks on me and lies about me and——"

"That's enough! I'm getting pretty tired of all this trouble we have with you. Every day you are brought down to the office. Every day you are reported for undesirable behavior. It's fight, fight, fight—all day long. Words don't seem to do you any good. Well, perhaps this will!" The principal gets out his strap and applies it wearily, despairingly, but effectively, where he thinks it will do the most good.

Tom and his teacher return to the classroom. The principal goes on about the business of being a principal. In the afternoon the teacher reports that Tom is absent. The principal calls Tom's home. His mother does not know where he is. She thought he had returned to school. He is truant from home and school for three days.

Everyone concerned with the case feels futile and inadequate. This does not seem to be the solution to this type of problem, but what can a person do? There must be order and discipline and control or the place would soon become a bedlam. Tom is certainly a difficult problem child.

II

"SO YOU'RE GOIN' HOME, ARE YOU?"

The matron of the Children's Home stood on the side porch of one of the cottages and watched Emma and the other children standing out in the yard. Emma was dressed to leave the grounds. She had her small overnight bag packed and waiting on the porch. The other children were standing apart from Emma. They made faces at her and she made faces at them. There was a tenseness—almost a grimness about her bearing as she waited there. Her handkerchief was twisted into a string. She stood first on one foot and then on the other.

"Ole Emma thinks she's smart 'cause she's going away," calls one of the children in a taunting voice.

"Shut up your sass," Emma retorts, "you stinky old polecat. You filthy, old, moldy-faced, double-jointed rat!"

"Don't you call me names!" angrily shouts the first child.

Emma leans toward her tormenters.

"Yah! I'll spit on you, see!" She does. There is an immediate clash.

"Children! Children!" calls the matron. They draw apart. Emma tosses her head defiantly. She watches the road eagerly for an approaching car. Her mother has promised to come after her and take her away for a short vacation.

The cottage door opens and out comes another matron. The two women talk together for a few minutes and then the first matron picks up Emma's suitcase and calls to her.

"Emma. Emma, dear. Your mother just called. She won't be able to come for you this week-end."

Emma turns toward the matron as though electrified. Her green eyes seem to be on fire. She glares at the matron.

"Come on, Emma. Take off your good clothes."

The other children shriek with glee.

"Yah! Yah! Smarty! So you're goin' *home*, are you?"

"Children! Children!" cry both matrons.

Emma turns and with the fleetness of a deer runs across the grounds until she comes to an isolated spot. She flings

herself face down on the ground and lies there tense and silent. The matron finds her there and finally coaxes her back to the cottage. This has all happened so many, many times before. The mother promises to come for Emma and take her away. She disappoints the child and never keeps her promise.

Back in the cottage Emma cannot eat, cannot sleep, cannot even cry. She becomes sick and is placed in the hospital room. When she recovers—as she soon does—and goes out among the other children, she is hateful and mean and sullen. She, too, is a problem child.

III

“THIS BOY DOESN’T NEED MEDICINE”

Timmy and Bobby hadn’t felt solid ground under their feet since their mother and father had separated and the children had been placed in a foster home.

When his mother had come to take him home for a short visit, Timmy had been reluctant to go with her, but she had insisted. Timmy had been having trouble eating and retaining what he ate. It didn’t seem natural for an eight-year-old boy to be without an appetite and to be so babyish. He cried easily, was difficult to get along with, fought with his younger brother, Bobby. He seemed tense and nervous.

Timmy’s mother took him to the doctor and the doctor diagnosed it as a “case of nerves.”

Timmy nibbled his fingernails as his mother discussed his case with the doctor. Then, in a moment of silence, Timmy exclaimed rapidly, in a high, shrill voice, “I saw my daddy yesterday. He came to the house. They’re going to get a divorce. They’re not going to live together any more. My father doesn’t love my mother and my mother doesn’t love my father and maybe he’s going to be married again and we won’t hardly ever see him, mother said, because she said she wouldn’t let him have me and Bobby ever and he said that he would show her!”

“All this was discussed before Timmy, I suppose?” the doctor asked.

“Well,” the mother said defensively, “he’ll have to know about it sooner or later. He might as well know it now!”

“Bobby and me are living in ——— now,” Timmy said. He was screaming at the doctor. “We live with Mother R. We like it there!”

“Can’t you give me a prescription—or something?” Timmy’s mother said. “He doesn’t sleep well at night. He vomits almost everything he eats. The woman he stays with says he is nervous and acts so wild.”

“I’ll give you a prescription,” the doctor replied, “but this boy doesn’t need *medicine*.”

In disgust, the physician wrote a prescription. He added caustically, as he handed it to the mother, “He needs a home and congenial parents more than he needs a nerve sedative.”

Timmy returned to the foster home. He sought out Bobby. “Mom and Daddy are going to get a divorce, and she said he couldn’t ever have us if she could help it and——”

Timmy and Bobby are problem children.

Tom and Emma and Timmy and Bobby are all described as “problem children.” They are tense, unhappy, thoroughly miserable youngsters who sometimes find their lives almost too much to bear. Those who are interested in the personal adjustment of such children regard them with genuine concern. The environmental forces are unfavorable, and little help can be expected from parents or others who are responsible for them. What, if anything, can be done to help them to help themselves?

There is a method of helping such children to work out their own difficulties—a method which has been used successfully with Tom and Emma and Timmy and Bobby and with many other children like them. This method is called play therapy. It is the purpose of this book to explain just what play therapy is and to present the theory of personality structure upon which it is based, to describe in detail the play-therapy set-up and those who participate in the therapeutic process, to present the principles which are fundamental to the successful conduct of play therapy, to report case records which show its effectiveness in

helping so-called problem children to help themselves in making their personal adjustments, and, finally, to point out the implications of play therapy for education.

2.

Play Therapy

*A Method of Helping
Problem Children
Help Themselves*

PLAY THERAPY is based upon the fact that play is the child's natural medium of self-expression. It is an opportunity which is given to the child to "play out" his feelings and problems just as, in certain types of adult therapy, an individual "talks out" his difficulties.

Play therapy may be directive in form—that is, the therapist may assume responsibility for guidance and interpretation, or it may be non-directive: the therapist may leave responsibility and direction to the child. It is with the latter type of play therapy that we shall be concerned.

However, before we proceed further with the actual description of play therapy, it may be well to formulate the point of view regarding the potentials within each individual; that is, the theory of personality structure upon which it is based.

There are many sources of information regarding the basic personality structure of the individual, because this is one of the most intriguing, if baffling, aspects of the human being. Many theories of personality have been advanced, discarded, re-examined, altered, and studied again. Attempts have been made to "test" personality, to "predict" personality traits, and to explain "personality structure." However, the whole subject is still wide open, and the theories that have been advanced to date do not seem entirely adequate to explain satisfactorily all that has

been observed regarding the inner dynamics of the individual.

Therefore, in order to set up a frame of reference within which to proceed, the following explanation of personality structure is advanced as a tentative theory, open to criticism and evaluation, but based upon observation and study of both children and adults during and after a non-directive therapeutic experience.

The Theory of Personality Structure upon Which Non-directive Play Therapy is Based

There seems to be a powerful force within each individual which strives continuously for complete self-realization. This force may be characterized as a drive toward maturity, independence, and self-direction. It goes on relentlessly to achieve consummation, but it needs good "growing ground" to develop a well-balanced structure. Just as a plant needs sun and rain and good rich earth in order to attain its maximum growth, so the individual needs the permissiveness to be himself, the complete acceptance of himself—by himself, as well as by others—and the right to be an individual entitled to the dignity that is the birthright of every human being in order to achieve a direct satisfaction of this growth impulse.

Growth is a spiraling process of change—relative and dynamic. Experiences change the individual's perspective and focus. Everything is constantly evolving, interchanging, and assuming varying degrees of importance to the individual in the light of the reorganization and integration of his attitudes, thoughts, and feelings.

The impact of the forces of life, the interaction of individuals, and the very nature of a human being bring about this constantly changing integration within the individual. Everything is relative and the pattern is a changing, reorganizing sort of thing—like the pattern one sees in a kaleidoscope, a tube in which you look, through a tiny peep-hole, down upon odd-shaped pieces of colored glass; as you turn the tube, the pattern falls apart and reorganizes itself into something quite different. As different parts of the design touch, they form a new configuration. No matter how the tube is turned, the design

maintains balance, the difference being in the design itself, which is sometimes compact and indicative of strength and sometimes spread out and seemingly frail and without much body. There is always rhythm and harmony in the design. Each pattern is different from every other, and the difference is caused by the way the light shines through and by the steadiness of the hand that holds the kaleidoscope, as well as by the interchanging positions of the bits of colored glass.

So, it seems, is personality. The living organism has within it the "bits of colored glass" and the personality is "structured" by the organization of these "bits."

The dynamics of life are such that every experience and attitude and thought of every individual is constantly changing in relation to the interplay of psychological and environmental forces upon each and every individual, so that what happened yesterday does not have the same meaning for the individual today as it had when it happened because of the impact of the forces of life and the interaction of individuals; likewise, the experience will be integrated differently tomorrow.

This characteristic of change applies also to behavioral responses. Responses that seem fairly similar day after day are sometimes referred to as habits, but habits seem to disappear suddenly into thin air when the individual no longer feels a need for them or when a more satisfying type of behavior is discovered.

It is this observable flexibility of the personality and behavior of the individual that has opened the door to admit the element of hope and a positive way of looking at the individuals who seem to have three strikes against them from the beginning. When the individual becomes aware of the part he can play in directing his own life—and when he accepts the responsibility that goes with the freedom of this inner authority—then he is better able to sight his course of action with more accuracy.

Why does Emma hope and hope and hope again in the face of continual disappointments and rebuffs? What feeds her faith and buoys her up after each shattering experience? Could it be this accumulation within her of "wisdom" and "experience" plus a growing awareness of her own ability to meet this situation? Is she gaining faith in