
THE HEALING POWER OF PLAY: 'Miranda and her Poop People!'

Newsletter Submission by Dr. Eliana Gil

Miranda was 7 when I worked with her and she was one of two siblings who had been removed from their birth mother and placed in a foster-adopt home. They had experienced so much neglect, as well as physical and sexual abuse, that it was very likely that parental rights would be terminated on a mother who had been "in the system" for almost a decade. Mother was of Mexican origins but had many cognitive distortions about skin color. She was light-skinned and her two daughters were slightly darker pigmentation. Miranda was brown with black hair and her sister was slightly lighter skinned with brownish hair. Miranda's mother constantly berated Miranda for being "dark" and "fea" (Spanish word for ugly). Miranda's sister, Yolanda, was spared this verbal abuse; instead, her mother called her the "golden child," and often described her as blond and blue-eyed (which she was not!). She seemed to value Yolanda for her lighter color and reject Miranda for her own.

When Miranda first drew self-portraits, she made herself with blond hair and blue eyes. She wanted to make her skin color peach and spent a lot of time focusing on these details. When I introduced the concept of skin colors using the Crayola Multi-cultural paints, she readily dismissed anything but the peach colors. This issue remained confused and complex throughout her treatment.

Miranda made steady progress as her foster-adopt mother (and father) invested themselves in creating a caring, loving environment for Miranda and Yolanda. They had fallen in love with these little girls and were willing to stay the course through some expectable acting-out behaviors in both girls. They were "dream parents" from my point of view: Kind, thoughtful, and very consistent. They created predictability in the home and no matter what testing the girls did, their responses were always loving and accepting.

The girls seemed excited to hear the news of their upcoming adoption once the termination process was complete. Mother had refused to see the girls to say goodbye but they had written letters to her telling them of their new family. Chances are mother would not have been able to tolerate her daughters being so well connected (and receptive) to their foster parents. Some things likely work out as they should.

Things were well underway when the foster mother called with a grave concern. She described that Miranda had been defecating into a plastic bag and putting the sealed bags in her dresser and kitchen drawers. This adoptive mother was concerned that this signaled Miranda's deeper ambivalence about being adopted and she wondered if she had failed her in some way. I told the mother that I was interested in what Miranda was doing, and I told her that Miranda had found yet a new way to communicate something important. Our job would be to decode the behavior and try to help her with whatever she was experiencing. I asked mom to tell Miranda that she had called to tell me about the



feces and I prepared myself for my next session with this child by making a trip to Michael's where I bought brown clay, some eyeballs, a few little beads, some cloth, and some little ties and bows and hats. When Miranda came in, she looked shy and I asked her how she was doing. She put her head down and I said to her, "Your mom told me about the poops, so come here, I think today we are going to make some poop people." I moved over to the table where I had laid out my new purchases and I quickly took a piece of clay and told her we could make as many poop people as she wanted. Her demeanor changed as we made some oblong poops that were tall and some that were short. I told her we could decide if they were boys or girls. The boys got a tie, the girls got a bow. One of the girls had a shiny skirt made out of pipe cleaners and looked quite the fashion plate!!

Miranda left this session skipping, asking me to save the poop people well and not to let anyone else play with them. I stored them on top of a shelf and they got more and more solid with time. At our next session, we pulled them out, named them, and finished decorating them. Miranda was particularly fond of one of the girl poops and named her "Miranda." We had taken great pains to make mouths, some smiling, some frowning, and some wide open, as if they were going to speak. The Miranda poop had an open mouth.

At this second session, and as we were completing the poop people's attire, I said to Miranda that I now wanted to ask her to do something that could be a little difficult to do. I thought however, that Miranda would be up to the task. I said to her: "I'd like you to give Miranda a voice and I'd like her to write down a letter to mom that would tell her in words, what she's trying to tell her by appearing in her drawers at home." Miranda looked at me and thought about what I'd said. I said, "She can whisper in your ear, listen and hear what she really wants to tell her mom." Miranda took to this task as she had to many other such tasks in therapy: She pretended to listen to the Miranda poop, wrote something down, and leaned her head down to listen to more. Finally, she finished her letter, folded it up, and asked me for a plastic baggie with a seal, which I had. She took the baggie with the note home. Nothing more was said between us.

The foster mother called the next day and asked me "Did you read what she wrote to me?" She seemed troubled and excited. I told her I had not read the note. I held my breath as she read it to me: "Dear mother, I know that I am ugly and I know that I smell, but please don't flush me away. Love, Miranda" I asked mom how she had responded and she said, "I went into her room, I took her in my arms, I sniffed her all over, and told her that I loved her smell, that she was like perfume to me, and that I loved the way she looked." My eyes welled up. "I hope I didn't overdo it but I told her that she was the most perfect child ever, that I loved her sweetness, her smiley eyes, and her beautiful brown skin. I told her I had always hoped for a child exactly like her (and Yolanda) and that she was an angel to me." I asked how Miranda had responded and mom told me she just melted in her arms and hugged her and then fell asleep for about an hour. No more poops appeared in mother's drawers. Message sent and answered.

I still smile when I think about this child and our poop people. They are probably still somewhere in storage, colonizing, chatting, and having fun!!

