

# Centre Profile

## The Squiggle Foundation

Jan Abram

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### *A brief history*

The Squiggle Foundation was founded by Alexander Newman who, inspired by the work of Winnicott, set out to create a space where the writing and tradition of Winnicott could be studied and 'cultivated'. The focus of this idea began to develop in Saturday seminars, called 'Original Themes in the Work of Winnicott', offered to participants over the course of one academic year.

This is where I arrived as a newly qualified psychotherapist, having only studied one paper of Winnicott's on my psychoanalytic psychotherapy training! I was curious to discover more. When I first met Alexander I remember being surprised when he told me that these seminars were aimed at 'enjoying' the work of Winnicott. Nobody had ever talked to me about 'enjoyment' during my training. This aspect has remained a crucial part of Squiggle's culture.

The year I joined the course was Alexander's last year as director, and it was held in his house. Each session lasted for two hours: in the first hour we listened to a paper presented by one of the seminar leaders, followed by a short discussion and then a full and delicious lunch accompanied by wine. This convivial atmosphere was continued when Nina Farhi took over as

director; the seminars then took place in her house. More and more people were attending as the organisation grew.

Since 1996, when I was appointed director, the seminars have taken place in the Primrose Hill Community Centre. This was where Squiggle's public lectures were held in the early days because Alexander's house was round the corner. It affords us more space than someone's front room, and we still provide refreshments.

I'm struck how much I'm describing the environment in which Squiggle began (and continues) in terms of the structure — time and places — and food and wine. I don't know if this is what Alexander had in mind, but it seems to me that much thought was given as to how to receive participants in a very literal way — providing them with a holding environment that will facilitate thinking and playing.

### *The core of Winnicott's thinking*

Winnicott's theory of the 'facilitating environment' is based on the paradigm of the good-enough mother, who will not force the baby into taking something but will rather 'offer' the breast and allow the baby time and space. This theory has a huge impact on the way the therapist is in the

*Jan Abram is director of the Squiggle Foundation.*

consulting room, and its quality influences the way we teach at Squiggle. It links with the 'squiggle game' often used by Winnicott in what have become known as his 'therapeutic consultations'. He would, with closed eyes, scribble something on paper that his child patient would add to. The series of squiggles often came to represent something meaningful in terms of the child's difficulties. Doodling and squiggling together were ways in which Winnicott would help the child to trust him and play — in this way he gained information that would help him evaluate the problem.

As therapists who work at the Squiggle Foundation we are not there to assess people's problems — that is for our private practice work — but to offer theory along with playfulness, creativity and an enthusiasm to learn from every participant who comes our way.

Squiggle values and encourages pluralism, and is well known as a place where Kleinians talk to Freudians and Freudians to Jungians. It is the work of Winnicott that brings us together. Those attending Squiggle events and courses encompass nearly every therapeutic tradition, and include social workers, residential workers and artists, in the broadest sense of the word, who want to explore the use of Winnicott's ideas in their work.

For me, Winnicott's theories, though steeped in Freud and Klein, are essentially his own version of psychoanalysis. He himself discouraged people from thinking of themselves as 'Winnicottian' — he wanted to get away from toeing the party line, and to encourage something which is personal and belongs only to the individual. I think this version is the human face of psycho-

analysis, and it resonates with the way in which I wish to work. This is why I have been part of Squiggle's activities for almost a decade.

### *The present day*

The 'holding environment' is another of Winnicott's major theories, encompassing the literal and the metapsychological. My pleasure in being a participant at Squiggle, almost ten years ago, and then being given the opportunity to grow up in this tradition by being invited to teach on the Saturdays, has facilitated me on a journey of self-realisation alongside my study of Winnicott's work. This is how Squiggle teams come into being — all of us have been participants to begin with.

The Further Study Group emerged from the wish of many people attending the Saturday seminars to continue their study of Winnicott beyond these Saturday meetings. It is a small group for individuals who are working in a clinical setting. The Public Lecture series has been a Squiggle tradition since the beginning. Speakers are invited whose area of work is related to the Winnicott tradition, and audiences have numbered as many as four hundred.

Last year an international weekend conference for Winnicott's Centenary was arranged with the Freud Museum. This was an enormous success, with people attending from as far away as Argentina, and we are planning a similar event in the autumn of 1998 to celebrate the work of André Green.

Day workshops and study days are excellent opportunities for extending Squiggle's work. They may take the form of a presentation of our work for therapists and counsellors, or could be a workshop to

explore how best to make use of Squiggle for consultation and supervision. For example, we have given a day's introductory workshop in a Further Education College for nursery nurse tutors and nurses; the nurses need help with understanding the roots of aggression in young children, and the tutors need support in working with young people who are often distressed and may unconsciously be looking for compensation for their own deprived childhoods. This has led to further consultation.

Arising from participants' requests, a ten-week course on the work of Christopher Bollas will be launched in the summer term of 1998. In Bollas's work, rooted as it is in

the work of Freud, Winnicott, Bion and Lacan, we can see development of many of Winnicott's concepts. Winnicott's 'true and false self', for example, has been developed by Bollas into his thinking about the destiny drive within each individual, and its conflict with the sense of being fated.

Publishing has also been a very important activity at Squiggle as another mode of disseminating Winnicott's work. *Winnicott Studies* has been published regularly since 1987, and in autumn 1997 we brought out our first newsletter, as a way of making clearer communication with our members and reaching out in a more relaxed and informal way. More projects are in the pipeline.

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## *Writing about Winnicott*

*Val Richards*

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A particular feature of Winnicott's writing is its deceptive accessibility. Clothed in familiar everyday language, such notions as mirroring, playing, good-enough mother, potential space, teddy bears, true and false self, render his work invitingly open to each reader's free interpretation.

Thus depending on an individual's specialism, it is possible to build on a theme, according to one's chosen path of enquiry, so developing fresh insights into infancy and childhood experience as well as into, say, art, theatre and music. For example, Winnicott's concepts of playing and creativity, which derive from theories on and

observations of earliest infancy, have formed the basis of recent papers on 'Theatre and Therapy', 'Games versus Playing' and 'Music Therapy'.

The immediacy of Winnicott's writing, combined with an uncanny understanding of human dynamics, has resonances that extend beyond the strict confines of classic psychoanalytic circles, as in his lifetime — for his range, beyond paediatrics and psychoanalytic work, encompassed the whole spectrum of social, educational and legal services, even including broadcasts to ordinary families. This is a pattern that in its teaching and publishing the Squiggle Foundation seeks to emulate.

*Val Richards is editor of Winnicott Studies.*

Inseparable from the stimulating immediacy of the writing is its highly compressed, even poetic quality, a denseness that should not however be mistaken for simplicity of thought, for close study reveals both rigorous theoretical underpinning and creative innovation. These are taken into account in the Squiggle Foundation's dissemination of Winnicott's work: in its publications and presentations the Foundation seeks not only to promote the wider relevance and the appeal, but also to reflect the rigour of Winnicott's thought.

*The Language of Winnicott* by Jan Abram provides an analysis and elucidation of Winnicott's key ideas and terms. An edited

version of the Squiggle lectures of André Green is in preparation, as well as a volume of the Winnicott Centenary Lectures, a collection of twelve papers presented during his Centenary year of 1996. The former journal *Winnicott Studies* now appears as an annual monograph. This offers interrelated papers on a selected theme, placing Winnicott's ideas in a wider contemporary context. Included are presentations from Squiggle lectures and seminars, and specially commissioned articles. The first of these collections is *The Person who is Me — Perspectives on the true and false self* (Karnac 1996) to be followed by *Fathers, Families and the Outside World* (1997) and *Potential Space and Playing* (1998).

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## **Squiggle: The joy of discovering that which was hidden**

*Maggie Garside*

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I first became interested in Winnicott's work when I was writing my dissertation at the end of my counselling course. It was two years later that I found Squiggle; Parkside Counselling group in Cambridge hosted a study day led by the Squiggle Foundation. It was one of those rare moments in life, experiencing the joy of finding something which had previously been hidden. The richness of the day gave me a taste that developed into a hunger for more.

I began to consider what to do next for

my own development and applied for a place on the course 'The Original Themes of Winnicott'. In my interview I experienced great excitement, as the dialogue quickly and clearly showed me how our two worlds could interact. Rarely had I experienced such insight into the issues around the impact of crime on victims, and never before with someone from outside my organisation.

The Saturday OTW sessions became a haven in my busy week. The setting was provided with such care. Remembering it I

*Maggie Garside is co-ordinator of the Counselling Service for the Road Traffic branch of Victim Support and participant and supervisee with the Squiggle Foundation.*

am reminded of a baby lying in her pram, free either to absorb the world around her or actively to reach out and engage with it, in her own time. A selection of Winnicott's concepts were brought to life by the creative presentations of a variety of practitioners. The sessions were stimulating to the beginner and provided a space where ideas could be played with and meanings could be explored and related.

Again I began to wonder which direction I wanted to go in, which path to take. This time I approached Squiggle for consultation and followed their recommendations to increase my personal therapy and change from group to individual supervision. I was introduced to one of the seminar presenters, whose work I had related to, and supervision began.

Feeling more confident I left the nursery slopes and joined the Further Study Group. Each week for a year we studied a paper of Winnicott's. In a small group setting a member would give a short presentation, relating the paper to their own work. This was followed by facilitated discussion which enabled a greater understanding of the concepts and their wider applications. Today my association with Squiggle continues mainly through supervision, but also in attending Public Lectures. These are a pleasure in themselves, as well as an opportunity to meet old friends and make new ones.

Over the last two years I have set up a new local service for people bereaved or affected by a road death. This has involved creating systems for initiating and maintaining contact with the bereaved, on a short- or long-term basis; recruiting, selecting and training volunteers; providing appropriate support and supervision

structures for the volunteers; defining policy and good practice. Aspects of all these areas have been brought to supervision, as well as work in progress. For example, where a volunteer has felt stuck or uneasy with a victim and we have been unable to change or understand this through discussion, clarification has been attained in the supervision session, using the theoretical insights of Winnicott and others. Supervision has also helped with assessing the level of victims' needs and identifying the most appropriate course of action for them, for the volunteers and for our agency. Staff behaviour and morale both benefit from a supportive supervision structure.

All aspects of the work overlap and are linked to Winnicott's theory of the 'holding environment'. Transposed to the therapeutic relationship, the victim and the volunteer, it is the setting that provides the necessary holding environment. Crucial aspects of this, adapted from Winnicott's theory, are that the volunteer:

- agrees a mutually convenient time for sessions
- is reliably present, punctual, attentive, preoccupied with the victim, taking a positive interest and yet firm in the matter of start and finish times
- ensures the room is comfortable, not too hot or cold, too light or dark
- makes no moral judgement, has no wish to intrude with their own personal details, does not take sides, is free from temper tantrums or compulsive falling in love
- makes a clear distinction between fact and fantasy, does not retaliate, and survives

In other words this environment functions along the lines of ordinary parenting.

Ego support or holding continues to be a need of the growing child, the adolescent and, at times, of the adult, when there is a strain that threatens confusion and disintegration.

Winnicott stressed the importance of management as a holding environment, especially when he spoke to groups of professionals involved in the care of people unable to care for themselves. He drew attention to the fact that when working with individuals who make heavy emotional demands, it is essential that a holding environment also be provided for (in our case both volunteers and) staff. Environmental continuity and stability are prerequisites for mental health.

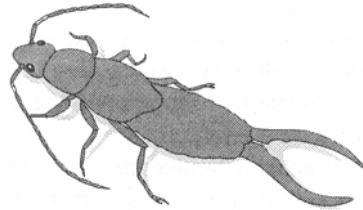
My involvement with the Squiggle Foundation has clarified the issues

involved in my day-to-day work. It has given me a frame within which to carry on, and an insight into the unconscious communication that takes place between volunteer and victim, volunteer and the organisation. It has provided me with both a holding environment and a model of good practice. Working with people affected by serious crime or sudden violent death involves coping with the primitive nature of their responses and their need for others to bear witness. My experience with Squiggle has helped me to realise that without appropriate supervision at all levels it would be difficult for such work to be effective or for the workers to remain psychologically healthy. This experience may be available elsewhere, but my joy has been discovering it through Squiggle.

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## Earwig

**H**ave you heard those so-called jokes which are going around about getting hold of a therapist? All about answer machines which say things like 'Press your \* button and if you are obsessive press I repeatedly. If you are co-dependent ask someone to press 2 for you. If you have multiple personalities press 3, 4, & 5. If you are paranoid-delusional we know who you are and what you want so stay on the line while we trace the call. If you are schizophrenic listen carefully and a voice will tell you which number to press. If you are manic depressive it does not matter what number you press?' What nonsense. Very alienating. We are all humanistic here, which means we do not do things like that. We are considerate, friendly and fully open



to you whoever you are, so our answer machine says (sounding sorry) 'We are sorry we cannot take your call at the moment but (sounding more chirpy) if you send an s.a.e. somebody will send you a programme of the workshops, courses and training we offer. We would be pleased (sounding very pleased) to send you a list of our well qualified, experienced and properly-supervised therapists which is available on request. Meanwhile, go hug yourself.

*Yours, Earwig, The People 's Shrink*