

# Extraordinary Children

*HARNESSING THE POTENCY OF ELEMENTAL ROLES*

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## **ABSTRACT**

Sara Crane traces the journey of her psychotherapeutic work with three children, describing how she came to appreciate the therapeutic potency of the extraordinary elemental roles enacted by them. The work of the clinician is to understand the context and underlying value system of these frequently unattractive and antisocial roles, and to ensure that they are doubled, mirrored and harnessed to the progressive system.

## **KEYWORDS**

children, clinician, core roles, double, elemental roles, mirror, psychodrama, psychotherapy with children, role context, role system, role theory, values

*As I was going to St. Ives  
I met a man with seven wives  
Each wife had seven sacks  
Each sack had seven cats  
Each cat had seven kits  
Kits, cats, sacks and wives  
How many were going to St. Ives?*  
Traditional

## **Prelude**

This well known old nursery rhyme was my youngest child's favourite when he was three. He was keen to know how all the cats had got into the sacks. He would examine

the picture in great detail and puzzle about how they could all fit in. He wondered what would happen if they were all let out at the same time. I was delighted by his curiosity and investigative nature. However, at about the same age this youngest son dropped my favourite green clock out of an upstairs window. My beautiful clock lay in smithereens and my 'revolting' child was examining its innards with pleasure. When I asked him why he had broken my clock he said that he had wanted to "get the insides out". I was upset and furious although I also remember that there was a very small aspect of myself that, along with my son, was fascinated by all the little silver springs that were now visible.

In both the scenarios above, my son's underlying desire was a deep longing to understand how things work. One of the core roles he enacted was that of the scientist. Depending on our individual experiences each of us will imbue the meaning of this role in different ways, but some constants such as experimental, observant, logical and inquiring are given. However, the re-statement of the familiar aspect of a role can have a watering down effect. For example, to describe a scientist as observant is unlikely to engage much interest. The quality of expression in my young scientist son ranged from enthusiastic, steadfast and determined to perfectionistic and doubting, depending on the particular context and set of role relationships with which he was involved. Had I shouted, blamed and thrown the clock in the rubbish bin I would have likely engendered a fragmenting role system, which would be adversely linked to my child's experience of being a scientist. However, my conflicted response possibly provoked doubt and confusion, and the energy of his scientist may well have receded for awhile. In contrast, by entering into the puzzling matter of the cats in sacks I encouraged playfulness in both of us. A casual observer might have named my son's roles *destructive tyrant* or *naughty fool* in relation to the clock incident, and *caring animal lover* or *concerned questioner* regarding the cats in sacks. This would have been to name roles by noticing the behaviour and to therefore miss the all important but not immediately apparent value system that underlies functioning and which imbues its context with meaning.

## Premises

This paper encompasses three related premises. The first concerns the therapeutic potency of elemental roles. While seeing roles as the expression of an individual's unique response to a situation, it is also useful to view them as imbued with all the stories, memories and influences on the very edge of awareness. Each of us will have had experiences in childhood when others perceived us as destructive or revolting, or in some other negative frame. Often these situations leave us, as children, feeling misunderstood and shamed. As adults it becomes clear that these unappreciated and often unattractive childhood roles have served us well. They have strengthened us and helped us to survive. Their means of expression are unique and full of force. These are central roles, often enacted as dynamic fragmenting or coping responses that make sense in context. Far from disapproving of or rejecting their repugnant qualities, the work is to couple their vital energy to the person's progressive system.

The second premise is concerned with the vital nature of context in the emergence

of roles, especially elemental roles, and the fundamental importance of the value systems that underlie them. There is a delight and a deep joy in accurately and precisely naming a role and thus 'getting' the true nature of another person. The function of both double and mirror is present. For that other person there is potency, a wake up to self in a new way. In psychodrama, a tendency has developed towards compartmentalising roles and listing them as progressive, coping or fragmenting. This can be a useful way of conceptualising an individual's personality and getting to grips with her or his functioning. However, it can also narrow down our view of a person by defining them in a partial way. The vital being of a person is fluid. There is value in taking a broad view of the core essence of an individual and the context in which roles emerge, allowing all possibilities to enter our consciousness. The roles they enact change in response to a relationship, progressive in one relationship but coping or fragmenting in another. In considering roles, context and foundational values are central.

Given the first two premises, a third premise relates them to the work of the clinician. The elemental roles that startle us into life are observable in tiny children as they show preferences and search for meaning through play and interaction. The role of the *free spirit* on the jolly jumper, screeching with excitement, will be affected depending on the responses of significant others. Join in and strengthen the role, or shush the infant and see the role diminish. Thus what is needed is doubling, followed up by a discriminating mirror. What may be considered cute in a three year old is often repulsive in a thirteen year old. Passion can be interpreted as excess, ingenuity as deceit. Mirroring assists us to learn about our impact on others so that our capacity for relationship is not seriously impaired and our ability to role reverse is increased. It is the clinician's job to double and mirror elemental roles, to make sense of the context in which they emerge, to illuminate the underlying value system and most importantly to harness their vitality to the person's progressive role system. Perhaps this perspective could be understood as an archetypal approach.

A word about my use of the term 'elemental' to describe roles. "Role is the functioning form the individual assumes in the specific situation in which other persons or objects are involved". This is the familiar definition of role provided by Moreno (1994:iv). The following definition provided by Charmaine McVea and Don Reekie (2007, cited in Reekie, 2009) resonates most with my understanding of the meaning of role. "Role is understood holistically as a person's specific way of being himself or herself in any given situation". The key word is 'holistic'. When we understand the core role a person is enacting we are most likely to relate to their experience. The choice of elemental as the preferred term and title of this piece indicates perhaps my literary style more than anything else. For me it is the word that most evokes the essential potency of the core roles enacted by the children that I present in this paper.

## Illustrations

To illustrate the three premises, I present three children with whom I have worked in my private practice. They have each survived abusive beginnings and been sustained by

'revolting' elemental roles, the significance of which had previously gone unrecognised. I discovered that doubling these powerful roles, recognising their survival contexts, acknowledging the value systems that underlay them and beginning the work of harnessing their potency, constituted the way forward. This approach enabled these extraordinary children to recognise and accept their essential goodness and take the first steps beyond survival and coping.

### *Mad Max*

Meet a little seven year old Maori boy who is unclaimed by his whanau (family), a very unusual phenomenon in Maoridom in Aotearoa New Zealand. He has lived in numerous foster homes and no family members ever attend family group conferences. I suspect there is a complex history that I never discover. He is suspended from school for attacking his teacher with a pair of scissors in a fit of rage. He explains that he was trying to put her eye out. In my room he is a little lamb. But there is no life in this little lamb. He is good because my room, with its colourful toys and numerous activities, is a safe place to be. Especially he likes my dog. However, I know that unless I gain a sense of the motivation behind his rage I am not going to be able to make a difference.

He adores my 'Where the Wild Things Are'<sup>1</sup> puppets. He relates strongly to Max, the book's central character, and is outraged by the way Max is unfairly treated when he is sent to bed without eating his dinner. It is through his play with the puppets that I discover that he has watched all the 'Mad Max'<sup>2</sup> movies and that Mad Max is his hero. Two Max heroes! He responds powerfully to Mad Max's fixation with making things fair. This is the value system he is relating to. Through his play, I discover that he experienced the teacher as unfair and punitive towards a little girl in his class who was "just like my little sister I don't see now". He wants things to be fair. When things are not fair, he is a *ferocious avenger*.

Now that I understand the value system a little more, I can be of more help. I begin to double his motivation to make things fair. However, I am doing my job in a very unfair system. I do not make any headway with the school, the foster mother cannot cope with his angry outbursts at home, and the social worker has to arrange for a volunteer to bring him to therapy with me. Then his funding finishes and I stop seeing him. I do not even get the opportunity to say goodbye and I feel like a hopeless traitor.

I think about this little boy a lot. I am very unhappy about the sudden loss of contact. Then a wonderful coincidence comes about. I am supervising the staff of a residential care facility for children and his name comes up. I find myself supervising his new psychologist who absolutely understands him. Rather than focusing on the fragmenting roles of a *raging destroyer*, he focuses on the motivation for things to be fair. Together we work out effective strategies for the staff to use with this little boy. One of the outcomes is the formation at the facility of the 'Fair Gang' with him as the leader. One example of him beginning to embody this role is his eagle eyed insistence on same sized portions of food served in the dining room. He warms up to being a *picky complainer*

rather than a *ferocious avenger*. Things are starting to improve.

When we resist our tendency to reject fragmenting roles in our clients, we are free to get to know the underlying value system and recognise the progressive forces embodied in it. This boy had been unfairly treated. His drive to destroy was motivated by his desire to make things fair, to be a *Mad Max*. Once he had the opportunities to enact this desire in a life-giving and relational way, he was able to take on the progressive elements of the role. The interventions of the residential workers saved this boy's life. He could easily have been drawn along the pathway to self-destruction.

### *The Virgin Mary*

Imagine a large 11 year old girl. She is the kind of child to whom people do not warm. She tends to behave in socially inappropriate and embarrassing ways, such as smothering strangers with hugs when she meets them. She is the second youngest of four children, all removed from their mother's care as babies. She has lived in numerous foster homes and was reasonably well settled in the latest one until her foster sister had a baby and came home to live. She is very jealous of her foster sister, and the foster mother is worried that she might hurt the baby. She is now having a small amount of contact with her own mother. The mother is not psychologically minded and wants her daughter to behave in socially prescribed ways. Meanwhile this young girl is bailing up boys in the school toilets and trying to get them to have sex with her.

When I meet this girl it transpires that she really wants to have a baby too. She imagines that the baby will meet her need to be loved best of all. She is sure that people will pay attention to her when she is a mother. Everyone will love the baby, her birth mother will care for it and both families will be happy. This baby will save the world. So, we play babies. The more she engages with the imaginary baby in my room, the less interested she is in boys. She likes to take on the mother role, but is very reluctant to be the baby.

The girl's foster mother is very suspicious of the baby play and wants to make sure that I am doing sex education. The school recommends that she attend an all-girls boarding school. However, her birth mother understands. Having resumed church attendance she introduces her 11 year old to The Virgin Mary. The mother and her daughter resonate with The Virgin Mary and the notion that women can be truly good and loveable. The daughter likes to hear her mother tell The Virgin Mary stories and is touched by something larger than herself and her known world. She is obviously inspired and begins to develop the idea that she may be loveable after all. Her longing to express her love towards others becomes more appropriate and she no longer smothers strangers with unwanted embraces. Gradually mother and daughter spend more time together and their relationship builds. However, the girl's peer relationships remain weak and this is an area of future work.

Here is an example of the underlying value system that is not immediately apparent but which is related to childhood experience. This girl is unsure of her own lovability. On the surface she is a *jealous troublemaker* and a *sexual bully*. But underlying these coping roles is the value system of a *Virgin Mary* who is truly good and who aspires to a deep

and enduring love for herself and others. She longs to express this love through the mothering of a baby, a baby who she will love and delight in and who will return that love and delight. I double her and therefore accept her, and this allows her to find new ways for the expression of what is her essential being. I follow up this initial doubling with consistent and accurate mirroring so that she will develop the ability to understand her impact on others and exercise restraint when appropriate.

### *The White Witch*

Meet another 11 year old girl. Again there is a very complex history of hideous abuse and numerous foster home placements. This child was shut outside at night and food was withheld. She witnessed severe violence towards her siblings and she was sexually abused. When I meet her she has just come to live with her grandparents and the social services have undertaken to fund counselling for both her and her grandparents. The school reports that while this girl is catching up with learning she has a tendency to be spiteful.

Nana, who has three other children still living at home, finds her granddaughter cold and hostile and is troubled by this. She is used to doing a lot for the children and nurturing them with love and care, but this child wants to make her own lunch, choose her own clothes, lock the bathroom door and keep her bedroom door shut. Nana engages well with my therapist colleague in the rooms we share. There is thus the opportunity for us to work in close consultation with one another, which makes my work with this family so much easier. Once Nana fully understands how much this child needs to be in charge to feel safe, we start to make some progress. She is able to maintain warmth and firmness with her granddaughter in the face of some challenging behaviours, such as biting, scratching and swearing.

This particular child is highly vigilant about others hurting her. She needs to be in charge so as to feel safe. She likes my dog Tansy and is very gentle with her. Intuitively Tansy knows not to lick her, because this is a child who is repulsed by touch. Her absolute hero is *The White Witch*<sup>3</sup> from the Narnia stories. She adores Tilda Swinton, the very gorgeous and sinister White Witch in her favourite movie version. In actuality, she embodies *The White Witch* as an elemental role. I make sure to watch the same movie version so that I can be a cooperative auxiliary and take on the other roles. However, the story enacted in my room develops somewhat differently from the movie. As she enters, explores and enjoys the role of *The White Witch*, this 11 year old begins to create a very beautiful and carefully constructed imaginary world where everything has its place and adversities are manageable. In one scene from the movie *The White Witch* tempts one of the children with sweets. In our story there are enough sweets for everyone including the animals, and sweets are not used as bribes. We make magic to melt the snow and we are careful not to leave any signs of our movements.

Given the extent of the hurt that this child has suffered it is remarkable to observe the progress she makes. Nana's insight was the key. She realised that her granddaughter's controlling behaviours were not motivated by animosity but by a creative instinct to survive in the face of terrible past abuse. Once this young girl began to feel safer she was

able to enact more progressive aspects of *The White Witch*. However, when she feels trapped the old fragmenting role system leaps into action and she will bite and scratch, and swear ferociously with icy venom. *The Old White Witch* is slowly diminishing and *The New White Witch*, the healer and safe-keeper, is emerging.

## Reflections

When working with these three children I was struck by the evocativeness and potency of the elemental roles that each enacted, *Mad Max*, *The Virgin Mary* and *The White Witch*. Roles such as these can be seen as the vital essence of a person's being. They spring up in a wide range of contexts, often as fragmenting or coping responses to original childhood experiences. The work of the clinician is to ensure that these roles, no matter how unattractive and antisocial, are doubled, mirrored and aligned to the progressive system. When we unravel their context and underlying value system, we can understand the motivation that elicits problem functioning and our task becomes clearer.

The essence of a human being, the creative genius, has unlimited capacity for spontaneity and encounter. When we gain a sense of the whole person, their stories, their mysteries, their motivations, we can work with their core roles. We can spot the shifts which occur within the contexts of different situations and double the values that are expressed through the roles that emerge. In working with these children and their families, I have continued to marvel at the love and determination that caregivers have exercised in order to encounter their children. I applaud these extraordinary children for continuing to be themselves in spite of disapproval, and for facing the challenges of life with vitality and creativity.

## Postscript

I showed the beginnings of this paper to my youngest son over a gorgeous dinner. Originally a chef, he has recently retrained as an electronic technician. He laughed and said that these days he gets paid good money to take things apart and figure out how they work.

## Diagrams

The following diagrams are intended to give a flavour of the role systems and to demonstrate how I conceptualise fragmenting, coping and progressive functioning in relation to elemental roles. I have found this format useful in charting the ebb and flow between the gestalts. In my consulting room, I tend to use magnets on a white board or small objects on a circular table to co-create systems with families.

DIAGRAM 1: *THE SCIENTIST*

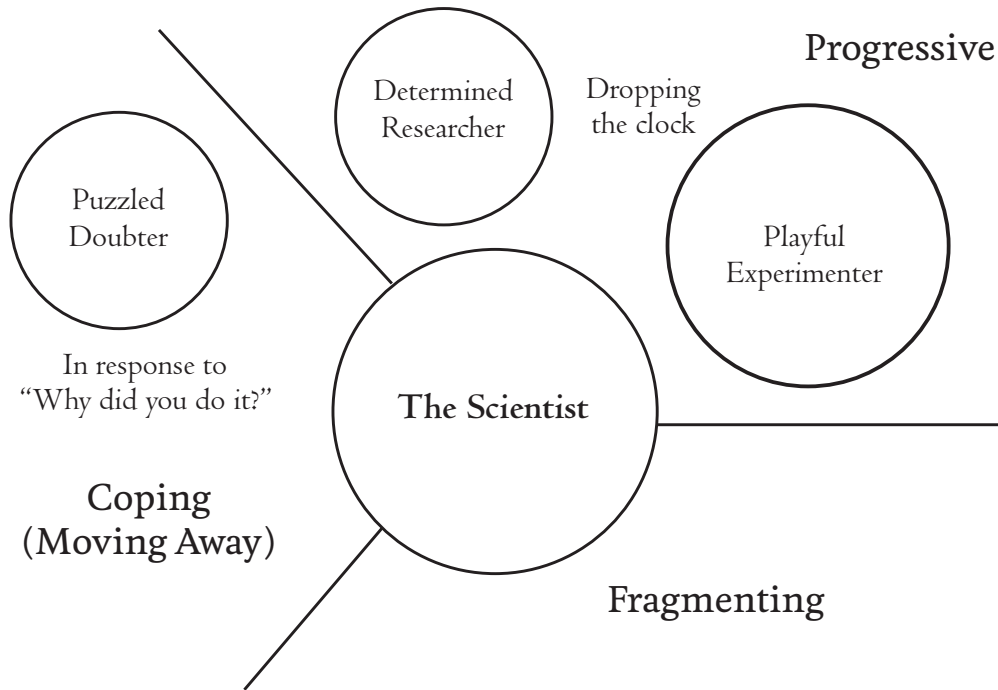
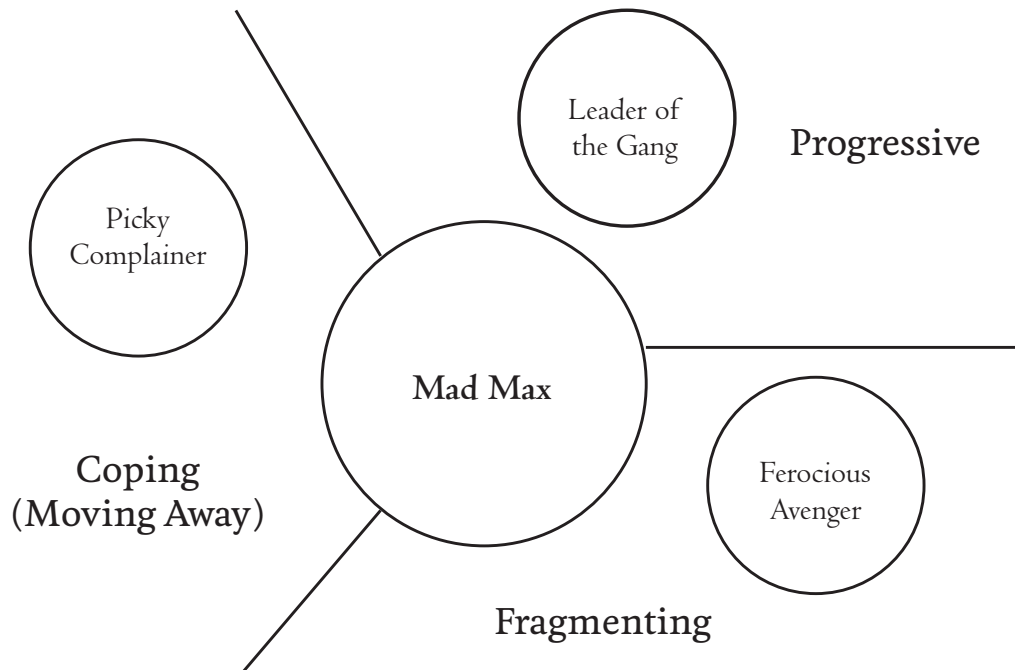


DIAGRAM 2: *MAD MAX*





## ENDNOTES

1. 'Where the Wild Things Are' is a 1963 children's picture book by American writer and illustrator Maurice Sendak.
2. 'Mad Max' is a 1979 Australian dystopian action film directed by George Miller and starring the then relatively unknown Mel Gibson.
3. Jadis, commonly known as The White Witch, is the main villain in 'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe', the first book in C.S. Lewis' 'Chronicles of Narnia'.

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