**Billie-Claire Wright transcript**

Sarah and Billie FEBRUARY 2021 CRI - PRESENTATION - 27 MINS

[FEMALE RESPONDENTS]

[Other comments:]

[Hello and welcome to the BACP Therapy Today podcast]

Hello and welcome. I'm Sally Brown and today I'm delighted to be talking to Billie-Claire Wright. Billie is an integrative therapist whose specialist is Play Therapy and sand tray work. She's currently on a project with a children's charity, Barnardo's, offering short-term therapeutic support to children and young people, but she originally trained as an actress and worked in the profession for 20 years with roles in film, TV and theatre before changing careers. Welcome Billie.

Thank you, it's good to be here.

It's great to have you, so let's start with that big career change, so from the performing arts to therapy, how did that transition come about?

It wasn't planned. It wasn't planned, definitely wasn't planned, but as an actress or performer you spend periods of time where you're not working, or not doing the job that you love to do, and for me, every time I hit that pocket, I would then start to find meaning, search for meaning; why am I here? Why am I doing this? A little bit like a fix, like a drug addict who, every time you have that fix you feel alive, you're awake, and acting is a bit like that. When you're working it's amazing, and when you're not working you start questioning your whole reason for being, so for me those pockets of space where I wasn't working was a search for meaning, reading books, understanding race and learning more about the human condition. It was my agent actually who said to me, 'Just get on with life. Get on with your life', and for me acting was my life, so how do I get on with my life if I'm not working? Then it just seemed to evolve into wanting children, and having difficulty with pregnancy and then finding a therapist to deal with that difficulty.

Then that opened up a whole area of me understanding how cathartic it can be to have that support, and then just dipping my toes in a little bit more and wanting to do some voluntary work with children or young people, and then realising I needed support in order to work with those children and young people because I wanted a much bigger role than what they'd assigned me. At that time, I was doing really weekly acting, so I had made a bit of a name for myself, so an organisation said they wanted me to be an ambassador, I think it was something like Voice for a Child in Need, and I wanted to be more involved, but I needed training. Then I approached the Place2Be and got a job as a volunteer doing a couple of days a week and then, from then I thought, 'Yes, I can do this, let me apply to study. I want to do this', and that's how it happened. It wasn't planned.

It was a gradual kind of being sucked in.

It was gradual, yes. I'm a bit like them, quite cautious, three steps forward three back.

Yes, so, as you say, you were high-profile, you'd done well and yet it seems as though therapy was a bigger draw for you, or became a bigger draw for you.

Yes, I always felt when I was acting - there's a sense of emptiness when you're not surrounded with the people that were on that stage, it just feels what's the point? I was doing a lot of TV work, and you spend a lot of time in your trailer waiting to be called to do a scene that you psych yourself up and it's over in a minute, and my passion was theatre, I hate TV. I'm really self-conscious, I felt really uncomfortable, but I kept getting TV work, but theatre I could breathe, I could come alive and I felt so passionate about it, so we would come together, just build these really powerful connections and then, at the end of the production, you realise you have absolutely nothing in common with this person. You've bonded just from those characters and that relationship on stage, but outside of that, well, what have we got in common? Not much. So, a lot of the time I felt really lonely and really as if I were searching for more. I felt underused as well. Even at the height of my career, I felt underused.

Right, yes, but there is a bit of a connection though I think between performing arts and therapy. I was thinking about storytelling.

That's right.

And how it's more about storytelling in a way, so there does seem a sort of logic between the two of them in a way.

At the time I can't say I thought of it that way, but there is a connection. I mean when you're working with a young person as a therapist, you're building a relationship and it's all about the narrative and a person telling a story, and making sense of that story, and you listening, validating their experience, and in theatre, or in acting, you're given a script, but you're bringing your own experience to that script, so you've got a narrative, but you have your own personal narrative. That's going to be affected by the person. I'm doing a scene with you, Sally, and you've got your own narrative, and you've got your own script, so how you deliver your lines from your personal experience is going to impact on how I then respond, so in a way it's a bit like therapy. I'm bringing myself to these clinical sessions with my clinic, and what they tell me and how I respond to that impacts on their understanding of that experience, and making sense of that experience, so that interplay is very similar to being on a stage. Then you've got the audience and the space as well, and that also influences how we receive information.

Absolutely, how interesting, so you mentioned children, and you've chosen to specialise in working with children, so tell me about that. Why was that important to you?

Probably healing the hurt child in me, and trying to make sense of my own experience in early childhood. I'm from quite a big family. I've got five siblings, and I remember I have three sisters and myself, we shared a room and there were lots of stories, so my oldest sister would tell us these really powerful, amazing stories at night-time around challenge, love, loss, and we'd always be questioning, but what happened then? What if this happened? What would happen if this happened? It would go on in the night, and then my second oldest sister would then tell us a happy story to cheer us up. So, storytelling is very much in our family. For me, the idea of working with children was to make sense of certain aspects of my own childhood, and in doing that I feel, I don't know, I've realised how lucky I am and how fortunate I am, and how much I have when I see the young clients that come through the door that don't have a fraction of what I had when I was growing up, but it's not relative, but yes.

And you see those young people coming through the door with Barnardo's. Is that right?

We do.

That's a charity we all know the name of, maybe we connect it with children's homes, but I wonder if we really know what it's about, so can you tell us a little bit about the charity you support?

Well, you're right, I mean that's how Barnardo's started, and they are definitely leaders in terms of fostering and adoption, but Barnardo's has been transforming lives of the UK's most vulnerable children every year, and they help build better futures for those children and their families. Now, I can give you some numbers if that's helpful.

Yes.

I know that last year alone they supported something like 350,000 families, children and young people, and we have 800 UK services that meet those needs, and of that 55,000 were people who access mental health services, 40,000 of those were seen in school and then the remaining 10,000 other mental health services as well, so they're doing a lot. They've definitely seen, since the COVID outbreak, an increase in self-harm and adversity as well. That could be online grooming, online harm, sexual exploitation, criminal exploitation. We're going through a very difficult period Barnardo's financially, and like any other charity I'm sure, they're struggling to keep up and meet the needs of some of the most vulnerable children. The children I see are doing well in the sense of they are loved, they have families, they have a home, they feel supported, but the children who don't have that, they're the most vulnerable and they're at risk of losing what we can provide for them, so we do need help.

At the moment, funding is not matching up with the demand.

Absolutely, so we are putting out another crisis appeal for the COVID-19 fund on our website, so if you're listening, and you want to make a difference in young people's lives and to the most vulnerable, please just visit the site and see what you can do. Any small amount will help.

Okay, and tell me about your personal work. How do you personally work with children?

How do I personally work with children? Play, play, play. It's been different since we're working now mainly remotely. I love Sand Tray. I feel really passionate about Sand Tray, and you can achieve so much with Sand Tray, and now I'm working online I can't do that. We can get the remote sand trays, but it's very, very different, very different, so the way that we work, we have a Barnardo's framework, which is a SCIE framework, which is client directed strengths-based system focus outcome-related, so that's the framework we use with all the clients. When a child/young person comes in, they do a Child Outcome Rating Scale, which is a sheet of paper that measures four areas of their life, and depending on what number they give that informs where we need to focus the work on, but it is child-led. If that young person has rated the family experience really low, then we can spend some time thinking about what do they need? What's going really well? What needs to happen to increase that? We have the framework, but we've got lots of clinicians from different areas of practice, from play and movement, psychotherapy, CBT, whatever that child needs.

And so Sand Tray is intriguing, because I know you do sometimes, or you did pre-COVID shall we say, you worked with a family together with the sand tray to aid communication, which sounds so interesting. Can you tell us about that?

Yes, so I'd never done it before, it was a first. I had a young client with a parent who, we sat in the sessions and there were difficulties around the parent's condition/illness and the child's response towards that illness. I always have a sand tray in front of me in a session, so whether that child wants to use it to help self-regulate or to pick objects and create a picture in the sound, and this particular parent, we were just playing with the sand and the young person also began playing with the sand, and as they were doing this interchange between the two of them I then suggested, 'Well, what might it be like if you created what it feels like for you when your parent is this way?' The child did that, and then I said to the other parent of the child, 'What would it be like if you met where that child was at? What needs to happen?' Then that parent did something else, and then we had a bridge, 'What needs to happen now to join the two?', and the two of them instinctively picked an object and created something around what needs to happen to make a bridge between the two worlds of the child's experience, the father's experience and how they can come together, and it was really, really powerful.

I've done it again since with other parents and children, and to see the parent suddenly understand that young person's world in a different way is, it's just beautiful, and the child's response as well that, 'Finally you get it, you finally understand what I've been trying to tell you, and I know now that you can support me', it's magical.

How powerful and how amazing, but it must also be frustrating for you that now you can't use that favourite medium of yours.

Yes.

So, how are you doing it now if you are working remotely?

It's really frustrating. It's so frustrating.

Yes.

I tried doing it, and it has actually worked, but in a different way where I have my sand tray positioned on my workstation, and then I angle the camera in such a way that the child or young person can see my sand tray, and they can see my objects and they're telling me what to do, how to move the objects around, how to create what they need in the sand, but they don't get the sensory experience of the sand. Some children have gone out and bought boxes and then created their own sand tray, and then the parents have supported that by finding objects in nature and then they had a separate box for our sessions, and that's been really valuable, or they bring their own toys and then we can do it that way, but I really miss being in the same space as that young person.

Yes, and deeply frustrating I should imagine at the moment when, as you mentioned previously, we know that lockdowns have really impacted on families and children. I've been reading a lot about the negative impact on children of being around parents in conflict, for instance. I wondered if all of this must, in some way, reinforce to you that you're doing something that's really needed and you're on the right path.

It does. It does, and with that it's quite overwhelming actually. The service I work for has just seen such an increase in referrals, and there's a sense of these young people who I'm seeing, who have actually quite a lot going for them, but they can't see it, they're stuck, and you realise how much the school, they're a glue really to hold these kids together and make sense of where am I going? Where am I going, this way? So, it does feel quite overwhelming at times when I'm seeing the referrals coming in and there's no end to it, and the referrals, the theme is around the anxieties because of COVID-19 and the behaviours around those anxieties.

I wondered about that, the impact of all that on you. Working with children and families at any time is emotionally charged, but at this time, when you say you've got all these extra issues coming in from the clients, but also you're dealing, as well, with exactly what's going on. We're experiencing the world in the same way, we are dealing with lockdown and everything that brings, and worries about COVID, so how do you deal with all of that? What's your self-care to prevent that becoming overwhelming and burning out?

Oh, how we deal with it? It's hard to cut-off because I'm working from my home space, but I do. My first thing I do is to clear all my work stuff away so that the table is clear and ready for a meal, and then I'll do some exercise, maybe some yoga or hit YouTube and try and find sort of the half hour workout, but mainly yoga and meditate. I've revisited the book The Art of Happiness, which is kind of a Buddhist philosophy. I read it at length in my 20s, and I've come back round again to finding, when you hear lots of negativity throughout the day it's really hard to hold on to the 'We've got this. I've got my health. I've got my daughter. I'm really happy', and that book is fantastic just to dip into and remind me of something bigger than this, which is to help, help and give out, give out. Walking, crocheting, reading, watching TV, Adam Sandler movies are fantastic, they're real feel-good motives.

I'm getting a sense that you're a very instinctively an optimistic person, you're a very hopeful person.

I think naturally I'm actually quite an anxious person naturally, but over the years I realised that just what's the point, it just creates a block. Now, I'm much more towards the sort of holding on to the optimism, the good stuff.

And it seems as though - I don't know if I've got this right - that I like the fact that the Barnardo's approach, I like that strengths approach, looking at what strengths the child has already and what they can build on, that's a very hope form of approach, very empowering.

It's really hard for young people to identify their strengths. That's what I've realised.

Yes.

They're not used to looking at the good, and sometimes, when you're going through an assessment and you ask them, 'What's going well in your life?', they'll saying, 'Nothing, nothing', but they've just spoken at length about their friendships and how fantastic the friends are, and that they're doing really well in school, but that question, 'What's going well?' 'Nothing, I hate my life, it's all awful', and you have to remind them, 'But you said earlier on that actually this is doing, yes, yes, I like that'. By the end they've listed five or six things without even realising that these are the things that they need to hold on to, to get through, to ride out those difficult periods, but the strength-based is wonderful, but it's a challenge to get young people to identify their key strengths.

Yes, and obviously that's not ignoring the challenges, the very real challenges that they're all facing, but I think that's something I do in my own work, which is just to try and counteract that very powerful brain's natural negativity bias that we all have.

Yes, maybe that's a British thing, a British way of being is to focus on the negative and that's our humour, and the American way is that they blow themselves up here, 'I'm this. I'm this. I'm great at this', and we're not good at doing that.

Absolutely, it's just not culturally acceptable, is it?

Yes.

It's much more culturally acceptable to do yourself down and make a bit of a joke of it.

Yes, absolutely, play down your strengths, and so many young people I meet, where I say, 'Where would you rate yourself academically out of five? Five being overachieving and zero being I'm nowhere near I need to be', and they'll kind of say, 'Two out of five'. I said, 'Really? What were your last reports?' 'I got a B plus', or this and that, and I'm like, 'And you're rating yourselves as two out of five, wow! Wow!'

Yes.

'It sounds like you're doing really well, but you don't see that', 'Well, I think I could do better'.

It must be very satisfying to see those young people reframe that and grow a little bit more in their confidence about their achievements.

It's exciting when you see them hear themselves back and realise, 'Actually, I'm better than what I'm giving myself credit for'. When they don't, when they're still letting it bounce off them and they're still putting themselves down, that's painful, it's painful to see, but when they actually get it and they go, 'Oh, I never thought of it like that. Yes, I guess I am probably a bit better than I thought I was', it's fantastic.

Yes, therapy is a career that comes with challenges, isn't it, and I wondered if there was anything in particular that you find frustrating about the profession, or your career, all challenging?

Frustrating would be wanting to move, be more flexible, so I'm working with children and young people, but I really, really want to work with families, so it's like the child in need is here, and now I want to extend that out and work with the family, but in order to do that I need to retrain, and that's frustrating. I wish there were more opportunities to train on the job, so okay, so she's got all these skills, these amazing skills and she's been doing it for this length of time, ten years, so we can take that person on and we can actually invest in them and move them on into this area, and help them to grow within this organisation, or within that aspect. I think that would be amazing for a lot of clinicians who have found a passion somewhere else, but they also have all these other amazing skills, but they're having to drop all that and retrain to work in a specific field.

Yes, absolutely, and retrain on your own, retrain with your own money.

Yes.

That's why a lot of that is not possible.

Absolutely and more money, more money for the jobs that we do. Yes, please, that would be fantastic. I know a lot of clinicians and practitioners would support me in that, that we are definitely underpaid for what we do.

Absolutely, yes, so you kind of touched on what I'd like to ask as my final question, any ideas of where your career path might lead in the future, and you mentioned working with families?

I would love to be working with families, absolutely. That's where I'm going to be heading, and maybe, maybe they'll be a book in there, who knows. I think we've all got a book in us, haven't we? I'm feeling a passion for writing. I love reading anyway, but a passion for writing.

What kind of book? Is that fiction? Is that non-fiction?

Sorry, repeat that.

Is that a fiction or a non-fiction book?

It would be something - you know what, it's interesting because I thought maybe it would be about my work and how I work, but then I've still got the actor in me and a passion for scripts, and so maybe they'll be a drama in there based on character studies and thinking about personalities, what makes someone do something or behave in certain ways. Maybe it will be a script, you know.

Right, watch this space.

Watch this space, a piece of theatre written, directed and acting bit there.

Yes, oh wonderful. I look forward to watching that, and seeing that happen.

Yes.

Well, it's been absolutely wonderful to talk to you today, Billie. Thank you so much for your time, and for sharing your inspiration and your passion for what you do with all of us.

Thank you for giving me the space, it's been brilliant.

And the best of luck with those plans.

Thank you.

[Thank you for listening to the BACP Therapy Today podcast. We hope that you enjoyed it, and remember, if you've got any ideas or suggestions on what we might include in future editions, please do not hesitate to get in touch. Thanks again]

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