

## **Introducing Sandtray-Worldplay: the Story of a Group Sandplay Ritual**

**By Gisela Schubach De Domenico, PhD.**



The Oakland Sandtray-Worldplay Training Center

A Sandtray-Worldplay training group is about to start. We have gathered in a circle. Everyone has been instructed to quietly move to music, to breathe gently, and be with the core of his or her being. Soon everyone moves toward the shelves filled with images, looking for one that brings form to the way they are today. Some return with one, some return with two, and some even have three, for we all know that images create composite clusters of experiences that are held in unity of meaning by the one who chooses them.

In this workshop, we will use a rain stick as a talking stick: as each person introduces themselves by making a part of their inner beingness visible for all of us, we take the rain stick and sound ourselves in and out of talking-sharing and silently-receiving. In other workshops we use Tibetan bells or rattles.

The Master Teacher has chosen sandtray. It has been placed on the floor in the center of our circle. A candle has been lit and is placed into the center of the World-to-be. We all sit quietly, stirring with expectation.



The light in the center reminds us that sandtray play has a centering effect on us: the container is a universe. The center is our axis of balance that radiates out into each direction of the compass, including above and below. We sense the presence of our own innate sentience in the core of our heart. Rather than solely relying on our small ego mind, we open ourselves to the space within. As we watch the light in the center of the empty tray, we see the reflection of the clarity of our deep conscious Self. We ask for guidance from our Self. The play process allows our own inner light to shine forth: our own psyche guides us. We are reminded that it is this very Self that we help our clients activate when we use the sandtray in the playroom.

One player knows that he holds the beginning of the sharing circle. Two young men enter the World. They are gathering the harvest. They are warm and connected to the earth: “My life needs to be simplified. I need to take time to experience the earth, the harvest, the country-side and my roots.”



Yes, sandtray is like gathering the harvest of our life: the rituals of the Sandtray-Worldplay Session involve playing, observing, taking time to be with Self, learning how to experience, finding the sounds, the words, and the story that fit, and sharing these with an interested, participating witness. We learn to see the content of the World as being an expression of what is growing and what is being harvested in

our life. This process re-connects us as much to the earth as to our own nature. It helps us return to the simplicity of our being.

At the end of our training, this same participant shared: “I have more clarity now.” Indeed, the play process brings more familiarity and more clarity, for it mirrors our nature and the conditions of life.

The next sharing embodies a sturdy, strong oak tree and a smoothly flowing figure of stone: “I sense how deep I am and how deep my roots go, holding the earth for generations even though erosion goes on. There is a scar that shows that I have the



ability to heal myself. I grew up with Oak trees... How I wish to be smooth and flowing like this...this one has tension and relaxation both... oh, I grieve for the younger days.”



The Oak and Flowing One

Here we see clearly how sandplay with forms allows us to use just a few images to make visible many complex experiences. We have the opportunity to experience very deeply, to connect to our roots, our ancestors, the cycles of the earth, as we learn more about healing from the inevitable woundings that life brings. We may begin to face the grief over the loss of our vitality and youth as we age. We learn how to flow with such experiences.

The next participant shares images that bring together the discordant, difficult, but developmentally appropriate parenting experiences occurring in her own family life:



“I am the screaming one...my son and I we were so close and now, rightfully so, in adolescence he is allergic to me...allergy vs. closeness. He is evolving. His temper evolves. He is testing the limits. It is hard. The owl is there. It is the owl of wisdom. It is with me.”

In play, we can experience many apparently discordant states simultaneously. In fact, we can bring these apparently discordant states into an integrated whole view that includes the emotional, the intellectual, the physical, the idealistic, the realistic, the remembered, the changed, the necessary, and the desired elements of the situation. We see the woman screaming at the monstrous child. Yet the same woman remembers and shows us the innocent frog prince as the sweet child of memory. Being with this memory allows her own wisdom to grow. We see and hear the Mother at her wit’s end. We know she already holds the wise owl.

In sandplay, the problem is made visible along with the solution. By the end of the workshop, she experiences her son continuing on his journey, herself screaming less, readying to reach for the support of Father-Husband during this transitional family time.

Sandtray-Worldplay is so effective in delineating and resolving parenting issues by allowing us to develop capacity for empathic understanding for all members of the family. We more readily learn to see their needs, their nature, their developmental challenges, their freedoms, their gifts, and their shortcomings as we let them come alive in the sand. They become beings in their own rights, rather than projections of our own nature and our own desires. Simultaneously we become more ‘real’ to ourselves as our humanity emerges.



Next comes a woman who shares that she is moving through a big transition in her life as her children are leaving home. She is struggling. The dragon with the light is the spiritual realm that gives her serenity and brings her near the light that is so important at this time. The couple is there.

Here we see how work with images can get us in touch with the light that



is not only within us but that surrounds us: the spiritual realm of truth gives us serenity. Whether young or old, it is good to access this realm of reality, particularly during times of difficult familial and social transitions. Sandplay usually re-opens the door to the spiritual dimensions that so often has been closed by our negative experiences with spiritual and religious communities. Similarly, sandplay readily evokes experience of the very reparative, healing states that we so often forget to access during difficult times. This woman freely chooses the reparative images at the beginning of her journey with the group. By the end, she feels her struggle more deeply: she knows that it is truly time for the children to go, and it is just fine for her to be in touch with her profound sadness. Now is another time for her and her mate.

Another participant shares how small she feels: “I feel overlooked and not taken seriously. I am small, but I’m determined and strong. I’m angry....The pyramid is small, smooth and balanced...it is the mystery...the mystery is important.” At the end of the workshop, she says that she still needs balance, that she still feels small, but is owning her strong and sturdy side more.



Here we see how the sandtray images help us face, feel, and express exactly where we are, even when it is difficult. For when we allow ourselves to be where we are, we can allow others to be who they are, even when

they do not appreciate us and when we are angry with them. The feeling overlooked, not taken seriously and being angry will eventually be played out and connect the two small ones: the small, determined and strong one and the mysterious, small, smooth and balanced one. Another lesson is linked to the first: allow room for the mystery. Facing that which has yet to be manifested brings a special type of strength and resilience into the present. It increases ability to be in the crucible of transformation.

Play with images allows us to meet the mystery: we can touch it, breathe it in and out, experience it, get used to it, name some of its attributes, and still not quite know what it brings. In sandplay we can feel deeply understood by our own ‘big’ Self and by our witness(es), as we learn how to welcome the unfolding mystery of life. We learn patience, as neither we nor our facilitators ‘push the river elsewhere’.



The next woman shares how angry and helpless she felt earlier this morning. When she finally received help, she was happy. This little figure shows the happy part, but the clenched fists show that she is still holding anger from the event that passed.

Sandworldplay is unsurpassed in exploring and ‘digesting’ events that have just happened. The play shows us where we get ‘hung-up’, what we tend to overlook and deny, and how we get bogged down in old or in invalid belief systems. Through the play we become aware of the true nature of the challenge before us. In this instance, we see how sandtray play can show elements of the

original- and of the subsequent experience(s): here, it is still difficult to transition from one condition into another, or from one event into the next. The feelings of anger and rage, helplessness and abandonment are not necessarily relieved just because help comes and the circumstances have changed. Here, they trail behind. They are held in the fists of this small child that needs to be seen. Happy and angry now occur simultaneously. At the end of the workshop, she comments how important the helpfulness of others had been: "I got over it...you were here to find me, and that makes me feel good." She was able to move her feelings into present time.

Sandtray-Worldplay at times allows the burdens of the past to become the fertilizer that promotes the growth of increased awareness and receptivity in present time. When we are able to experience the present fully we can then also experience gratitude in the very moment we receive love and kindness from others.

Next comes someone who shares another composite experience of Self over time: "Here is my balanced male and female self... dreams in flux... the Snake Goddess... Spirit rising... my energy is indeed rising and it is returning again... it was gone for a long while... the all embracing woman is appearing now."



Again we see the psyche's encouragement to embrace all of self and all of life, the opposing and apparently conflicting states, the hard times and the easy times. In the image work and particularly in the sandtray we are called upon to experience, to command, and to connect the opposites, the dualities of our own nature and of others. In sandplay we have opportunity to appreciate the complexities of our being: the many different aspects of humanity that we have the potential to embody during different times of our life. We can tap primordial energies and forces. We move into archetypal experiences that activate the different realms of reality and with whom we enter into intimate relationship during dreamtime, waking time, day-dream time, deep-down-under time and rising-above-the-horizon time. In sandplay, we so often are able to experience the all-embracing one, the one who has sloughed off provincial judgments and self-limiting roles.

At the end of the workshop, she states: "I have been moved."

Next, we hear a story of the contemporary Venus of Willendorf: "I'm out of shape and hurting. The Scream: panic, stress, anger, job frustration and my illness is coming back into me. The Fairy, she is lightness and the future." At the end of our time, she said: "The scream is not so strong. I feel more nurturing of self. I want the presence of the fairy."

We see how the play compels us to look at how we are nurturing ourselves and to what extent we are fully present with ourselves. In the play, with psyche's prompting, we may readily learn that we indeed have the choice to be more compassionate with self and



to transmute anger with ourselves into compassion. This promotes opening our heart to ourselves and learning to tolerate being with just the way we are, being with just the way we feel, and being with just the thoughts that we are thinking. This path nurtures the capacity for self-reflection. It leads to a way of holding self more realistically: to love the one we see in the mirror, even though she does not look like a 'model'

or is not free of physical pain and discomfort like the woman of youth, is a big task for our little ego that has been taught to expect so much more from us. Yet, psyche teaches here that wherever this Venus appears, there is not only the scream but also the spirited, lighthearted fairy. Whenever we have the experience of this Venus, this Fairy is very close-by.

Another woman speaks of how, because of her failing Mother, the leadership of the family is being handed to her. With tears: "Matriarchy is mine...I am connected to the Mother of my Mother, of my Grand Mother, of my Great Grand Mother...it is a bloodline...How to be in the middle of it all... How to hold it... How to hold the different generations... How to feel connected to the ones before and the ones who come after.... How to hold that space...there is such richness... I am a leader."

As so often is the case in sandplay, both ancestors and descendants of a blood lineage appear. The play allows us to appreciate our connectedness to the family. We learn to acknowledge the growth and the quests of families over the ages. We prepare ourselves to participate in extended family life in a new way as we discover different aspects and different ramifications of our beingness. We look the current opportunity right in the eye. We chose the role we wish to play. We take on the challenge. The play in the playroom allows us to work with how to be a leader, how to live with connectedness, and how to enable others and ourselves. At the end of the time, she states: "I am still holding. I'm going to play. Playing is the essential thing."



Another group member speaks: “ Here is my traveling child...the man on the horse, the one who was to come and to take care of me, has fallen down...that’s what I learned:



the man on the horse was to take care of me. Here is the true nature of my reality: there is the light within and with this light and the heart I learn how to take care of myself, not needing to be rescued.” At the end of the workshop she expresses: “ I feel more content. I’m beginning to open up a bit more.”

Play with images readily allows for the expression and the exploration of our familial and cultural norms. We can compare them with the actual realities of our current life situation. In this case, we learn that this woman does not need to be rescued anymore. Somehow, the old family myth does not apply to her. Yet, she can bring a new mythology into the family, for circumstances have changed. She is able to care for self. Here the play shows how a situation begins, evolves and transforms. The rider has toppled. The traveling child is there. A light is within. Rather than seeing the light- within as outside of herself, she can access both the light and her heart to learn how to take care of herself. She does not need another to rescue her. It is time to explore new ways of unfolding and being in relationship to self, to become the man on the horse, and to move out of distress.

The next person shares: “I want to balance work and my private creativity... I have the treasure... time is eternal... you can see through it... if I could find the answer, I would feel more solid.” At the end of the workshop, she speaks: “ The treasure is the treasure deep within me and I will figure out how to let it swell up within me.”

Play allows us to look for our creative part: to look and find the treasure within ourselves. This treasure is our ever-present creativity. It is not conceptually thought-out or fully formed. This treasure is more a dynamic living process related to time rather than a particular special product. Play teaches us how to be in time, how to be with time, and particularly, how to be in the fullness of present time. This allows us to access our treasure.



Our last group member shares her images, a flowering Daisy and a Stop-Watch in a plastic bag: “I have been trying to “bag time”...the stop-watch is in the bag...my struggle is with time...the flowers flower. . . illness made me descend into the body...and review the way I look at time.” After the workshop she so simply states: “ I found that breathing helps me slow down.”

Again the play moves directly to the point. Here it can show us what we have been trying to let go of and how we have been doing it: trying to stop time. It can show us the true nature of time, the different rhythms of movement,

and the merits of a particular time in our life. It helps us recognize what a time of flowering looks like. It helps us notice what ‘bagged-time’ looks like. It teaches us how to be with our personal time as it brings us back to our own personal breath. Thus, it reveals that breathing slows down time. Play helps us find a beginning that we can make use of in our daily life.

The Master Teacher is the last to share: “This one is in touch with all the cycles and all the ages, standing strong, while movement is happening . . . there is stillness in the midst of movement. Stillness is the observer. . . when I can be in stillness, I can alternate between making things happen, and letting the things that happen happen, and receiving the things that are happening.”



Thus, play tells about balance, about stillness, about movement, and about how to be in relationship to active-passive and creative-reactive modes of being. It teaches us how to be on the spiral transformational path of life. At the end of the workshop, I feel this stance and this way of being normalizes all of life, much like the Sandtray-Worldplay process does. This brings lightness, a sense of relaxation and unforced receptivity into the Play-and consultation room. It brings an ease rooted in the understanding of the rhythm of life.





## **The World of our Community as Created by the Training Group**

The participants created this group altar at the beginning of the workshop. They shared when they placed their images into the sand. The group altar stayed up during the entire Sandtray-Worldplay workshop, including lecture time, demonstration time and practicum time. After having done a number of sandplays alone and with partners, everyone gathered in a closing circle: as they removed their characters, they shared with the group where they were at the end of our time together.

The initial joint play process laid the foundation for a connected group experience. It allowed everyone to come together and have the same baseline of interpersonal experience. Thus, dyads could shift during the workshop without undermining a sense of familiarity and curiosity about one another's journey.

The final sharing ritual reconnected each individual to his/her life path outside of the training group. Everyone had worked hard and had examined many personal, professional, and interpersonal realities. Now everyone was returning to their own journey, enriched with new professional skills and expanded in awareness about themselves, their growing edge, their gifts and obstacles, and about some specific aspects of the inevitable nature of life. Sharing while removing their initial image allowed for reflection, for a solid closure (termination), and for the expression of gratitude for a deeply moving group experience that would continue to grow and evolve after the group had long dispersed.

It was a great honor to be in the presence of this group.

### About the Author:

Gisela Schubach De Domenico, Ph, MFT, R-PTS, is the originator, master teacher, and international guest lecturer of Experiential Sandtray-Worldplay and Dynamic Expressive Playtherapy. She is a Founding Member of the Sandtray Network ( [www.sandtray.org](http://www.sandtray.org) ), an organization dedicated to the exploring the use of sandplay in many different clinical and transformational settings. She has published numerous articles, *The Sandtray-Worldplay Manual*, *the Sandtray-Worldplay Experiential Home Study Course*, and an *Introductory Sandplay Video*. Her private Play Therapy Practice and Sandplay Studio are located at 1946 Clemens Rd., Oakland Ca, 94602. You may reach her at 510-530-1383 and [sandworldplay@rcn.com](mailto:sandworldplay@rcn.com) and [www.vision-quest.us/vqisr](http://www.vision-quest.us/vqisr).