

WATERPLAY BY VICTORIA MC GUINNESS

There are no elements that express the unconscious and its unformed contents as perfectly as water and sand. The sand tray or table is usually available to clients of all ages, but water is something that they generally have to ask for. One transforming aspect of water is that it turns sand from a fluid and rippling medium into a substance that can be formed like the earth. Something about the act of emerging hands into water or sand seems to connect the internal and external worlds. Our hands link inner psychic images to the out-picturing representation of them.

Much has been written on the uses of sand in therapy, less has been explored about the uses of water. It is almost impossible to separate a discussion of water from a discussion of sand. But the four year old child in this example used so much water in his therapy - apart from his sand work - that I felt his use of water provocative enough to share.

Most of us experience at least a temporary cleansing from a shower or bath. We feel refreshed and absolved from the "grime of the day." But immersion into water is generally viewed as regressive behavior in therapy, and possibly counterproductive, as it can symbolize a return to the womb or a formless, unborn condition. From a Jungian point of view, a child or an adult can return safely to the "waters of the maternal uterus," and thereby heal and transform primary relationships. Although far from strictly Jungian, the following description of Zack's(not his real name) use of water during his later sessions in play was powerful for him, regardless of any potential pre-determined meaning.

Zack could not adjust to his parent's divorce and the relationships that developed due to their divorce. His emotions were a force powerful enough to sweep his essence away with them as they possessed his small body. He struggled to develop naturally; environment and genetics were having a "sword fight" inside his 4 1/2 year old body. During his fifth session, after a series of boiling and blasting volcanoes, he poured water into the sand. He also discovered the watergun, which following that session I quickly cast a therapeutic vote to eliminate from the playroom. I had set a limit on water and it felt like a balanced decision.

For weeks he glued sand together, made object d'art from glue and sand-glued "two opposing castles" together. During the twelfth session, Zack filled a blue, plastic water tub with water "making an ocean." Isn't the ocean thought to be the amniotic fluid of mother earth? Was his unconscious giving birth to his expression? Zack filled the small blue tub to its capacity with sharks, whales, marbles, soldiers, farm animals, sponges, plants, etc., until, as he said, referring to himself, "I could not move anymore." He talked about "pressure" and didn't stop filling the tub until he could not move at all. Zack poured sand in "from the bottom," and added trees so (again, referring to himself) "I could breath."

Then he took everything out, checking the whole time on how much "I" could move and breathe until "I" could swim freely. Is this child seeking a way to navigate, negotiate and integrate the intense energies, both good and bad, that he had to deal with? This 12th session was also Zack's first session in which he came into the playroom completely alone. Did this child have an issue with trust and separation? I think so. And did he figure it out? I think so. In session 14 he "made an ocean" again. This time he filled it with "buried" and "unburied" treasure and then plunked in a big wooden block. My gut level feeling about this water-play is that Zack had a "block" between his consciousness and self-worth (unburied treasure) and his unconscious resources that would be discovered to cope with his feelings, his (buried treasure). "Water symbolism concerns the struggle of the psyche to formulate a clear message for the conscious mind."...and aids...in the alchemical process....(Joel Ryce-Menuhin, *Jungian Sandplay: The Wonderful Therapy*, P. 56).

In session 18 Zack mixed water with play-dough on the little playroom table. The water transformed the consistency of the play-dough into "slimy, yukky, icky," stuff. We spent a good half hour mucking around with these "gooey" emotions....laid out on the table, so to speak... We clearly identified with the "slimey, yukky, icky," feelings until we were laughing and he was feeling better. He knew instinctively, the alchemical nature of water.

The two next successive sessions were also very watery. In one, he used a lot of water in the sand table to create volcanoes that had "already erupted lots of hot lava." In the next, he filled up the tub with water and "fish," - I was told we were "going sailing." One of the fish in the boat became very "sick," and needed to be taken out of the water, put in an ambulance and taken to the doctor. He was laid out on the deck but was "kept alive" by pouring water on him "so he wouldn't die." He would check the "sick fish" with the magnifying glass to see if it would "be shiny again," then he looked for its heartbeat.

During his last sessions, he drew a treasure map and specifically was able to locate his buried treasure. He also completed the ocean theme by creating "an island," that had everything that he needed on it. It seemed that he had literally found his way to achieving a full enough conscious-awareness to surface from the "ocean" (of the unconscious) and live in plenty on his own island....himself.

Dora Kalff (1980) has pointed out that the course of psychic development might be compared with flowing water.....(From the I Ching - Hexagram 29 K'an/the abysmal (Water) In Joel Ryce-Menuhin, *Jungian Sandplay: The Wonderful Therapy*, P. 106):

It flows on and on, merely filling at the place it traverses; it does not shy away from any dangerous place, nor from any sudden plunge; nothing can make it lose its own intrinsic essence. It remains true to itself in all circumstances. Thus, the truthfulness in difficult conditions will bring about the penetration of a situation with one's own heart. And once a situation is mastered from within the heart, the success of our exterior actions will come about all by itself.

(Wilhelm, 1951. P. 115)