

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS WITH GISELA

Q: What do you do in a sandplay session when the client does not wish to speak about the play?

A: It is best to honor the wish of the client. Do not speak. Silence does not prevent witnessing, nor does it prevent intimate sharings between the client and the therapist. In terms of this question several issues and considerations come to mind:

#1 Remember that silently-being-with-another and silently-observing-the-sandplay-together are very basic ways of honoring the builder's creation which is a tangible, visible testimonial of the client's psyche. Intimacy and consciousness may be born in a mutual silence; therefore, I suggest you simply join the client in her silence. Notice how the silence becomes pregnant with mystery, experience and meaning as you stand or sit together in front of the sandplay.

Join the builder's pattern of breathing. Respectfully establish eye-to-eye contact with the sandtray, keeping the attention focused on the World before you and the builder. Let your body language show that you are interested in the play. You may occasionally glance at the builder and perhaps nod ever so slightly, respectfully thanking her for the sharing.

Some Worlds are simply silent. Some have a sound of their own that exists in the background of the spoken English language. Sometimes builders will share the sound of the World after you have honored the great silence. I had one woman sing me the sounds that reigned in her World, once she knew that I could hear more than words. Other Worlds are witnessed in a great, sacred Silence: they are so silent that you can hear the blood coursing through your veins. They are often left at the end of experiencing with a series of small sighs, deep breaths, and/or holy utterances such as "Amen", "So be it", "Namaste" etc.

Frequently Silent Worlds are manifestations of the transpersonal realms of consciousness that go beyond ordinary language and require a spiritual language or an energetic language. Sometimes they are Worlds that depict pre-verbal, pre-and perinatal experiences of the builder.

#2 Remember the difference between analysis and experientially-being-with-the-World: The silent experiencing phase of a sandtray-worldplay session invites entrance into silently-being-with where we can witness the movement of consciousness: the experiential response to life. Cultivate this phase regularly. It is the most difficult part of the session. Yet, silently-being-with is most essential. It is much more poignant than rushing away from the sandtray to the next activity or hurrying into a cerebral analysis and a long list of meanings, definitions and interpretations. When psyche rests from the active building/creative process of the sandplay session, being-with and reflecting-upon the play come naturally. Remember Level 2 work, where we learned how to facilitate silent experiencing and free-associative experiencing.

Some clients think they have to "speak an interpretation" of their sandplay: after all, isn't that what psychotherapy is about? They feel pushed to analyze. But they do not yet "know" what the World means. They do not yet have anything to say. Perhaps, the objects are just a "bunch of statues" anyway. They think they need to "know" in order to speak. They do not realize that language is a translation of experience. Language cannot stand without experience: we cannot use language for our own World when we have not experienced it yet. Meaningful language comes after experiencing. Thus, the clients who might say, "I don't know what this means", "I don't know why I did this", "This is very strange", "This has nothing to do with me" are telling us that they have nothing definitive to say about their World. It is another way of saying that they really have not spent time becoming acquainted with their World. They have failed to enter their own experiencing faculties. They are alienated from themselves. Rather than focusing on giving them language, we need to focus on helping them experience. We encourage and allow experiencing to happen, even if only for 15-30 seconds. 15 seconds of experiencing is a long time of being conscious. It is a long time of embodying one's own reality.

Therefore, these clients often do quite well when encouraged to just be with their World and to get to know it. Tell them not to make any judgments, nor to try to figure out what things mean. Teach them to let be whatever thoughts, feelings, memories, ideas, patterns, and energies arise. Assure them that there is no reason for them to have anything to say at this time. Invite them to notice everything and share with you whatever they wish. Stress that self-experiencing at this time is much more important than verbal sharing.

When they begin to free-associate, make sure you use your reflective mirroring skills. Do not ask questions. Do not give them your words and your language.

#3 Often when we ask small children about the story of their World, they look at us as if we were from Mars: after all, did we not witness and "hear" the language of play? The story already has been told. The characters have already been introduced. They wonder what is the matter with us. When they consent to share with us once more, they often begin to play again. They continue their process of meaning-making, going on to the next sandplay. When the children are non-verbal during their active play, notice the sounds they make. Mirror them now and then. The sounds eventually will grow into words and verbal sharings. Be attentive. Encourage experiencing.

#4 Sometimes clients do not wish to talk about their World because it contains "taboo" and secret experiences. These experiences defy verbalization. The ego's resistance is high. There is great fear. At this time try to refrain from mind-reading and from pushing for explanations. Again encourage being with the World. Join the builder and look at the World together. Acknowledge that you see what is there. Confirm that these things happen. Validate the reality of the World. Validate whatever the client experiences as she looks at her world, as if her responses were the most natural and logical responses, which in fact they always are. Such validation allows the builder to experience more freely. Slowly she will find the courage to "speak" about what is

being seen. It is often advisable to ask her to simply describe the scene/pattern in the sandtray in a journalistic, anthropological fashion. Minimize the need to analyze. Maximize attentiveness to detail. Minimize the need to evaluate. Maximize perception of the multidimensional qualities of experience. Minimize the need to know. Maximize honoring the emerging and ever changing realities.

In conclusion; know that experiencing proceeds language. Know that playing is the primal, universal language of humanity. Play contains/hides language. Know that in shared silence a language is spoken. Know that we need to be able to navigate the entire spectrum of language communication: from the eternal silence, to the sounds of the breath and the movement of the body, the inner and outer song, and the inner and outer words. Do not be afraid to enter the rich, fertile fields of silence.

FROM GISELA SCHUBACH DeDOMENICO