

FEATURED ARTICLE

The Sandtray A Bridge Between Courtship and Marriage

By
Mary Ann Drake

A former student of mine I knew rather well became engaged and when it came close to the time of their marriage, the subject of pre-marital counseling arose. Robert* was opposed to pre-marital counseling and questioned its value, but they agreed to see a lay counselor instead of someone affiliated with the clergy. Consequently, Robert came and asked if I would be willing to work with them in pre-marital counseling. I said yes, if they would agree to do it my way. Robert, who is not known for his flexibility and spontaneity, wanted to know what would be expected of them. I told him that he would come in alone and make two sandtrays, one that represented who he was and one representative of his vision of his marriage in the future. Brittany* would do the same. They would then come in together and make one tray of their perception of marriage. I asked Robert to go and speak to Brittany and if they both agreed, we would set an appointment.

A digression is necessary here to explain that many weeks after they completed their sandtray work I asked them, independently of each other, to write a page or so explaining what the process was like for them. This was not originally planned, but turned out to be a fortuitous afterthought and allows me to use their words to explain their process.

Robert and Brittany's original responses to my request are telling. Brittany writes: "I remember clearly the day he returned from school to say the counselor had agreed to work with us, but that she had an unconventional approach. We were to use miniature toys to create a sandtray...Admittedly, we both scoffed at first, being insanely conservative, but agreed to approach the situation with open minds." In comparison, Robert writes: "At the start of our counseling, the process of using 'toys' and 'sandtrays' as part of marriage counseling seemed incredibly odd. You pick a few 'items' throw them almost randomly into a sand tray, and then tell somebody why they're there."

Robert came in first, probably because he and I knew each other. I gave him the instructions as promised. There were two dry trays and one wet tray. I asked him to make two trays using the trays and items he wanted. Robert liked the miniatures and carefully looked around the room often commenting on figures he recognized. When he was ready, he chose figures and placed them in the tray where he wanted them with little change in their positions once they were placed. As with all sandtray work, I asked Robert to tell me about his tray and to decide various things we both observed. When we were finished, I asked Robert to take a Polaroid picture of each tray to take with him, but asked him not to show it to Brittany until she had completed her work. Brittany, when she first came, received the same instructions as Robert had received. She looked around briefly, chose figures, dropped them in the tray, and then when she was ready, she arranged how they were to be placed. As with Robert, we carefully and thoughtfully discussed her tray. She also took

Polaroid pictures of her trays. When they came in to work together, their individual patterns of interacting with the tray did not change. Both of them only worked in the dry sand.

Brittany, who describes herself as extremely introverted and hesitant to share personal information with anyone not close to her, has this to say about the sandtray experience. "The use of physical objects for representation of our views of ourselves, and also the idea of marriage allowed both of us the opportunity to see and discuss potential difficulties that we did not realize existed...At first, I was astonished at how the lines of communication burst open, especially with me...Because the representations were tactile, they served as a sort of proof that feelings and behaviors were present in our life as a couple, and thus a door was opened in our relationship."

Robert, the more skeptical of the two, was shown in concrete terms in the tray with miniatures some things that Brittany had suggested existed with Robert, but that Robert had not accepted. He says: "'For myself, then, the concept of looking at this tray allowed me to see possible trouble areas in my life...I like to 'win' too much.' This is an obvious insight into my subconscious that, though my fiancée had noticed [these things] in at least indirect ways, I had never really observed [them]." Brittany supports Robert's self-observation and states: "I truly believe that some things were 'proven' to him. This proof gave him the base needed to accept certain things, and then work toward changing them."

In working on a tray together and also in sharing the pictures of their individual trays, more communication and understanding evolved than had existed before. As Robert describes it: "When allowed to look at each other's sand trays, though, the true 'genius' of this process becomes quite clear. [The trays] allowed me to see my fiancée's subconscious. Not to 'hear' about it second hand, but to actually see the product of her thoughts...A certain realization occurred between the two of us, therefore, when we compared our trays to each other, we saw different 'priorities' and different perceptions of the future. And for Brittany: "the use of sandtrays and miniatures served two main purposes, to open the lines of communication that may have otherwise been closed, and to allow realization and discussion of ideas and situations that I hadn't previously realized existed."

From their own comments, it is clear that the sandtrays worked well for Robert and Brittany in their pre-marital counseling. It is also important to note that the sandtray work done in the consulting room continues long after the last tray is completed. Brittany writes: "Even though the counseling is over now for the two of us, we still discuss it almost daily, either directly, or indirectly connected with ideas that came up during our sessions. We often refer back to certain objects in our trays as a fair way to bring up current difficulties." And Robert states it this way: "Interestingly, then, several months after the actual counseling, we still refer back to the 'making of the trays' as a rare experience in which we were able to look at our individual subconscious desires, as well as our collective subconscious desires. The true effect occurred to us just

the other day while fighting. We could trace the actual cause of the fight to 'pieces' of us in the tray. I now have my 'Godzilla' and 'trophy' attitudes, while she has had her 'ideal' and 'center point' desires."

The sandtray works in many different situations and for many different people. It is clearly an effective tool for pre-marital counseling. Again, in light of Robert and Brittany's individual personalities, Brittany says that "the result was incredible," and for Robert, he could see how their relationship was "all created and made simple to understand by [their] placing a few toys in a box of sand."

*The original names have been changed to Robert and Brittany and they have given permission to use their work and their words.

Mary Ann Drake, Ph.D.
Licensed Psychologist
Registered Play Therapist/Supervisor