

Introducing Sandtray-Worldplay: The story of an adult sandplay group ritual

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Sandtray-Worldplay is an Expressive Play Therapy tool used by children, adolescents, adults, families, couples and groups. Miniature images, sand and water become the field of conscious expression for the psyche as clients create patterns, Worlds, and/or dramatic play processes in the sandtray. Such play enhances self-healing, self-expression, individuation, the capacity to be in relationship and to create shared visions and community with others. In this article I will share with the reader how we can use the sandtray with a group who has come to journey together. Images are chosen, experienced and played with a communal sandtray. I share with you what was evoked for the participants, what issues they chose to work with, and how their play demonstrates the nature of Sandtray-Worldplay. This sharing may help you understand the profound depths that may be reached and communicated using sandplay.

A Sandtray-Worldplay training group is about to start. We have gathered in a circle. Everyone has been instructed to move to music, breathe gently, and be in the core of their being. Soon everyone moves to the shelves filled with images, choosing one image 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. The Master Teacher has placed a sandtray on the floor in the center of our circle. A lit candle has been placed in the center of the World-to-be. 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. The light in the center mirrors the clarity of our deep conscious Self. It is this very Self that we help our clients activate for the play process allows our own inner light to shine forth: our own psyche guides us.

One player holds the beginning of the sharing circle. An image of two young men enters the World. They gather 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 countryside and my roots."

Yes, sandtray is like gathering the harvest: 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, dynamic witness. This connects us as much to the Earth as to our own nature. It returns us to the simplicity of our being. At the end of the our

training, he shared: "I have more clarity now."

The next sharing brings a sturdy, strong oak tree and a smooth flowing seated 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."

Here we see clearly how sandplay allows us to use just two images to make visible many complex experience. Here, 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 wounds of life. We can begin to face the grief over the loss of our vitality and youth as we age. We learn how to be in and 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 apparently discordant states simultaneously. We see the woman screaming (at the monstrous child). Yet, she shows us her remembered sweet child. From this memory, wisdom grows. We hear the Mother at her wit's end. We know she already holds the wise owl. 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, reaching for the support of Father during this family transition.

Next comes one who shares that she is in the big transition of her life: her children are leaving home. She is struggling. The dragon with the treasure is the spiritual realm that gives her serenity. It 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 experientially evokes the very reparative, healing states that we so often forget to access during our difficult times. This woman's psyche freely chooses them as the beginning of our journey. 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 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."

The sandtray images help us face and feel 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. The second lesson is linked to the first: allow room for the mystery. Facing that which has yet to be manifested brings balance into the present. Play with images allows us to meet the mystery: we can touch it, experience it, name some of its attributes, and still not quite know what it brings. At the end, she says that she still needs balance, that she still feels small, but is owning her strong and sturdy side more.

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

We see how sandtray play can show elements of the original and the evolving experience: It is 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 released just because the circumstances change. They trail behind. They are held in the first that need 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 use the group to move her feelings

into present time.

Next comes another composite experience of Self in time: "Here is my balanced Male and Female Self...dreams in flux...the Sanake Goddess...Sprit rising...my energy is indeed rising and it is finally returning again...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 qualities of our own nature and of others. 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."

Psyche's play compels us to look at how we are nurturing ourselves and to what extent we are fully present with ourselves. With psyche's prompting, we learn that we can choose to be compassionate with self and perhaps learn to use and transmute anger with ourselves. This can lead to self-reflection, to a gentle way of holding self. 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."

Another woman speaks of how, because of dying Mother, the leadership of the family is 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...here is such richness...I am a leader."

As so often is the case in sandplay, both ancestors and descendants of a lineage appear. We get to look our current opportunity right in the eye. Play allows us to work with how to be a leader, how to honor and live with connectedness, and how to enable ourselves and others in our clan. 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 of other traditions: "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...with this light and with this heart I learn how to take care of myself, not needing to be rescued."

Play readily allows for the expression and the exploration of our familial and cultural norms. We can compare them with the actual realities of our personal life. In this case, we learn she does not need to be rescued anymore: she is able to care for self. Play shows how situations begin, evolve and transform. For her, it is now time to explore the ways of unfolding and being in relationship. At the end of the workshop she expresses: "I feel more content. I'm beginning to open up a bit more."

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."

Play allows us to look for our creative part: to look and find the treasure within ourselves. This treasure is our ever-present creativity, not thought-out or fully formed. This treasure is more a process than a 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. 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."

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."

Play can show us what we would like to let go of. 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 make conclusions about lessons learned. It helps us recognize when we have reached a time of flowering. It teaches us how to be in our time. After the workshop she so simply states: "I found that breathing helps me slow down.."

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."

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 enacts the 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 a lightness, a sense of relaxation and unforces receptivity into the Play-and consultation room. It brings an ease rooted in the understanding of the rhythm of life.

The participants created a group sandtray altar at the beginning of the workshop, laying the foundation for a connected group experience. The altar stayed up during the entire workshop. Having done a number of sandtrays alone and with partners, everyone gathered for the closing circle: as each removed their own characters, they shared with the group. Everyone returned to their own particular life's journey, enriched with new professional skills and expanded awareness about themselves, their growing edge, their gifts and obstacles, and about some aspects of the true nature of life and being human. Each grasped new aspects of the value of Sandtray-Worldplay in the play room.

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GAPT can offer you the following information about Dr. De Domenico's **home study course**: It is a self-paced Study Guide for your home or office. The 200 page guide offers 29 complex exercises with journal keeping guidelines. Designed for individual and/or group use, it may be used in conjunction with Sandtray-Worldplay Training Level One or independently. It is also approved for Dr. De Domenico's advanced students who wish to teach some of her original methods to colleagues and students. The course offers 14 Continuing Education Units when the Examination Packet is ordered and completed.

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