

Sandplay Therapy

by

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Children have always delighted in playing in the sand, bringing their inner and outer worlds together through imagination. Different cultures have also used sand in imaginal rituals of visioning. The Dogon medicine men of Mali draw patterns in the sand and later read the paw prints left in the night by the desert fox to divine the future. Tibetan Buddhist monks spend weeks creating the Kalachakra sand mandala which is used for contemplation and initiation into Tantric practices. Donald Sandner, in *Navaho Symbols of Healing*, wrote about the Navaho sand painting ceremonies in which images of world order are created to invoke the healing powers that bring the psyche of the people back into harmony with the universe. Upon the completion of all these rituals the sand is brushed away and dispersed.

Whether the makers of these sand creations are children, healers, or priests, potent and ineffable energies can be stirred on an intuitive, non-rational level. Sand opens the door to the unconscious world. In western European folklore, the sandman puts children to sleep by sprinkling sand into their eyes. Sand is impressionable, mutable, and impermanent: "Dancing on sands, and yet no footing seen,"

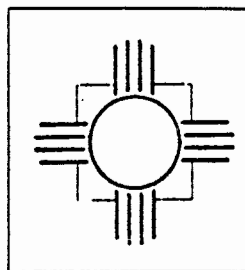
Shakespeare wrote in "Venus and Adonis." The sand particles, created by the disintegration of the earth's rocks, are ideal for pouring and shaping into an image of the symbolic world. We can "see a World in a grain of Sand" as Blake wrote in "Auguries to Innocence."

So it's not surprising that psychotherapists as contemporary healers stumbled upon playing in the sand as a therapeutic method. Margaret Lowenfeld, a pioneering child psychoanalyst during the 30s, was the first therapist to put sand into trays and place water and figures nearby in her consulting room. She graciously attributed the invention of what she later called the "World Technique" to the children themselves, who naturally brought these materials together in play therapy.

Dora Kalff was initially influenced by Emma and Carl Jung and her immersion in Tibetan Buddhism. She also studied with Lowenfeld in London for a year in 1956. When she returned to Zürich, Kalff developed another way of using these materials therapeutically which she called "sandplay."

*Sandplay therapists who work in

the way Kalff taught differentiate sandplay from sandtray therapy. Sandtray therapy is a more generic term referring to a variety of effective ways of using sand, figures, and a container from different theoretical perspectives. Sandplay therapy emphasizes the spontaneous and dynamic qualities of the creative experience itself. The essence of sandplay is non-verbal and symbolic. In what Kalff called the "free and protected place" provided by the tray and the relationship with the therapist,



children or adults play with sand, water, and miniatures over a period of time, constructing concrete manifestations of their inner world. When energies in the form of "living symbols" are touched upon in the personal and collective unconscious, healing can happen

spontaneously within a person at an unconscious level. As a more harmonious relationship between the conscious and the unconscious develops, the ego is restructured and strengthened.

Sandplay may open the person to re-experience pre-verbal and non-verbal states. Children understand (recognize) language before they can speak (recall) language. An adult may have forgotten or never learned words for some inner experience. Yet they may recognize a figure intuitively without being able to recall why or what it is. That's why sandplay therapists sometimes say, "Let the figure pick you!"

Continued on page 23

SANDPLAY THERAPY

Continued from page 24

The quiet tray with its smooth sand and a trusted therapist nearby allows images to arrive for the maker. The variety of figures and the sensory experience of sand and water also stimulate the unconscious. The elemental nature of sandplay evokes the body and touches the mother within. Sand can be molded, water poured, fire ignited, and air blown. The elemental flow and balance that is created in the tray mirrors processes in the psyche as well as in the natural world.

The size of the tray itself is meant to hold a person's steady gaze which may encourage a concentration and intensification of the psyche's energies. The sand and blue bottom and sides offer the concrete possibility of digging down to the depths or building up to the heights. The three-dimensional figures also offer a fullness of representation that requires no skill. Even a three year old can build complex, multidimensional scenes. These figures can facilitate both differentiating and linking together different pieces of meaning and bringing them further into consciousness. Like the alchemical vessel, the tray between the person and the therapist contains and intensifies the heat and pressure so that a change can happen.

Sandplay's efficacy comes from creating the sand picture itself as a form of active imagination, not in focusing on cognitive processing or on the completed production. Sandplay pictures are generally not interpreted while a process is going on so that the maker can stay close to the living experience in her or his body and imagination. The therapist is a witness who primarily reverberates empathically to the person playing in the sand. When both simultaneously experience the inner world of the sandplayer through the medium of sandplay, a synchronistic moment happens. This helps both to contain and to honor the experience so that it continues working in the per-

son. Sandplay is usually done adjunctively to talk therapy which carries the interpretive aspects of the psychotherapeutic work. Review and more analytic discussion of the trays themselves can happen years after the process is completed.

At the heart of becoming a sandplay therapist is in the personal experience of a sandplay process with its cycles of getting lost, waiting, and coming home. It is a deeply held Jungian principle that the therapist as wounded healer has to have been initiated herself before becoming a guide for others.

Although the use of sand in ritual practices exists on a continuum from ancient traditions up to Jungian and other contemporary psychotherapeutic methods, sandplay therapists now are concerned about the economics of healthcare and the impact of modern day values on the future of sandplay. They see also a need to continue to relate their work to other ongoing developments in the understanding of the psyche. To address these concerns, Sandplay Therapists of America is planning a conference in April, 1997, called "Ancient Practices, Future Directions." (See page 9 for details.)

In the midst of an age that rushes towards the future, the simplicity and depth of sandplay may help it maintain its integrity as a place of sanctuary and healing. ■

Reference

Sandner, Donald (1991). *Navaho Symbols of Healing*. Rochester: (Healing Arts Press, 1990)

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(The logo of the Sandplay Therapists of America is on page 24.)