The Power of Sandplay

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Those of us psychotherapists who are fortunate enough to have found Sandplay as a way of working with psychologically troubled individuals know—from a place deep within—of its power and efficacy. But we are sometimes at a loss to explain what we know to others. We can speak abstractly about sandplay's ability to tap into the individual's own sources of healing and transformation, but exactly how this may come about may not be so obvious.

Because sandplay touches the depths of the psyche, it remains at its core a mysterious process. But I would propose, that if we circumambulate this core, some insights may emerge as to exactly how this powerful medium works to effect change in the psyche.

Experiencing the Psyche

One of the reasons that sandplay “works” is that it is an actual, concrete experience rather than an abstract discussion about experience (Bradway and McCoard, 1997). The image

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Opposite: The Ninth Key, hieroglyph of the Prima Materia.
appears in the sand and is honored by both therapist and client. This is very different from what sometimes happens in the consulting room when the ego holds sway and immediately tries to "make sense" of an individual's psychological process. A weak ego that feels threatened may compensate by seeking mastery and control, and by using the tool of rational thinking to push for clarity and closure. An individual with strong intellectual defenses often makes judgements and tends to reject whatever is not immediately comprehensible. S/he may then either erect a barrier to the dark mysteries of the unconscious or interpret the life out of any image that emerges. When we apply rational understanding to the products of the unconscious, we run the risk of squeezing the juice out of them and reducing them to arid abstractions that are no longer alive. Jung wrote:

Of course we all have an understandable desire for crystal clarity, but we are apt to forget that in psychic matters we are dealing with processes of experience, that is, with transformations which should never be given hard and fast names if their living movement is not to petrify into something static. The protean mythologem and the shimmering symbol express the processes of the psyche far more trenchantly and, in the end, far more clearly than the clearest concept; for the symbol not only conveys a visualization of the process but—and this is perhaps just as important—it also brings a re-experiencing of it, of that twilight...which too much clarity only dispels. (1967, pp.162-163)

Sometimes the demand for rational understanding kills the image, whereas an acceptance of it "as is" allows for a genuine experiencing of the psyche. By working with materials that s/he can touch and see, the individual is lifted out of the world of abstract concepts which often work against true understanding. S/he moves into that twilight space that Jung spoke of, that place where psychic process is re-experienced and can perhaps impress itself on consciousness for the first time.

The temptation of the ego to intervene and impose rational interpretation on psychic manifestations can make the process more
difficult than it need be. What the unconscious wants and needs is the attention of consciousness. When we simply attend to the emotions, images and experiences of our lives, we come closer to receiving the messages of the psyche.

Sandplay therapists understand this and wisely caution against premature interpretations (Weinrib, 1983; Bradway and McCoard, 1997). The value of this mode of therapy lies in its images, spread before the client in a concrete manner. To instantly make of them something else by translating the images into psychological jargon is to diminish what has just been created and depotentiate the creator, the Self. “We sin against the imagination whenever we ask an image for its meaning, requiring that images be translated into concepts” (Hillman, 1975, p.39). Much better to approach the process as an alchemist approached his work and allow the images to act on one as the sand picture takes shape.

THE SYMBOLIC ATTITUDE

Jung defined symbols as “the best possible formulations for still unknown or unconscious facts” (1963, p.540). Because it speaks to us about the unknown, there is an air of mystery surrounding the symbol. Jung wrote, again, “A symbol remains a perpetual challenge to our thoughts and feelings. That probably explains why a symbolic work is so stimulating, why it grips us so intensely” (1966, p.77).

We chance losing the intensity and richness a symbol conveys when we attempt to explain it rationally. It is much more powerful to hold the image of the rape victim’s portrayal of herself as a lone deer surrounded by threatening forces than to attach labels such as “vulnerable” or “exposed.” Likewise we can experience the inner reality of the self-effacing, dutiful daughter who shows us who she is by the use of a farm horse in full harness.

These images are concrete expressions which are not literal although they are accurate and descriptively true. They are metaphors. Metaphor makes something more of physical substances than what they literally are. It breathes life into matter and fosters the
development of a symbolic attitude to life. The sandplay client begins to understand, through the feelings his/her pictures evoke, that work in the sand has profound meaning for his/her life. The objects s/he places in the sand symbolize internal processes and energies that are lacking in his/her conscious, waking existence but which seek to be made manifest. Of course, these same archetypal energies are also expressing through behavior, emotions and physical symptoms. If the client can develop a symbolic attitude through his/her sandplay process, s/he may be able to translate it into everyday life and view all aspects of life—inner and outer—as messages from the unconscious psyche. The symbolic attitude allows one to stay open to the promptings of the unconscious and to avoid the one-sidedness that values rational thought above all and feeds the false omnipotence of the ego.

PERSONIFYING

Another aspect of sandplay that makes it such a unique and efficacious process is that it allows psyche to express itself through the activity of personifying. Hillman defines “personifying” as “the spontaneous experiencing, envisioning and speaking of the configurations of existence as psychic presences” (1975, p.12). Jung stressed that personifying is not something we “do” (i.e., an ego activity) but something that “happens to us” (i.e., springs from the unconscious). Personifying means that we apprehend the basic structure of the unconscious, the archetypes, as personalities.

Sandplay is a unique therapy in that it offers the client an opportunity to express the psyche’s proclivity for portraying itself in the form of various personages. People do, of course, appear in our dreams, but often it is difficult to discern what qualities of ours they represent. Art therapy offers a medium for the depiction of inner psychic figures but often we are intimidated by our lack of artistic ability and are unable to adequately give expression to our images.

Sandplay does not suffer from these drawbacks. The client can choose from religious figures, circus performers, knights, cavemen, people from different cultures and races, farmers, hobos, dancers,
athletic competitors, children and people in various contemporary occupations and holding a variety of poses—to name only a few of the available categories. If the therapist’s collection is broad enough, the individual should be able to adequately express his inner life. According to Jung, personifying serves three functions:

[Personifying] enables us to see the relative reality of the autonomous system [i.e., the unconscious], and not only makes its assimilation possible but also depotentiates the daemonic forces of life. When the god is not acknowledged, egomania develops, and out of this mania comes sickness. (1967, p.38)

The first point made by Jung is that personifying helps the individual to grasp the fact that the unconscious is real. This alone is a significant achievement because the ego dominates our personality to such a large degree that we are apt to think that we are nothing more than our conscious mind. We cannot connect to the unconscious unless we first accept it as a living entity, so this is a crucial first step in the individuation process.

Personifying presents the unconscious to us in a form to which we can relate. This effect is magnified by the coagulatio nature of sandplay (Bradway and McCoard, 1997. It is an actual experience that requires participation on the part of the individual. The fact that one performs a concrete activity pulls in the totality of the person. S/he carries out a physical form of active imagination in which s/he dialogues with the unconscious. It is from this level of participation that transformation emerges. Jung wrote:

But if you recognize your own involvement you yourself must enter into the process with your personal reactions, just as if you were one of the fantasy figures, or rather, as if the drama being enacted before your eyes were real. It is a psychic fact that this fantasy is happening, and it is as real as you—as a psychic entity—are real. If this crucial operation is not carried out, all the changes are left to the flow of images, and you yourself remain unchanged....But if you place yourself in the drama as you really are, not only does it gain in actuality but you also create, by your
criticism of the fantasy, an effective counterbalance to its tendency to get out of hand. For what is now happening is the decisive rapprochement with the unconscious. (1963, p. 529)

Sandplay has been called a form of active imagination (Stone, 1980; Weinrib, 1983; Ryce-Menuhin, 1992; Bradway and McCoard, 1997). Active imagination is a powerful means of bridging the gap between consciousness and the unconscious. To be successful the ego must actively participate. When a true dialogue takes place, the way is opened for psychic change—of the ego and the unconscious. When the connection takes place, there is instituted a process "whereby the two positions, the conscious and the unconscious, are both modified" (Jung, 1963, pp. 209, 210). This explains why sandplay therapy may produce such profound change in its participants.

The second point made by Jung regarding the efficacy of personifying is that it objectifies the contents of the unconscious so that the ego can relate to, and eventually assimilate them as opposed to being blindly identified with them. "Personifying helps place subjective experiences 'out there'; [sic] thereby we can devise protections against them and relations with them" (Hillman, 1975, p.31). The "out there" element of the process is enhanced by sandplay because it actually "coagulates" the personified images in concrete reality.

The tangle of unconscious contents moves from the dark recesses of inner space into the light where they can be seen. They take on a reality that cannot fail to impress itself on consciousness. Instead of being identified with an unconscious content, a process of separatio occurs, whereby the ego is able to distance itself from the emerging psychic force.

A symbol for this process of separating subject from object, the knower from the known, is the mirror. The mirror represents the psyche's ability to perceive objectively, to be removed from the deadly grip of raw, primordial being. (Edinger, 1984, p. 37)

When the archetypes speak to us as dark, unbridled emotion we feel possessed. Sandplay transforms this threatening affect into objects
of knowledge (images) to which we can relate. One client of mine was able to see, through her picture-making in the tray, that her anger had many aspects. The anger did not disappear once it took on the form of an image, but it became imbued with a sense of reality by virtue of its various representations. It also lost its “evil” appearance that had engendered a great deal of guilt in the client. She began to feel that some forms of anger were justified and she became able to express this anger in a more appropriate way.

Jung wrote on this subject: “To the extent that I managed to translate the emotions into images—that is to say, to find the images which were concealed in the emotions—I was inwardly calmed and reassured” (1961, p.177).

The mirroring function performed by sandplay has the added benefit of serving as a buffer between the ego and the unconscious. There is good reason why the unconscious is often symbolized by a snake or a dragon. Precisely because they are unconscious and have not been exposed to the civilizing effects of man’s consciousness, these forces from the primordial depths can have a primitive or even demonic aspect. A direct confrontation between these forces and the ego carries the possibility of destruction for the ego.

It is for this reason that it is vital that the sandplay therapist has undergone his/her own sandplay process. S/he has “faced his/her demons” and can thus support the client and help him/her to negotiate the treacherous waters of the unconscious. The modality of sandplay itself also serves as a container, a “safe and sheltered space” (Kalff, 1980, p.29), where unconscious contents can be expressed. Often the client will find that what had on first appearance seemed threatening, when related to and integrated by the ego, takes on a life-enhancing aspect, a source of creativity (Whitmont, 1969).

Finally, a third reason why Jung values personifying is that it serves to impress upon the ego that it is not the center of the universe.

Dragon or Subject of the Wise. Kilavus ascribes this diagram to a manuscript of 1421, by Heinrich Kubdorfer, drawn in turn from ‘an ancient book of the year 1028.’
psyche. As Jung pointed out, when a state of egomania prevails in which the conscious mind ignores the unconscious or forcibly represses its contents, some form of illness will always result. We may no longer worship the archetypes as gods, as did cultures of the past, but ignoring them does not make them go away. The archetypes seek expression in our lives and if not consciously acknowledged they will force themselves upon our attention as “phobias, obsessions, and so forth; in a word, neurotic symptoms. The gods have become diseases” (Jung, 1967, p.37).

It is therefore at our own great peril that we ignore these personages within. We must find a way to honor them and make them a reality in our lives. To do this requires a special attitude, a new awareness of the ego’s place within the psyche. Through its encounters with the unconscious, the ego sheds the illusion that it is in control. It can admit “that all figures and feelings of the psyche are wholly ‘mine,’ while at the same time recognizing that these figures and feelings are free of my control and identity, not ‘mine’ at all” (Hillman, 1975, p. 31).

The ego thus begins to perceive its position as object to the Self’s subject (Edinger, 1984). This realization or change of perspective usually comes about through a numinous experience. The client creates something in his/her sandplay process that moves him/her deeply. The depth of the emotional experience impresses on him/her the fact that some force is moving through him/her and engenders the feeling that s/he is not alone in the psyche. S/he senses that there is a part of him/her that knows more than s/he could ever know rationally or consciously. The conscious mind begins to feel “watched” and may ponder the nature of this “other” who does the watching. For the individual this is an experience of encountering the mysteries of his/her own depths. Weinrib (1983) relates an incident where a young man placed a news cameraman in his second sand picture and in his last picture used this precise location to set a mirror which he described as “an eye from the outside.” She feels this mirror does represent the eye of God, or the Self.
An encounter with the God within, the Self, is felt as a defeat for the ego (Jung, 1963). This is a painful time for the individual. His/her ego feels diminished as it approaches the numinosity of the Self. Yet, if the ego can suffer this defeat, the way is opened to a whole new way of being and living. In return for giving up its conception of itself as the center of the psyche, the ego gains a sense of assurance that it rests on a ground of being of richness and profundity. Life takes on meaning as each moment becomes an opportunity for an encounter with the unconscious. The individual does not cease to suffer but s/he knows why s/he suffers.

WITHDRAWING PROJECTIONS

Another aspect of sandplay that helps to explain its power in effecting psychological change and growth is the role it plays in helping the individual to withdraw projections and thus expand his/her conscious personality. Whenever it is faced with the unknown, the psyche automatically projects its own unconscious processes (Jung, 1963). This tendency explains the origin of such pieces of culture as creation myths and astrology. Because sandplay is an unfamiliar process for most clients, it easily becomes a screen for their projections. Many sandtray clients, when presented with the sandtray and miniatures, become hesitant and uncertain. While creating a picture, they will often say: "I don't have any idea what I am doing." This indicates that the ego is no longer in charge, a situation which creates an ideal opportunity for the unconscious to express itself. This is an extremely beneficial aspect of the process, and one that aids the client in ultimately withdrawing projections from the external world, which as we know from the writings of Jung, is an essential part of the individuation process.

Because we tend to feel that we are perceiving external reality objectively, it is extremely difficult to recognize and claim as our own, the projections we hang on the people and situations in our lives, and yet, the first step in withdrawing projections is this recognition. "Projections can be withdrawn only when they come within the possible scope of consciousness" (Jung, 1963, p.489).
This is the function that sandplay serves: to bring projected contents before the purview of the ego. There is a paradoxical nature to the operation of sandplay in this regard. For the very objects and processes which, because of their unknown nature, invite projections, are also the means whereby projections can be withdrawn. The sand-tray serves as Winnicott's "potential space," an intermediate place between "inner" and "outer" reality. Unconscious contents are activated and flow out to an object. But they do not flow all the way out into the real world where they often become lost. They are caught in the net of a very personal process in the sandtray and constitute a completely individual statement by the client. It becomes easier for him/her to "own" his/her creation and acknowledge its contents as belonging to him/her. The figure of the man snoozing under his large hat may confront the workaholic who disdains non-performance with the fact that this repudiated "laziness" is actually a part of him that is seeking to be integrated. Indeed, it must be integrated if he is to be whole. We must constantly remind clients that the goal of the work is not perfection, but wholeness.

In sandplay the "not-I" parts of the individual are seen objectively and yet recognized as belonging to the individual. Sandplay therefore functions as an intermediate place where inner and outer can meet. It functions as a mirror for the ego to see beyond its narrow limits, to see into the depths and enable it to bring the treasure found there to consciousness. The tray and the therapeutic setting become a threshold area where opposites can confront each other and conflicts can be resolved before they are taken into the real world to be lived out. Work in the sandtray can allow for the expression of unconscious contents so that they no longer seek to manifest in a literal way in one's life. In this way, sandplay becomes a transformative process.

**Manifestation of the Self**

Before the individual is capable of withdrawing projections that he has flung out into the outer world, the flow of psychic energy must be reversed. Von Franz explained the process thus:
The possibility of integrating projected contents instead of apotropaically casting them out into extrapsychic space does not arise until symbols of the Self begin to appear. From this center impulses proceed to a contemplative, thoughtful re-collection of the personality. The contents now seen to have been projected are at the same time recognized as belonging to one's own psychic wholeness. Consequently, the psychic energy belonging to these contents now flows toward one's own inner center, strengthening it and heightening its intensity. (1980, p.169)

The appearance in the tray of symbols of the Self is thus an extremely significant occurrence. It signals a pulling in of psychic energy around a core so that qualities that have been projected out onto the world can be "re-collected" and integrated into the personality. This process broadens and deepens the individual and leads to a richer life experience.

The fact that, in sandplay, the manifestation of the Self occurs in material form, creates an added dimension. It serves to reconnect the client to his body. The experience of the numinous as the image of the Self unfolds in the sand causes a powerful emotional, "bodily" reaction. Kalff understood this and often spoke of the benefit of sandplay as an avenue for the appropriate release of repressed instinctual energies. The embodied aspect of sandplay makes it a powerful agent for effecting change in the individual. And, to touch again on a point made earlier, the third reason that the appearance of the Self in the sand is so important is that it often leads to a relativization of the ego. The ego comes to realize that a collection of energies, of wholeness, resides within and provides support. If the individual can take away from his sandplay process an appreciation for this inner core of the Self, and a determination to dialogue with it and allow it to become manifest in his/her life, s/he will have experienced the coniunctio so highly prized by Jung. For when consciousness and the unconscious can interface and connect, the process of individuation or the pursuit of psychic wholeness is underway. Sandplay's gift is that it serves as a container where this soul-making activity can occur and flourish.
REFERENCES


