

# When Is a Sandplay Psychotherapy Process Completed?

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**ABSTRACT.** Many therapists find sandplay psychotherapy a useful adjunct to their play or talk therapies, but learning how to interpret even a single tray can be a daunting task. In this article, the author addresses the features of a completed sandplay process that unfolds over time and produces many separate sandtrays. From a survey of experienced sandplay therapists, the author found that most therapists characterize the sandplay healing process as a psychic journey into unknown inner realms, in which clients confront and contain their own chaos and conflict and touch a deep and numinous transpersonal aspect called the Self. The therapists consider the journey completed only when the images in the tray reflect a return to the collective or evidence of a more effective approach to life.

Key words: play therapy, psychotherapy, sandplay therapy

There are no final answers to the question of what constitutes a completed process. There are probably as many kinds of completed processes as there are sandplayers.

—Kay Bradway, *Sandplay: Silent Workshop of the Psyche*

**SANDPLAY IS A THERAPEUTIC TECHNIQUE** that involves a tray of standard dimensions (19.5 by 28.5 and 3 inches deep) with a blue interior, 3–5 inch miniatures of every aspect of human and nonhuman existence, sand, and water. Clients are allowed to work with the sand, add water if desired, and select any number of miniatures to arrange as scenes in the sand. The therapist offers few interpretations of the process and acts as an empathic witness to the client's healing and growth as processed through the sandplay. Sandplay is an action method that provides an opportunity for the client to symbolically act out that which is often inaccessible through conscious, verbal expression.

Sandplay offers relief to the disturbed personality by allowing the inner reality to become concretized (Cunningham, 1998). The process also allows for the interiorizing of an inner sanctum or *temenos* that Kalff (1980), the originator of Jungian-based sandplay therapy, called "the free and protected space." Friedman (1997) describes the space as "a place inside that is not affected by what happened this morning or yesterday." At first, this protection is provided externally by the therapist and the limits of the tray. Though the trays are not interpreted with the sandplayer as such, over time the therapist's remarks to the sandplayer about the meaning, positioning, or feelings evoked by the player's use of various images offers the ego's established attitude the opportunity to experiment with changing its own position. This is key because Jung believed that individuals experienced a neurosis when the existing ego attitude was held too one-sidedly. A further advantage of the sandplay process is as Chambers (1998) concluded that sandplay allows people to be who they are so that there is no need to "up the ante" in their physical world of relationships. In the sand, they are free to show what is really going on within them. When therapists acknowledge the sandplayers' conflict and chaos, they demonstrate to the clients the possibility that they can do this for themselves; hence their belief in themselves increases.

Drawing on the teachings of Kalff, Friedman (1997) determined that under certain conditions there is an organic disposition within the psyche to heal. The goal of sandplay is to activate the layer of the psyche that brings out the healing. The healing takes place not through the intellectual or cognitive, hence conscious, will but through the internal wisdom of the unconscious that makes itself known through the symbols. Amatruda (1998) wrote that healing occurs through sandplay because of the unconscious content originating from a transpersonal element called the Self. In a useful emphasis, she noted that the Self heals, not the sandplay.

Many therapists find sandplay psychotherapy a useful adjunct to their play or talk therapies, but learning how to interpret even a single tray that a client produces can be a daunting task. Rogers-Mitchell and Friedman (1997) conceded that a thorough understanding of an individual tray does not stem from an approach that analyzes the tray from a specific perspective. Their idea paves the way toward an appreciation of the multiplicity of ways a tray can be interpreted, and hence it seems logical to apply that to a full process as well. Amatruda (1998) offered a unique perspective on the journey through the sandplay process. Drawing on the psychology of fairy tales as developed by Marie Louise von Franz, Amatruda has suggested that a narrative of the sandplay process can be constructed around a tale's stages.

For von Franz (1990), individual dreams work on the personal conscious disposition either to confirm, heal, compensate, counterbalance, criticize, or complete it. Fairy tales act on the dominant collective attitude to achieve the

same ends. Like the king in the fairy tale whose kingdom is imperiled because the old ways have become unproductive, the client presents himself or herself in therapy when his or her old ways of behaving have become ineffective. The fairy tales begin with a loss, illness, death, bareness, or some other specific problem such as greed and are comparable to the psychic states of individuals who are beginning therapy. The depression, compulsion, addiction, or violation at the problem's core connect to an individual's sense of loss, illness, emotional barrenness, and so forth. Something must be done to ease the pain. The individual responds from the more developed (or more habitual) parts of the personality. She or he performs this way, then that, and still the problem persists.

In the fairy tale of the stingy uncle, as told and analyzed by von Franz (1974), a rich brother demands the labor of his poor brother's sons. The rich brother tries to outsmart the sons so as not to pay them wages. The rich brother has certain problems because he and his wife are too stingy to have children of their own. Read from a depth perspective, the couple's stinginess stands for their limited possibility of psychological development. The couple tries to enrich themselves through trickery and wit, rather than through the engagement of their own physical efforts. The poor man has three sons, two of whom are quite capable of making their way in the world but not able to outsmart the uncle. Like the uncle, the two rely on their conscious habits or intellect. The third brother, who is considered "a dumpling" or "a simpleton" in a genuinely naive way, is able to put an end to the uncle's trickery.

Amatruda contends that the dumpling part of the individual facilitates psychological development. She observes that individuals come to therapy only when the "dumb child" inside them throws up his or her hands and wails "I don't know what to do." As interpreted by von Franz (1990), the simple-minded son is the key to the story. Unlike his more worldly brothers, he does not *decide from an intellectual vantage point the best course of action to take* to resolve his dilemma but is assisted by the natural course of events. In other words, he opens himself to the autonomous power of the psyche, the Self, to guide him in the direction that is right for him. Bradway discovered that while working on a particular sand tray, sandplayers make statements such as: "I don't know what I'm doing" as they become more deeply immersed in the sandplay process. Other statements include: "I don't know what I am making" or "I don't know why I am putting this in" (Bradway, 1997, pp. 7–8). Bradway noted that earlier trays are more determined by external reality; whereas as the process goes on, scenes are more influenced by inner realities.

### **The Problem of the One-Sided Ego**

Jung designated the Self as the central organizing principle of the personality. Individuals come to know the Self through the symbols emerging from

nondirected thinking. Jung (1956) labeled those thoughts that do not follow a definite course *nondirected*. Unlike directed thinking, which assists with one's adaptation to reality, nondirected thinking is learned through education and is constituted through language and words. Nondirected thinking offers a world picture different from conscious thought. In his essay, "The Transcendent Function," Jung (1960) wrote that directed thinking, with its reality orientation, bases its judgments on what is known and that a conscious thought designates one possibility at the exclusion of others. The conscious thought always selects what seems rational to its own logic and believes itself to be nonprejudicial. Any idea or attitude that appears unreasonable to the conscious personality is excluded and deemed irrational.

Jung (1960, p. 89) wrote "present day shows with appalling clarity how little able people are to let the other person's argument count." The outer reality results from the inner one because individuals are reluctant to consider the contents of the nondirected thought. He continued, "for, to the degree that he does not admit the validity of the other person, he denies the 'other' within himself the right to exist and vice versa. The capacity for inner dialogue is a touchstone for outer objectivity." The opposing or unconsidered and dismissed ideas, Jung claimed, could indeed be irrational or could make a great deal of sense when viewed from an alternative perspective. The symbols offered up by the unconscious, when incorporated into consciousness, hold the possibility of enriching the directed thought (Jung, 1960) by illuminating the mystery of ordinary life, by providing a preview of the future, or by highlighting what is good about a seemingly negative situation (Edinger, 1992). The unfamiliar and new perspectives that arise from the psyche are perceived initially as emotions and moods. During sandplay, those feelings can become concrete in a process Bradway (1997) called *coagulation*. The new ideas that are growing within can be realized externally through the selection, placement, and burying of objects, the pouring of water, the molding of the sand, or in the scenes of creativity or destruction the sandplayers act out in the tray.

The function of the Self is to synthesize the opposites within, affecting a balance or compensation of the unbalanced or one-sided attitude. Jung believed that our emotional pain comes from the deep splits between the opposing elements of what our conscious mind has allowed us to consider and what we have actually lived, with what remains unconsidered and unlived (Samuels, 1985). Out of the opposing elements, the Self gives rise to our possibilities. That is why the stingy, childless uncle, who has a poor brother with three sons, is able to find a way out of the ensnaring family saga through the "dumpling" son. Jung's (1960) essay, "On the Nature of the Psyche," conveys the sense of shock suffered by the ego when discovering how the Self has enriched the personality, creating that which dwarfs the ego in breadth and potency. Once the ego recovers from its paralysis, the ego becomes convinced

“that in spite of all difficulties it is better to be taken down a peg than to get involved in a hopeless struggle” (p. 224). Thus, the “dummling” who is open to forces greater than himself brings the other side of his intellect to the problem and helps his family out of its problem stemming from ego-based desires.

### Developing a Contrapsychological Position

Amatruda (1998) wrote that after encountering the incident that sends the heroine or hero on her or his way and after performing the required tasks, there is a period of time during which the heroine or hero is lost and journeys into an unknown territory, encountering crones, talking fish, and other unusual figures. She interpreted those meetings as confrontations with the *contra-sexual* aspect of the personality. I prefer to use Samuels’s (1985) more precise term of *contrapsychological*, because that term extricates the Jungian tradition from its baggage of mistaking sexual metaphor for emotional and physical reality. The contrapsychological refers to the alternatives to the conscious attitude arising out of the unconscious. Acting as “soul-guide” or “psychoprompt,” the contrapsychological position is a bridge between the ego and the Self, between who a person is and what she or he may become. As Amatruda observed, that part of the process is a development of the “inferior function.” The ascent from the under regions of the psyche or the return to the village is a resurrection from the archetypal level. The story and process come to a close as the individual returns to the marketplace and the work-a-day world.

#### *Example of Dorothy’s Journey to Oz*

No better example of the return to the everyday world with a transformed personality can be found than in Morena’s (1998) analysis of *The Wizard of Oz*, which she presented in her workshop “Traveling Through Oz: The Journey Home.” In the book, Dorothy’s seemingly placid life is disrupted by a twister. Psychologically, the twister represents the consequence of trying to hold to an established ego perspective—one gets ripped apart. When releasing one’s grip, as Dorothy did, one has the possibility of falling asleep or going into the unconscious. The twister, Morena noted, possesses a rhythm and pace of its own. Once inside the imaginal world, a feature of the psyche keeps one there. An astute observer in the audience of that workshop theorized that Toto, Dorothy’s dog, keeps running away from Dorothy, forcing her to stay on her journey. Morena elaborated on that point, observing that Toto has not only initiated the journey but is responsible for Dorothy’s missing the ride home, uncovering the facade of the Wizard, and verifying the witch’s death. Morena’s perspective on Dorothy illustrates that one does not gain awareness by staying at home (that is, relying solely on what one already knows, which is one’s conscious position).

Von Franz (1974) suggested that neuroses are often a function of an inability to confront the moral and ethical dilemmas of our lives. Morena suggested that Dorothy must make a decision about whether or not to grow up and confront the dangers of adulthood, effect a transformation, and return home as a stranger who must re-integrate herself into the daily life of her community. The journey consists first of a visit to the Emerald City, which for Morena represents a "persona puffing up place." The Emerald City, according to Morena, is a glitzy place where all the good is thought to exist on the outside and all the answers lay some place other than in one's self. During the sandplay process, one must go to the inner city of disillusionment, suffer the disappointment of the seeing the persona's limitations, and gain the ability to withstand the betrayals one has experienced. In Oz, this is symbolized by the false power of the Wizard. Dorothy stands up to the Wizard and challenges him. Rather than finding "a bad man," she discovers, as Morena asserted, an ineffectual nice guy trying to survive. That is the part of the process I see as the ego being unmasked by the Self, at which point the persona falls away. The sandplayer then discovers that the habits for coping or the established ego's attitudes were the means of survival in unsatisfactory physical and emotional environments.

In the story, Dorothy faces another ethical dilemma. Should she go into the poppy fields and go to sleep (that is, will she become unconscious to this new world of knowledge, hence stopping psychological growth) or with the assistance of the instincts, should she wake up and keep going? Finally, Dorothy gets angry enough with the witch to destroy her. Morena contended that Dorothy is confronting what is imprisoning her. From a psychological perspective, Dorothy spends this phase of the story developing her fragmented and nonfunctioning aspects. Using the depth approach in which all the characters represent elements of one's psyche, Morena interpreted the Scarecrow as Dorothy's projection of confusion. The Scarecrow does not know how to figure things out and avoids getting involved with life. The Tin Man represents the disconnection of the intellect and the emotion. The Tin Man, cut off from his feeling, chops off pieces of himself and others. Dorothy administers a lubricant to his joints, enabling his motion. That segment stands for the rigid ego's attitude being softened by the *solutio* and becoming movable. The Cowardly Lion demonstrates the consequences of being overwhelmed by neurotic fear. Morena believes the lion points to "a woundedness in confidence and competence."

Morena's analysis encapsulates the goal of the sandplay process: to create an inner *temenos* in the individual. "Home" is invested with meaning as cocoon, refuge, scrapbook of memories, a place where one is both free and protected. The developmental goal is twofold: (1) how to live at home, not in the original unity of the conscious and the unconscious in the participation

mystique of the family, but as a person who is capable of separation and communion, (2) how to live relatively unencumbered by the vicissitudes of family life.

### Other Models of the Sandplay Process

#### *Alchemical Model*

Using an alchemical model of the transformation of the base metal called the *prima materia* to the valued gold, Cunningham (1998) followed the sandplayer's psychological journey during which the devalued aspects of the personality—mood, depression, compulsion, and so forth—get washed, dissected, and brought together in a novel form, more viable for confronting the realities of one's existence (see also Henderson, 1993). The *solutio* phase of the process effects a softening of the solid ego attitude. Cunningham notes that the *solutio* phase solves emotional problems by shifting the problem from the conscious attitude to the realm of feeling. The evidence of the *solutio* phase includes trays flooded with water, images of people in the bath, in pools, washing clothes, swimming, drowning, and so forth.

The *calcinatio* phase burns off "the emotional intensity of the complex." Like the *albedo* or whitening phase of the alchemical procedure, therapy provides the heat that results in the lightening of the problem in terms of illumination and symptom relief.

In the *coagulatio* phase, the liquefied metal yielded by the burning becomes solid. The archetypal images that the sandplayer has selected in previous trays get incarnated in concrete forms. That may be seen in projections coming down to earth: dreams of falling down to earth or plane crashes. The deep emotional splits are felt in the body. Coming down to earth is also about taking an action, which in turn strengthens the ego and solidifies the personality.

During the *sublimatio* phase, the sandplayer is able to stand above the material reality of the problem. The sandplayer gains a spiritual or universal perspective and generalizes, rather than particularizes, the problem. The images pointing to that phase include ladders, birds, airplanes, angels, stars, and so forth. All are airy figures that invoke the idea of spirit or being above the earth. Cunningham (1998) warned that at that stage the sandplayer may suffer an inflation. One may feel above it all and no longer be in touch with the personal nature of the problem and its discomfort.

The killing or *mortificatio* stage marks the darkest period of the sandplay process, when the death of the old aspects of the personality pave the way for the new. Sandplay scenes of that stage include dismemberment, rotting corpses, experiences of death, bones, eclipses, darkness, defeat, and so on.

In the *separatio* phase, the new attitude is created by cutting it out of the

emotional chaos of previous stages and bringing the new ego position out of the unconscious. It is a time of differentiation, of carving out consciousness so as not to remain in a participation mystique. The images of this stage that appear in the tray are knives, swords, words (to name), clocks, weights, scales, and so forth.

Another step in the process is the *coniunctio* stage, in which the gold of the personality manifests itself. The trays are filled with images bearing fruit, mandalas, precious stones, and such miraculous symbols as a lion and a lamb lying together. It is in this last phase that the opposite elements within the psyche unify. At a personal level, the *coniunctio* is the relationship of the ego with the Self. At a communal level, the *coniunctio* announces one's unity with all human beings. Cunningham (1998) noted that the whole process is nonlinear and need not be conceptualized as a stage theory.

#### *Image Interruption Model*

Ryce-Menuhin (1992) adopted a classical Jungian view of the four stages of psychotherapy for some sandplayers. Through image interpretation, sandplayers gain an awareness that sacrificing the old attitude frees them to discover what their new attitudes might be. By exploring the metaphors suggested by the images, the sandplayer is introduced to the possibilities of the situation never here-to-for considered and that consideration bolsters the ego and promotes differentiation from the unconscious. The four stages creating the conditions for the transcendent function are the confession (out pouring), elucidation (sorting out of issues), education (development of the ego), and transformation (release of the libido trapped in the unconscious). In a full process, the sandplayer traverses the regions of archaic collective symbols and returns to the "here-and-now consciousness" relating the symbols to conscious life. The ego develops when the potentialities that have been inert can be seen to stir and what has been repressed and diminished enters the symbolic play through the "least valued function of conscious life." The sandplay process comes to an end when the personality is renewed through the dialectic between image and metaphor. The dialectic offers an elucidation of the possible new attitude with a resulting release of the energy trapped in the unconscious.

#### *Nonsequential Models*

Dunn-Fierstein (1996) and Chambers (1998) have each developed nonsequential models for notching the sandplay process. Dunn-Fierstein suggested that the trays be surveyed over time for six markers. The first few trays are considered the initial ones and present the problem of the sandplayer. Fried-

man (1997) viewed the initial trays to be like topic sentences or announcements of the theme of the unfolding inner drama. Dunn-Fierstein captured that nicely in the following statements:

“Here is what I struggle with.”

“This is where I am, and this is what I may become.”

“This is what is easy for me, and this is what is hard.”

“This is the problem, and this is the possible solution.”

Zappacosta (1994) advised that the therapist must always look for the hopeful signs of potential in the initial trays that may be manifest again in later trays. Weinrib, a noted sandplay therapist, taught that initial trays may be persona trays and as such may point to specific events that the sandplayer would like the therapist to notice (Friedman, 1997). Dunn-Fierstein also advised that therapists pay attention to which piece is selected to represent the client because it may serve as a clue to how the sandplayer moves about in the world.

The second aspect of the process is the descent into the unconscious in which the shadow is confronted in both its positive and ominous aspects. The trays contain digging and pathways that indicate a going deeper. The third phase may be the constellation of the Self that can only be brought about by encountering the shadow material. Dunn-Fierstein has discovered that in Self trays, candles may be lit, a child may be born, jewels and treasures may be used. In the therapy room, a palpable feeling of the spiritual exists. Dunn-Fierstein believes that the ego begins to develop once the Self has been encountered. The growing ego is represented by animals. Those trays may be followed by trays with more shadow confrontations. As the process nears an end, there is an ascent, a coming out of the unconscious. Images indicating the ascent include ladders, bridges, stairs, or pathways of stones going to a new place. Next, there is a relativization of the ego in which images represent the sandplayer's growing awareness of the new sense of who he or she is becoming. The ego finally consents that there are elements such as the Self that transcend it. Finally, there is the return to the world and images depicting daily preoccupations.

For Chambers (1998), sandplayers can come into the process at any point of the cycle of moving from the persona to the constellation of the ego to the restructuring of the personality. As with Dunn-Fierstein's model, the initial trays can show the persona and the problem and its resolution. She believes sandplay allows for the shadow content to be directly expressed. Unacknowledged unconscious content can return to the psyche and become destructive. Sandplay allows this unknown and unacknowledged content to be transformed constructively. The persona is crucial to daily living, but when a persona becomes identified with the persona, he or she sees only one side of himself or herself. The backside is the unconscious or shadow, and confronting it brings consciousness. In the sandplay process, if the ego is strong enough, it

can begin the descent into the unconscious where an acting out of the unconscious conflicts occurs. Depending on the ego strength, subsequent trays will reflect less of the persona and more traverses into the archetypal realm. Images become less and less anthropomorphic and increasingly vegetative and then progress to the geological (e.g., to rocks and jewels). The metaphor of the jewels act as evidence of the constellation of the Self. When the Self tray is made, Chambers has found that within the therapy room there is a sense of the beauty of the moment. The beauty of the Self tray is the outer reflection of the beauty within the client. Self trays are sometimes characterized by underground streams, mandalas, and crystals, and the player may request music. The Self tray also acts as evidence of the psyche's ability to hold the tension of the opposites—those elements that oppose the conscious attitude. The ego participates in this holding, effecting an enlargement of consciousness. That process is what Jung called individuation, meaning the development of the personality in the way that is just right for the individual. After the Self has been constellated, there follows a contrapsychological differentiation. Archetypal figures that symbolize aspects of the sandplayers' psyche that have been underdeveloped appear in the tray. For example, the trays of clients who have difficulties connecting with others may begin to contain images that are associated with caring, nurturing, and companionship. These personifications demonstrate how these clients relate to the feeling and relatedness principles within themselves. If their personal experiences with the primary people in their lives have been such that they have been held back and exploited, they project the notion that they are devouring onto people who try to get close. Such people act out their inner feelings with others. The selected images and scenes created around them offer the therapist the information about how those clients treat their own inner attributes of feeling and relatedness, being suspicious and nontrusting of them. After touching the clients' psychological otherness or contrapsychological position, Chambers has seen that sandplayers engage in a new struggle to achieve a new relationship to their life circumstances. The growing ego has to overcome the old structures that shackled them to their problems. Ideally, as the work in the sand trays continues, what emerges is a personality that can handle life situations.

Both Dunn-Fierstein's and Chambers's models are reminiscent of Kalff's (1980) three stages of ego-development: the animal-vegetative stage in which trays are made up of animals and plant life, the fighting stage or the phase of struggle, and the stage of adapting to the group or collective.

#### *Bradway Model*

Although Bradway (1997) offered no definitive criteria for determining a completed sandplay process, she did advance a few touchstones that routine-

ly chart the sandplay journey. The initial tray is followed by a descent into the collective unconscious, symbolized by the use of water and all that is associated with the aquatic realm. Noticeably absent are land animals and humans. Subsequent trays are a return to the marketplace with a copious use of objects standing for life in the collective—buildings, people, vehicles, and so on. The descent and return may happen several times, peppered throughout with signs of mother-child unity, first archetypally, then in human terms; the classic *cun-unctio* that bridges the differentiation; the splitting of opposites; and the Self tray. The Self tray is distinguished by its numinosity, felt experientially as momentous for both therapist and sandplayer. The Self tray need not be centered or contain mandalas but must contain objects that give a sense of the sacred or spiritual. Sometimes, final trays are obvious, such as a horse galloping out of the tray, but many are not so, although the therapist and client often recognize when this phase of the maturation is over.

### Case Presentation

A brief case presentation of the sandplay process of six-year-old Peter illustrates several themes central to the sandplay process—the creation of the *temenos*, the descent into the deeper layers of the psyche, and the constellation of the self.

Peter's parents brought him to therapy because of their concern with his encopresis, which is the elimination of fecal matter into inappropriate places. According to the DSM-IV, encopresis may develop for psychological reasons as part of a pattern of anxious and oppositional behavior in children who had previously been continent. Psychosocial stressors are predisposing factors leading to the development of encopresis. Peter had just recently recovered from cancer. His frequent hospitalizations interrupted his schooling, and the stress of coping with the illness further fractured the parents' pre-existing distressed and volatile marriage. The parents also reported that Peter routinely exhibited oppositional behavior such as temper tantrums.

Peter did not speak to me directly, nor did he agree to be seen alone without a parent present for the first eight sessions of his 12-session therapy. He did quickly become accustomed to the sandplay and on entering my office, went directly to the miniatures to play for the duration of the session. In his first tray, the school bus and Luke Skywalker were placed in the tray by Peter's mother because he was reluctant to engage with this process initially (see Figure 1). She selected the schoolbus to represent his life at school and Luke Skywalker to stand for Peter. After her selections, he placed the remainder of the images into the tray himself and spoke to his mother about what he was doing. It appeared that even though he was not going to verbalize anything to me directly, he was not going to allow anyone to be in charge of his

story, even his mother. Peter's first tray was filled with conflict-laden and powerful images (e.g., Zeus) and figures associated with death and decay. Peter said of the bones, "the man must discover them." I thought, "What does he want me to discover?" Was Peter saying "the battle that I fight is one of life and death because the gods have seemed to turn their backs to me?" While looking at his work with the bones, I was gripped with a sad feeling. I asked aloud if Peter ever felt sad. He told his mother that only his brother felt sad, not he himself.

Although Peter was not willing to own any sad feelings, he readily admitted his angry ones. Peter's second sandplay featured his inner chaotic state and his angry feelings that were targeted toward his mother (see Figure 2). In his first tray, Peter's way of interacting with the environment seemed to be primitive—he was either bulldozing over people and things or riding roughshod like the Flintstone character Bam Bam. The presence of the buses indicated that there was evidence of inner movement of these chaotic and angry energies.

Peter denied feeling any anger toward his father and used some of the miniatures as weapons and acted out shooting his mother. To account for his behavior, Peter's mother explained that she was the disciplinarian in the family and that the father served as a playmate to the children. The ironing board was prominently placed in the center of the tray. Peter said his mother was always ironing. The ironing and the engagement with straightening things out were apt metaphors for this troubled family.



Figure 1. Peter's initial tray

In the third tray, the chaotic state is maintained, with numerous images filling up every inch of the tray (see Figure 3). This time he placed four buses in the tray; other transportation devices included cartoon figures normally associated with violent activity and space rockets. The rockets may represent the opposite of the more primitive way of getting around, which is avoiding people altogether and going to a place described on earth as having little capacity to sustain human life. During that session, his mother is relieved that he does not use the weapons to shoot her. I found the gun and the bat buried when I removed the figures from the tray (see Figure 4).

In tray four (see Figure 5), Peter placed four buses, the cartoon character vehicles, and the space rockets throughout the tray. He also placed cars in the tray, and I took those to represent a more direct and appropriate form of interaction with people. Perhaps that was a concretization of a more involved approach to life. At the end of the last session, Peter did give me eye contact and addressed me directly, although very curtly. The new vehicles added differentiation to his potential for coping with daily life and could be a signal that a more sophisticated way of getting around in the world of people is available to Peter, even though he was not yet using it. Interestingly, an emergency vehicle was moving away from the death region of the bones and toward the wrestler. Was Peter saying that he was being rescued from the land of the dead—that death would have a challenger? Buried beneath that vast network of figures was the face of a decomposed dinosaur (see Figure 6). Did Peter



Figure 2. Ironing things out



**Figure 3. Flooding the tray with signs of the problem**



**Figure 4. The buried aggression**

still believe he had cancer, and were his bowel movements a way of getting rid of the disease?

In his next session, Peter added water to the sand for the first time; it was his fifth sandtray (see Figure 7). He pressed his hand deep into the wet sand, as if to announce: "I am." That was the first time Peter came to therapy accompanied by his father. In that tray, he covertly addressed the encopresis. Peter said that the wet sand was mud, and it could kill. The dry sand was good. He announced that one of the action figures in his tray was stinky and he died. His father commented that the figure was not totally buried, which probably highlighted his



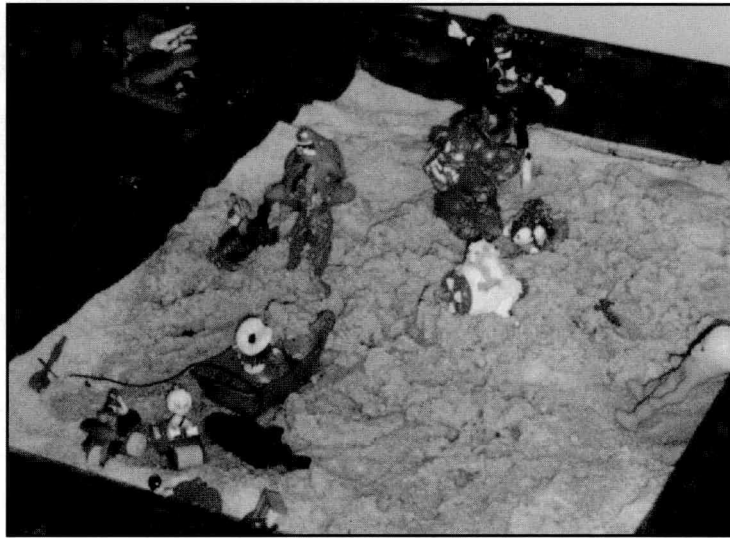
**Figure 5. Rescue from the land of the dead**

father's impatience with the tenacity of this problem. The adding of water to the sand and the inclusion of the boat pointed to that tray being the beginning of the descent aspect of Peter's sandplay process. Over the next three sessions, Peter delved into the descent process. The images Peter selected continued to be the archetypal warriors, soldiers, aliens, and monsters. His parents and I talked openly during sessions about his experiences in the hospital. Because he was attached to so many machines, Peter called himself, "Mr. Gadget." The arm of a toy Mr. Gadget was part of his third tray. Because he lost his hair three times during the illness, the use of the alien images might have symbolized his feelings of difference and alienation from the children his age. In his seventh tray, Peter added three large sturdy candles, which I allowed him to light. In the next session, Peter was preoccupied with the fear of his own mortality. In the tradition of fairy tales, Peter represented the terrors of his journey by using monsters and menacing figures in the trays. I interpreted the lighting of the candles as Peter's readiness to bring light to his frightening interior journey.

During his seventh visit, I asked Peter if I might see him alone, without his father. That created an uproar, with Peter wailing, clinging to his father, and pleading to be taken home. After some time, I wondered aloud whether he worried if his father would not be there, if he needed him. I wondered if Peter had gotten angry and felt left out, when his father left the hospital to care for the couple's other child. His father and I talked about our feelings of being without our parents in the hospital when we were children. As we talked, Peter began to play with three tortured male miniatures (see Figure 8). I told Peter



**Figure 6. Death and decay**



**Figure 7. The descent**

that I believed being in a hospital could feel as if one were being tortured, even if the doctors were trying bring about a cure. I told Peter that one of those tortured men had died. He shot me a piercing look. Peter buried the men in the tray and said it was a cemetery; then he placed dragons, monsters, and centaurs to guard them so they could not leave. I apologized to Peter for my request to see him alone. I conveyed to him that my request was unreasonable, given his experiences in the hospital and reassured him that he would never have to be in my office without his parents.



**Figure 8. The torture of the cure**

It seemed to me that Peter was carrying not only the problems of not being sure whether he would live or die, the stigma of being different, and the anger of the cosmic unfairness of his illness but also the problem of the projections his parents placed on each other. The husband accused his wife of being angry and hostile, and Peter picked that up and saw his mother as a powerful person who needed to be “shot.” The wife accused her husband of abandoning her, and Peter acted that out through his clinging to his father.

At the following session, Peter’s father said that Peter had agreed to see me alone, with the office door closed for two minutes. It turned out that Peter spent the entire session alone with me in the office and produced two sandtrays. In both trays, he added animals, snakes, dinosaurs, turtles, and people, all of whom had died and were then “alive again.” In the final tray of the session, nine prehistoric creatures of varying ages, from newly hatched to fully grown, approach the fire (see Figure 9). In the sandplay process, a Self tray can be identified by the use of light and symbols reflecting birth. Perhaps we were celebrating Peter’s newly birthed awareness that he is well and free of cancer. At the end of the session, Peter buried bones and said, “The men are looking for the bones, and then they dig them out.” Have I discovered the buried bones, a transference test he gave me at his first session? We played a light-hearted game of putting out the fire, and I said to Peter, “I think you are going to survive.” He replied, “No, I won’t” and pretended to be dead, then he laughed.

In future sessions, Peter continued to work in the sand and to be seen in therapy without his parents, actively forbidding them to come into the room.



Figure 9. Constellation of the Self



Figure 10. The temenos

In the tray, he continued to work out some of the last vestiges of his personal death and rebirth conflict. He moved on to tackle other problems, such as his parent's impending separation. He reported, "I went to the hospital, and they forgot to fix the 'poop' problem." He was continuing with his tantrums and said he felt sad all the time because his parents were fighting and his dad was sad. Peter is still not well because his family is "sick" and the hospital cannot fix that. The death of the marriage is looming.

At his twelfth and final session, Peter brought in a red porcelain egg, say-

ing he needed it for the tray. He made a nest that would sit on top of fragrant flower petals and called it “comfy.” Peter told me that I was to keep the egg. In Peter’s sandplay process, the creation of the outer temenos, in which he could feel safe in the therapy, was being transferred within. Only time will tell if Peter can use his brief experience of creating an inner temenos to cope with the daily vicissitudes of his childhood.

### Summary

In a survey of experienced sandplay therapists, I found that most therapists characterize the sandplay healing process as a psychic journey into unknown inner realms in which clients confront and contain their own chaos and conflict and encounter a deep and numinous transpersonal aspect called the Self. The journey is considered completed only when the images in the tray reflect a return to the collective or give evidence of a more effective approach to life. The therapists interviewed recommend that a therapist, when working with a client over a period of time when several sandtrays are made, look for the following evidence:

1. Clues to the problem and their possible solutions in the initial tray involve a descent into the deeper layers of the problem in which certain inner dramas are acted out. Examples include digging trenches, clearing spaces at the bottom of the tray, use of water, use of rock and vegetative miniatures, sea creatures, other items, and arrangements suggestive of the realm below.

2. During at least one session, there needs to be some numinous or special moment in which both client and therapist feel deeply moved by the creative elements used in the tray.

3. Both the therapist and the client are able to identify when the client emerges from that deep inward journey with more emotional resilience than the client had before beginning therapy. Final trays contain images and scenes that reflect a preoccupation with life in the collective.

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