

Introduction to Sandplay Therapy

Dora M. Kalff

Dora Kalff, Jungian therapist, developed sandplay therapy in Switzerland in the 1950s and '60s based on her studies at the C.G. Jung Institute, Zurich, in Tibetan Buddhism, and with Margaret Lowenfeld, in England.

Summary

The client is given the possibility, by means of figures and the arrangement of the sand in the area bounded by the sandbox, to set up a world corresponding to his or her inner state. In this manner, through free, creative play, unconscious processes are made visible in a three-dimensional form and a pictorial world comparable to the dream experience. Through a series of images that take shape in this way, the process of individuation described by C. G. Jung is stimulated and brought to fruition.



The process that analytical psychology strives to bring about, and which Jung designated as the process of individuation, can be understood as the process of becoming conscious of human wholeness. By wholeness is meant an attitude that goes beyond mutually exclusive opposites and strives for an integration of these opposites. It is the structure of wholeness which, beginning at birth, is the fundamental aspect of the human being and which Jung refers to as the Self.

This wholeness is first situated in the mother's Self. Caring for the newborn infant's needs, which appeal generally to the maternal, such as satisfaction of hunger, protection against cold, etc., are localized in the bodily mother. We call this the phase of mother-child unity in which the child experiences unquestioning security and safety in maternal love.

After one year, the child's Self is freed from the mother and is experienced instead in relationship to her with her demonstrations of affection; and the sense of safety grows into a relationship of trust.

The resulting security is the basis for the third phase, which starts at the end of the second year of life, in which the centre of the Self becomes consolidated in the child's unconscious and begins to manifest itself in symbols of wholeness. The child plays, draws or paints in a symbol-language, thousands of years old, and with which the human being consciously or unconsciously, through times, in all cultures, has given expression to wholeness. This is a profound experience which often finds its expression in the form of a circle or square and is accompanied by a *numinosum*. Thus the circle becomes not just a geometric form, but turns into a symbol which allows something invisible alive in the human being to come to light. Symbols speak for internal, energy-bearing images, for dispositions of human-ness which, if they become visible, exert a continuing influence on the human being's development. Symbols with numinous or religious content therefore speak of an inner spiritual order that can be the basis for a healthy development of the ego, which creates the link to the external world.

Jung has spoken of the unity of the external and internal world. Often, in fact, through a one-sided adaptation to the external world with the mask of the persona, the internal world of the unconscious is repressed -- that world incorporated in the opposite-gender soul-image of the Animus and Anima. The

unconscious contains the transmitted energies of previous collective experiences, as well as forgotten and repressed experiences of the individual person. The human being, understood as a unity, must be capable of continually mediating between the demands of the internal and external world, as the only way of proving that one is an authentic individual, because in this way one is neither a will-less victim of unconscious contents nor a super-adapted creature in relation to society and the world. This attitude, however, can only be realized in such a way that the ego, which is the centre of the conscious personality, becomes conscious of its relativity and understands itself as forming part of the Self, which embodies the unity of the conscious and unconscious person. In addition, Jung attributes to the Self a healing and regulating tendency which the analytical work aims to reveal.

The work itself that is performed during sandplay can bring about the relativising encounter of the ego with the forces of the Self as a numinous experience which frequently finds its expression in religious symbols. Another aspect of the wholeness upon which particular emphasis is placed in the sandplay is the totality of body and spirit. In its negative aspect the spirit appears as exclusive intellect which has lost all connection to feeling and the body. This lack of connection expresses itself in contempt for feeling as something unclear and in the opinion that the body is primitive and non-spiritual. This attitude, all too frequent in modern man, is often the cause of psychic disorders. Only when the intellect has learnt to understand itself as one element among others making up the total person, can the client find the way back to the sense and meaning of life. Symbolically, the newly found wholeness expresses itself in mandala-type representations.

"Sandplay" is the method I use in therapy both with children and with adults in order to gain access to the contents of the unconscious. As the name suggests, it consists in playing in a specially proportioned sandbox (approximately 19.5 x 28.5 x 2.75 inches; floor and sides painted with water-resistant bright-blue paint). Boxes of dry and moist sand are provided. Clients also have at their disposal a number of small figures with which they give formal realization to their internal worlds. The figures from which they can choose should represent as complete as possible a cross-section of all inanimate and animate beings which we encounter in the external world as well as in the inner imaginative world: trees, plants, stones, marbles, mosaics, wild and domesticated animals, ordinary women and men pursuing various activities, soldiers, fairytale figures, religious figures from diverse cultural spheres, houses, fountains, bridges, ships, vehicles, etc.

In sandplay it immediately becomes clear that the human being can come closer to wholeness. It becomes possible to break through the narrowing perspective of our bogged-down conception and fears and to find in play a new relationship to our own depth. Immersed in play, the person succeeds in making an inner picture visible. Thus a link is established between internal and external.

The sandbox corresponds in its extents to the field of vision. In this area the fantasy which strives towards boundlessness is formed and shaped. We can say that fantasy becomes fruitful only where it is obliged to restrict itself within definite forms. The result is the polarity freedom/restriction. Freedom, on the one hand, consists in the fact that few boundaries are set to the client's shaping activity. The client has the possibility of selecting from the variety of figures and to construct a portrayal of the world that is closest to him or her. Restriction, on the one hand, resides in the fact that, out of many figures, a choice must be made. In this way clients succeed in portraying the problematic that is unconscious to them. Now we observe that a process is set in motion in which the unconscious, hidden totality assumes the leadership. When persons begin playing, they submit to the law of the very thing that leads them to that reconciliation of opposites which indeed is the decisive characteristic of the playing. Play is the mediator of the invisible and visible.

Another important polarity in sandplay is that between body and soul. The image is shaped in the sand physically, so that we can say that internal contents find a bodily form. We observe moreover that the act of shaping can become a deep, emotionally felt experience if the manifestation of a wholeness is achieved,

which has the mandala as its most beautiful expression. One prerequisite, among others, for the unfolding of inner forces is something I have designated as the free and protected space. It is the therapist's task to give shape to such a space: a free space in which the client feels fully accepted. It is a space protected by the fact that the sandplay therapist recognizes the patient's boundaries. The therapist becomes a trusted person. In this way negative or destructive tendencies are not suppressed but are portrayed and transformed.

The analytic process with sandplay unfolds through representations of the unconscious contents which find their expression in symbols. The initial scene most often reflects a situation lying closer to the level of consciousness, but which still contains references to the problematic. In many instances, on the basis of an initial scene we are already able to find important indications of how and in what direction the solution of the inner conflict could develop. Subsequent images lead out of the exclusive predominance of the conscious level and to deeper layers in the person, having unconscious contents. These images often have a chaotic character and testify to unleashed energies. Eventually the patient may reach the stage we can designate as the expression of wholeness, or in Jungian terminology, the Self. Thus a psychic situation of repose-within-oneself is generated, which often effects a numinous experience and establishes contact with the spiritual. The ego becomes less absolute as centre of the conscious personality by coming to recognize that it is contained within the Self, which embodies the unity between conscious and unconscious. This experience is the basis for initial transformation of energies.

In the sand images this is seen at first on a primitive bodily level. Themes of the plant and animal world emerge. Water and earth are in the foreground. Therefore I call this phase of development the vegetative-animal, the encounter with the lowest level of the body. This is also the point where the encounter takes place with the complementary-sexed soul-image, which is as yet still resolutely unconscious, that is, in the man with a feminine creative side and in the woman with a masculine logos-side. These are the new creative energies which begin to emerge. Recognition of these energies leads to the effort to deal with them and, at a subsequent stage, to their transformation. Dark energies are transformed into bright, constructive ones and with the help of awakening creativity they give life a new direction. The wholeness expressed through sand must now find its expressions in the wholeness of living.

We could say in summary, that the wholeness of ego and Self, of body and soul, becomes the goal and finds its expression in the principle that energies are not repressed but rather transformed.

From this description of a possible sequence of inner development we can recognize that the healing experience is the direct consequence of the client's involvement with the dynamic of the internal image and gives plastic expression to them. Experience shows that a discussion or an extensive interpretation of the sandplaying activity can inhibit the client's capability of keeping open to something that still demands spontaneous expression on a pre-verbal level. For the process of healing and self-perception, however, it is of decisive significance to establish contact with the as yet unconscious sides within oneself. For this reason it is an important aspect of this work that a discussion and conscious realization of contents on a verbal level should be postponed until the process of sandplay experience is largely concluded and has been experienced as an internal "lived" process. The primary element then, with this form of therapy, is the shaping and experiencing of the sand images and of the resulting resolution of inner tensions. This type of experience, too, can be viewed as a form of conscious realization of unconscious contents, though not on the verbal level but of that of the shaping and experiencing of these contents. The inner experience of these contents frequently precedes modifications in the external sphere of life.

The fact that the images are not commented upon and interpreted during the sandplay work does not exclude the possibility that, with adults, a process of conscious realization of the experience on a verbal interpretative level can be of great significance later.

It is important, however, that the therapist or counselor understands the symbol-language of the images correctly and, on the basis of this comprehension, follows the process internally and, under certain circumstances, without making reference to the sandplay, establishes connections to the external life situation and raises possible problem points. It can also be decisive for the progress of the work to recognize a possible transference which may express itself symbolically in the sandplay, and to be able to react to it appropriately.

It is entirely consonant with this work that along with the shaping of sand images there should also be room for discussing everyday problems and examining important dreams together with the analysand.

Especially in the case of work with children, there should be sufficient possibilities, in addition to sandplay, to pursue other games and creative activities such as modeling and painting. Such games can make an important contribution to the enactment and realization of that which comes to light in the sand images themselves and also, conversely, can further encourage the continuation of the internal sandplay process.

In order to be capable of carrying out the sandplay task, the therapist/counselor, in addition to psychological training, must be able to fulfill two all-important prerequisites:

1. Since the sandplay process expresses itself in a symbolic language, a profound knowledge of the language of symbols - as expressed in religions, myths, fairytales, literature, art, etc. - is indispensable. This applies especially to the depth- psychology interpretation of symbols as developed by C. G. Jung. Above all, one must have experienced these symbols and their efficacy on the basis of one's own psychic maturation process. Only this practice makes it possible to accompany the client's experience effectively.

2. On the other hand, as we have already seen, the therapist/counselor must be capable of establishing a free and protected space. What we want to mediate for others should emerge from our own experience. This means that the therapist/counselor should possess an openness that is the fruit of an open encounter with one's own dark and unknown sides. Also important at the same time, however, is an experience of one's own deep-seated positive potential - an experience which guarantees an inner security which thus enables one to create a protected space for others.

Finally it is decisive for successful work to have a positive motivation, which sets as its objective the creation of a space for the client which will enable coming closer to wholeness in an independent manner. This intention should be combined with the striving, through ongoing work upon oneself, to deepen one's own capability of giving authentic and non-self-seeking help.

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