ASPECTS OF THE SANDTRAY/SAND PLAY SESSION

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Often in our presentation of case material we have been asked how we are able to elicit such rich and detailed information about the meaning of a sand world from its creator. First it is our ability to be authentically present with the creator in this process. Secondly, it is our extensive study, which has brought us a deep understanding of the different ways of using the sandtray/sandplay process. Thirdly, it is the cultivation of our own abilities to recognize these ways and to follow, guide and support the creator’s own process that allow this.

During a sandtray/sandplay session it is important to keep in mind that this is a living, dynamic, multidimensional process, and not a linear one. The following outline is offered with the hope that it will assist sand tray practitioners in understanding this process in a cognitive framework, with the clear knowledge that this is not usually the way the journey will emerge in an actual session. It is critically important that the sandtray practitioner (witness) not manipulate, push, or force the creator of the world into this linear format. In describing the dynamic change that can occur through the use of her World Technique, Margaret Lowenfeld stated “…its power lies in the gradual revelation to the patient through his own work, accompanied by the understanding of it which is mediated to him by the therapist, of his inner experience.” This mediation occurs when the witness can gently guide and support the creator’s exploration of the sand world in front of them.

BRIEF REVIEW:

ASPECTS AND FUNCTIONS OF A SANDTRAY/SANDPLAY SESSION

As stated before, the various aspects of the sandtray/sandplay session do not necessarily occur in the linear format that is used for training and discussion purposes. Although some experiencing processes need to come before others, some are created simultaneously. If the witness (therapist) does not learn to recognize clearly what aspects are occurring, he/she is more likely to impede the sandtray/sandplay process rather than supporting it.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Description: Sandtray/Sandplay may be initiated by a creator (client) or a witness (therapist). A creator, in response to an invitation by the witness or at the creator’s own initiative, may indicate a desire to make a world. This is a completely spontaneous type of world. During a directed world, the witness may want to encourage or suggest using the tray to depict a dream, life situation, internal process, or other issue that has been, or is being worked on. In this way, the witness provides a beginning focus or framework for the world. The experience of a directed versus spontaneous world is very different.
B. **Function:** To invite and encourage free and spontaneous use of the materials provided. Even if the *witness* provides the framework, the *creator* will proceed in an individual way and will address what is most important to the *creator*. The more suitable the sandtray/sandplay setup, the more inviting it will be to work in, regardless of a person’s age.

C. **Suggestions:** The suggestion to use the sandtray needs to come naturally out of the content of the work and the immediate interaction between the *witness* and *creator*. This is not a technique to be imposed upon someone. If the *creator* does not initiate a sandplay, suggest:

1. “Would you like to work in the sand today?”
2. “Would you like to put that idea (dream, experience, situation, etc.) in the sand?”
3. “Do you feel like using the sandtray today?”

**II. WORLD CREATION**

A. **Description:** The *witness* takes a position across the tray from the *creator*. The *creator* may use dry sand, wet sand, or a combination of both, with or without miniatures, to create any form(s), scene(s), experience(s) or story (ies) desired. The *witness* facilitates this process by being fully present, attentive, and responsive, creating a harmonic resonance with the *creator* of the world.

B. **Function:** The sandtray/sandplay apparatus functions to evoke many modes of human experience. This includes the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual energies of experience. These modes may be present in the creation of every world, although this may not initially be apparent to the *creator* of the world. In sandtray/sandplay therapy a major function of creating a world is to project these modes of experiencing outward to be seen and worked with.

C. **Suggestions** for the *witness*

1. Begin with a quiet yet authentically present and interested stance. Focus primarily on the world being created, secondarily on the *creator* of the world.

2. Be responsive to verbal and nonverbal requests (to find an item, for more water).

3. Let the *creator* of the world lead.

**III. SILENT OBSERVATION**

**Description:** (Across) The *witness* remains across from the *creator*. The *witness* tells the *creator* to be with the world creation and to look at it silently, observing what is there and what is evoked for the *creator*. The *creator* may make revisions in the world during this time. The *witness* also observes the world silently, continuing to support the sense of harmonic resonance.

**Function:** To provide a nonverbal time for the *creator* to have a deeper experience with the world. It allows time for uninterrupted reflection, to observe what is there, and what thoughts,
feelings; physical sensations, etc. emerge from within. It functions to slow down the experiencing process of the creator. This aspect is crucial for later verbal exploration so every effort needs to be made to facilitate it.

Suggestions for the witness to encourage longer observation:

1. “Take another minute or so to be with this world.”

2. “See if you can spend another minute or so in silence with this.”

3. “Be with this world a little longer.”

4. “Look at the world and be with it some more.”

IV. REFLECTIVE/DIRECTIVE

A. Description: The witness maintains his/her position across the tray. Although the witness holds the entire process with a general stance of mirroring support, in this aspect the focus is even more specific. The witness encourages the creator to look at the world again, and this time to share verbally what is seen and/or what is evoked for the creator by the world. In keeping with continuing a sense of harmonic resonance, the witness reflects the body posture, tone, etc. of the creator. During this aspect, the witness verbally reflects the words or phrases of the creator inviting the creator to stay with the experience, allowing a more profound experience, and observing what associations emerge. This is done in a careful and specific way with gentle direction. It is not just parroting the words of the creator. A witness’s questions during this aspect impede the flow of experience for the creator and disrupt the sense of harmonic resonance.

B. Function: To slow down the creator’s process, making it less automatic or habitual. To allow the creator time to be more aware of what has been created and what the associations and personal meanings are.

C. Suggestions for the witness to initiate this aspect:

1. “Look at the world and tell me what pops into your head.”

2. “Be with this world and tell me what comes up for you (comes into your mind).”

3. “Be with this world and tell me what is here and what it means for you.”

Suggestions for the witness to continue this aspect:

1. First, reflect a word or phrase of the creator, using the creator’s terminology for the world and what is in it. You may need to gently interrupt the creator to do this.
2. At the end of the reflection, direct the creator to go deeper into that experience: “Be with that (loneliness, tree, dog).” Restate the creator’s word for the item or experience. Then, for example, direct the creator: “Allow yourself to stay with that experience.”

V. ENTERING INTO THE WORLD

A. Description: The witness requests permission to come and view the world with the creator, moving the chair to sit next to the creator, seeing for the first time the world from the position in which it was created. During the initial few minutes together, the world is viewed silently. The witness asks the creator to take her/him into the world to explore the experiences present from the perception of inside the world, as if the world were real. (The physical, mental, emotional and spiritual experiences, memories and associations created there are very real.)

B. Function: The witness moves the focus of experiencing into the world as a means of exploring the experiences in a more profound manner. This also shifts the focus of the creator from “looking at the world” to “exploring from within.” This change in perspective encourages the creator to project as much as possible into the sandtray. The witness continues to hold the framework and encourage the creator to guide him/her.

C. Suggestions for the witness to encourage the creator to enter the experiences inside the world:

1. “Let’s go into this world as if it were real. Where would you like to start?”

2. “Look at the world and pretend you and I can go inside and see it as if we were small.”

3. “Let’s use our imagination to become small and go inside this world to see what is there.”

VI. GUIDED EXPERIENCE FROM WITHIN THE WORLD

A. Description: Seated side-by-side. The witness maintains a holding, reflective stance and may help to focus the attention of the creator on experiences inside the world as if the world were real. This may be facilitated by gentle and tactful questions. The witness helps the creator explore more of the creator’s own personal associations - physical, mental, emotional and/or spiritual. This often takes place as a dialogue about the experiences within the world with the witness inquiring and learning from the creator about the experiences present. Experiences inside the world are referred to with neutral and/or third person language, which encourage projection.

B. Function: To broaden and deepen the awareness of the creator and the creator’s connection to the world. The witness also assists the creator to experience what is present in the world so clearly that the creator is able to teach the experience to the witness. The experience can then be understood experientially as well as verbally, and clearly mirrored back to the
creator. This connects the creator to the experiences that have emerged from the world in a very profound manner.

C. **Suggestions** for the witness to assist in expanding the experiences from within the world:

1. “What kind of a (use the creator’s name for the item) is it?”

2. “What does it see, feel, know, think will happen in the future (about some aspect of the world)?”

3. “What is its function in the world?”

VII. LEAVING THE WORLD

A. **Description**: Still side-by-side. The witness begins to guide and support the creator in a shift from inside the world to an increased awareness of the creator looking at the world. The witness moves the focus of discussion to the experiences of the creator in looking at the world and away from the experience from within the world.

B. **Function**: To create a shift of focus and awareness of the creator toward bringing the creator more into present time and current reality. In this process, the creator begins to take what has been previously projected back into himself/herself. Here the creator begins to integrate the material revealed in the tray.

C. **Suggestions** for the witness to facilitate the shift away from the inside of the world.

1. “We’ll need to end (the session) soon; is there any other part of the world you want to visit?”

2. “How is this experience inside you or in your relationship to another person?”

3. “What is your experience as your look at this world?”

VIII. SUMMARY

A. **Description**: Still next to the creator. The witness guides the creator in linking experiences from within what has been created in the world to what is being created within the creator’s daily life. The witness also assists the creator in exploring what has been received from the creator’s inner wisdom (psyche) as provided by the world in front of them.

B. **Function**: To pull together and summarize the experiences of the world and help the creator focus on the connection between the experiences in the sand world and experiences in the real world.

C. **Suggestions** for the witness to facilitate the summary aspect:
1. The witness may briefly summarize the process of the session or the viewing of the world together. “Let’s put together what has happened here…”

2. The witness and the creator can summarize the experience together.

3. “What do you think the deeper part of you (your psyche) is saying to you right now?”

IX. FORMING A PLAN

A. **Description:** Weaving the entire process together, the creator and witness verbally explore what the deeper self (psyche) indicates is needed. How to attend to this is discussed so the creator has a plan of action; i.e., to become increasingly attentive and aware of the patterns brought forth in the world or a specific and concrete task that has been suggested from the experiences with the world.

B. **Function:** To increase active consciousness in the daily life of the creator. To continue to emphasize that the creator is creating everywhere, all the time, and may have many other choices than the habitual ones which he/she has learned.

C. **Suggestions** for the witness to guide the forming of a plan:

1. “Look for these experiences in your daily life, notice when they come and what you do with them, both internally and externally.”

2. “How can you create this experience (that you need more of) for yourself on a regular basis?”

3. “How can you support this newly developing part of yourself in your daily life activities?”

X. PHOTOGRAPHING

A. **Description:** Taking pictures of a world. Both Polaroid and 35mm are recommended. The creator is offered a camera for this purpose.

B. **Function:** The creator is provided an opportunity to look at the world in a different way and to make a concrete representation of the world. The creator is encouraged to take the photo home. Photographing also assists in tracking the creator’s journey over time.

C. **Suggestions**

1. “Would you like to photograph your world?”

2. “It’s time to take a photograph now.”
XI. CLEARING THE WORLD

A. Description: Removing items from a world, cleaning them and replacing them on the shelves is usually done by the witness after the creator has left the room. Sometimes the creator will ask to take a world apart. If possible, the creator should be allowed to do so, or at least to remove the first several objects. In group situations, this is done by the creator for practical reasons.

B. Function: To clear a sandtray in preparation for the next world. When the witness dismantles the tray, he/she may notice items that were not seen before. These can then be recorded.

We wish to remind readers that this is a brief review of a complex and multi-dimensional process. We hope you will use it as a study guide to further your exploration and training in this field. This review is based on the work of many pioneers in this field, including Margaret Lowenfield, Dora Kalff and Gisela De Domenico.

Selected Papers of Margaret Lowenfeld. Edited by Cathy Urwind and John Hood-Williams (p.366), Free Association Books, London 1988

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