I was introduced to Florence Grossenbacher through *The Psyche Knows Best*, a filmed interview, conducted by Lauren Cunningham. The questions are not recorded, nor is Cunningham seen, so we, the viewers have the pleasurable experience of seeming to sit in intimate conversation with Grossenbacher. For much of the film she sits in a chair in front of her sandplay collection and chats amiably about her long career as a psychotherapist, Jungian analyst and Sandplay therapist. At other times she moves about her sandplay room to pick up and discuss a cherished figure or move the sand to demonstrate use of sand and figures. At all times she exudes a quiet, gentle presence, a love of Sandplay and her clients, and an engaging humility about her life and work.

The interview takes place in the year 2000, nine years prior to Grossenbacher’s death at the age of 88. She tells us that she is in her 55th year of practicing psychotherapy. Her relationship
with sandplay began in the 1950s when, as a young social worker, she accepted an invitation by a friend to attend a workshop by Dora Kalff in San Francisco. Grossenbacher was immediately drawn to Kalff, who presented a sandtray image of a white fence with horses inside. Grossenbacher became “really excited” by the energy depicted in the tray, and was equally excited about the way Kalff “epitomized energy.” For many years Grossenbacher attended Kalff’s annual seminars in Santa Cruz as often as possible. During those years she also became certified as a Jungian Analyst. In the summer of 1986 she decided to do her own process and traveled with a group from California to study and work with Kalff in Switzerland. The following summer she again went to Switzerland, this time by herself, to continue her process. Back in the US, she worked with Kalff when she came to California and also with Kay Bradway.

The film circles around various topics, often leaving one for a while and returning to it later. They include her training with Kalff, some of her favorite figures, examples of ways one might use the tray, the sand and the figures, and the principles of sandplay that are most meaningful to her. All of them add to a sense of a very grounded woman who embodies the work of sandplay in her very being.

The topic that I found most moving is Grossenbacher’s relationship to many of the principles that form the foundation of sandplay, and some that are particular to her. She tells the viewer that she has two primary principles in her work. The first is that her only agenda is to facilitate a client’s getting on with his life and living, that this is the reason to be in therapy. The second is that this requires development of one’s connection to the spiritual. She uses the term soul.
She says to become enthusiastic about life, to discover the excitement of meaning in life, one needs to be in touch with soul, what Jung calls the Self. For most people, she says, developing a spiritual attitude is part of inner development and is an organic process if it can be allowed to unfold in its own time and way. Sandplay allows this organic development.

Grossenbacher believes there is often confusion around what constitutes a Self tray. She cautions that beauty alone does not equal a Self tray. She says centering is usually visible, but more important qualities are that it comes from the depths of the psyche, indicates that something has been integrated, and reflects an element of transformation. An internal feeling is aroused, and often a sense of mystery. Sometimes clients will ask for the meaning of the tray. She encourages them to just experience the tray, not to ask why it came at this time, in this way.

Grossenbacher talks repeatedly of integration and how it is facilitated in sandplay. She finds some clients need to get rid of neurotic ways of thinking and behaving to get back to getting on with living. She calls this clearing out the “brambles” that prevent them from being in touch with what the psyche wants. When the brambles are cleared the client finds parts of herself that she did not know existed. The effect is often surprise and indicates an aliveness beginning to develop in the psyche. When these various parts are integrated there is movement toward wholeness, and a minimization of symptoms.

At another point in the interview she discusses how Sandplay Therapy helps to develop ego strength. She says many people have been fragmented by painful experiences in their early years. They have to bring the pieces of themselves back together in order to acquire the ego strength to find their inner authority and to speak on their own behalf. A strong ego is necessary to minimize the danger of acting out impetuously and harming oneself or another. Working in the sand helps the client to integrate her various parts, move toward wholeness, contact the self and find balance. It is a wonderful way to experiment with both our unconscious and our conscious selves, bringing all the parts together. She mentions Dorothy and her companions in the Wizard of Oz as a way one might depict several parts of one’s personality in the sand.
Grossenbacher describes herself as patient. Often, she says, the client grows discouraged about her progress, feels her outer life is not improving as she wishes. Then it is Grossenbacher, who has been watching the client evolving in the sandplay, who holds the hope for the client. She is also accepting of a client’s hesitation and fears, trusting that the psyche knows what is best. She does not push anyone to use the tray. Similarly when a client decides to take a break from therapy she accepts that the psyche is speaking and knows the right thing to do. She finds that clients may return as much as three years later, ready to work again.

Grossenbacher combines dream work with Sandplay. She finds that when a client wants to create a tray about a dream, it is usually a “big dream.” It seems that when there is a desire to present the dream in both the symbolism of words and the concrete symbolism of the sand, the psyche is pushing something forward to be integrated. Often a breakthrough is occurring. Grossenbacher says that she is freer to make use of her intuition when the dream is presented in both forms.
My favorite portion of the interview reveals Grossenbacher’s humility and humanity. She says life is a back and forth. On the path of individuation we fall off the path. It is important to know how to get back on the path, back to center and back towards wholeness. She says that it is freeing to know she will make the same mistakes again and again, and that she can get back on the path. Holding a miniature of Sisyphus, she says we push and push and push and yet things collapse. We have to let things happen to us, she says, and learn to deal with our problems. She is clearly regarding herself as a traveler on the path of individuation, along with the rest of us.

I have not mentioned many of the figures she introduced, discussed, and used to create small scenes, as I think it is difficult to feel their impact without seeing them. However, I do want to mention the last ones. She arrayed her two sets of Russian nesting dolls in a long row and said, “One person after another inside of ourselves. I would love to see all parts of me at the same time!” She graciously allowed us to see a few of those parts in this interview, and I was glad to be one of the viewers.

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ABSTRACT & KEY WORDS

THE PSYCHE KNOWS BEST: AN INTERVIEW OF FLORENCE SWAN PORTER GROSSENBACHER
A Reflection by Mary Ann Brock
Menlo Park, California, USA

KEY WORDS: Sandplay therapy, Grossenbacher, Kalff, Jungian, psychotherapy, Self, soul, psyche, self tray, figures, miniatures, individuation, recovery, dreams, sand.

ABSTRACT: Mary Ann Brock discusses her reaction to a video interview of Florence Grossenbacher by Lauren Cunningham and produced by Audrey Punnett. The interview, conducted in the subject's Sandplay therapy room, permits an intimate glimpse into the work of a Sandplay therapist/Jungian analyst whose practice is in its 55th year. The conversation ranges from Grossenbacher's guiding principles in Sandplay therapy to discussions of how specific figures have been used by her clients over the years. Brock describes her as a woman of deep humanity and humility who is dedicated to promoting individuation, her clients' and her own.