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JOURNEY TO THE PEARL
SYMBOL OF TRANSFORMATION

The Sand and The Pearl Conference
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The Sand and the Pearl Conference was the Fifth National Conference of the Canadian Association for Sandplay Therapy/ Association canadienne pour la thérapie par le jeu de sable.

OPPOSITE:
Oracle of the Pearl
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Sand, water, figures. The materials of sandplay are tools of a language that connect us more deeply than words. For they awaken the symbolic imagination where personal, cultural and archetypal psychic contents are alive with transformative possibility. It is through the symbolic that outer and inner worlds interface in a profound way, as we have discovered on our journey to the pearl.

Over a period of eighteen months, six Canadian sandplay therapists were deeply moved by our collective experience of the symbolic during the birthing of our Fifth National Conference. The symbol we chose as our theme was “The Sand and the Pearl,” though it felt, as the creating evolved, that the symbol had chosen us. We had much to learn about interface.

When an oyster shell opens itself to nourishment, it may accidentally ingest an unwanted object. If the oyster is unable to expel the irritant, it becomes embedded in the oyster’s flesh. The flesh then surrounds the irritant with numerous layers of its mother-of-pearl iridescent coating called nacre, thus creating the pearl. Our conference committee had an analogous experience of interface, like that between irritant and oyster flesh; and it resonated for us throughout our process, as we interfaced with potential speakers, graphic designers and hospitality providers. We frequently found ourselves saying to one another, “this conference has taken on a life of its own.” Each encounter added a layer, like the oyster nacre, to the creation of our conference.

One of the earliest decisions made in planning a conference is location. The choice of Montréal was one of many leaps for the committee, a shift from our previous conference in a small city that had been less accessible to international travelers. Montréal is a vibrant bilingual city with diverse cultures. We had been drawn by the pearl to take the next step, to go beyond the limitations of earlier venues; our group knew it was time to move with the waves of change, to go with the flow. As one of many complexities we embraced, this choice contributed to the realization of our hopes for the conference — our attendance ultimately doubled that of past conferences, and the hospitality suite of Concordia University was full to capacity.

To our astonishment, we were overwhelmed with submissions from several continents and in three languages — French, English and Korean. Papers were strewn on the floor of the large sandplay office where we gathered together for an intense weekend to make selections and create a conference program. We talked, we journeyed, we meditated, we ate good food. And slowly, slowly, the conference took shape. How does the oyster feel when the irritant accidentally slips in on the motion of the sea water? Suddenly there is something that feels foreign and has to be managed. At times we wished we could just expel one more irritant, as sometimes the oyster is able to do. Perhaps also like the oyster, we felt at times not equipped to deal with the task. But at each turn, our capacity to contain and to trust the process, produced coatings around those irritants. Again and again, we created solutions — sometimes quite smooth, other times a bit rough — but pearl-like solutions nonetheless.

In his book *Words as Eggs*, Russell Lockhart suggests that words — like eggs — have shells; and if we break through their outer layer, we may find a “living quality” that enriches our understanding (1983, p.94). Lockhart inspired Maria Iosue to explore the meanings of words related to the pearl in her opening remarks to the conference:

All mollusks can produce pearls. The word ‘mollusk’ means ‘soft,’ referring to its soft flesh. The ‘oyster’ which produces the most beautiful pearls has the meaning of ‘bone’ or ‘shell.’ So the natural potentiality to create pearls involves the interface of opposites: softness and hardness, inner and outer. The word ‘nacre,’ or mother-of-pearl, comes from the word ‘drum’ and is also related to ‘hollowing out.’ Thus the substance of pearls is related to digging out, and creating a space where transformative life-rhythms can resonate. The word ‘pearl’ originates in ‘pear,’ for the pear-shaped oyster shell in which the pearl is formed, thus holding within it a link to the container from which it emerged. ‘Pearl’ also has the meaning of ‘sea pebble,’ a small stone made smooth and round by the action of water or sand. So a pearl is formed by waves of contact with fundamental materials, becoming an essence of what it already was, while sustained in relationship.

Informed by our learning about interface, and inspired by our Canadian commitment to bilingualism and multicultural inclusivity, we looked to nonverbal activities and rituals to welcome and bring together the diverse conference attendees. Our initiatory evening of music and refreshment enabled

us to begin a process of breaking barriers to informal connections and cultural exchange. We shared food and local wine at our celebratory dinner. And our opening and closing rituals were grounded in the currents of ocean drums, while bells echoed throughout the room, passed from participant to participant. In the “hollowed out space,” sound resonated, without and within.

Throughout the days of the conference, as presentations were shared in French, English and Korean, the initial “irritation” of using headsets transformed to gratitude as impeccable translation flowed through them. Our differences did not divide, rather opportunities for discourse, interface, and mutual respect brought us closer together. As did our banquet amidst historic stone walls in old Montréal, where we listened to one another’s languages in the telling of stories about sandplay in Québec and the Korean-Canadian training collaborations.

It is hard to imagine a successful sandplay conference that does not involve the gift of miniatures. For months, visions and encounters with pearls abounded. A party store provided pearl necklaces that adorned the banquet tables and soon after, adorned each participant. And a final gift, inspired by the wisdom of our keynote speaker Gretchen Hegeman who grounded us with her love of miniature-making, sent us eating oysters to collect their shells, visiting pearl parties, and researching the precise location of an oyster’s flesh wherein the pearl is formed. Received in numinous silence in the final moments of the conference were over one hundred oyster shells, each holding a single pearl partly hidden in wooly flesh. Now they are bringing luminosity to sandplay collections on many continents, and wonder to sandplayers who discover them.

When a pearl is examined for its value, the most critical aspect is its luster, created by layer after layer of nacre laid down over the core of irritation. The more layers, the more luster in the pearl. It is said that one should be able to see one’s reflection in a pearl of great value. This mirroring occurred during our preparations and throughout the conference for so many of us: committee members, presenters, advanced candidates, trainees, students, and newcomers to sandplay, as we discovered the pearls we were meant to find.

While there are many jewels to be found, the pearl is remarkable in that it is the only one that is created by living flesh. In the dynamic interface between the movement of human hands shaping their creations, and the materials of sandplay — sand, water, figures — the pearl and its capacity for transformation is profoundly and symbolically alive. Its symbolism sustained us throughout our journey to the Sand and the Pearl Conference, as it continues to nourish all those who are touched by its luster.

REFERENCES

- Lockhart, R. (1983). *Words as eggs: Psyche in language and clinic*. Dallas: Spring Publications.

