

SANDPLAY IN THREE VOICES:
IMAGES, RELATIONSHIPS, THE NUMINOUS
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Sandplay in Three Voices evolved out of informal conversations between three senior sandplay therapists concerning the importance of relationship, in the fullest sense, to sandplay therapy. In Bradway's introduction, she includes:

the relationship between the therapist and client. But also the relationship of each to the sand; of each to their own unconscious and to the other's unconscious; the relationship to the un-lived side of the shadow of each; the relationship to the numinous, the spiritual, to something beyond each, where the Self connection is made between the two. We wanted to get at the meaning of some of these connections. Not just a single meaning, but the many deep meanings. (p.1-2)

As we review this wise and wonderful book, we would like to share some of the reflections the book kindled in us as we traversed its rich territory. What is especially new about this territory, this exploration of the nature of therapeutic relationship in sandplay, is that its form suggests that it may take three or more to discover it. More complex than the reflections of One. More lively than Two. Their multiple perspectives enhance one another, jockeying each other until new insights are gleaned with an "ahhh" or an "mmm." As readers we join this triad as the Fourth perhaps, squaring and completing the dynamic conversations that will continue well after we've finished the book. As reviewers, we felt invited into a mature, clear and deep process of inquiry into the direct experience of sandplay itself, arising from the authors' years of practice and through their focus on the many kinds of relationships we encounter in therapy.

Eight of the most important topics in sandplay therapy — Therapist – Silence – Child – Mother –Self – Shadow – Chaos – Numinous – are explored as the ground of our most basic therapeutic experiences. The book is not so much concerned with articulating cognitive techniques or current theories of relationship as it is with our attuning ourselves to what Chambers refers to as the "heartbeat of the psyche." As we listen deeply for this heartbeat, with the help of the sand and images, the possibility arises of our meeting at the numinous level of the Self, where healing and wholeness are born. This experience does not happen by accident nor does it happen by design. It arises in the "free and protected" space created by the therapist's living knowledge of the psyche.

Sandplay in Three Voices begins by directly engaging us in our role as Therapist. We are reminded at the outset that "what is required in sandplay" as therapists as well as clients, "is the courage to descend into the depths of the human psyche and open its mysteries. Sandplay opens doors into the unconscious" (Chambers, p.24).

As we first read, we feel a little of what the client must feel walking into a strange room with a strange person at the beginning of therapy: the tentative beginnings, the unknown destination. This is new territory, this trialogue. Where are we going? But as we turn the pages and these three therapists begin to speak their concerns and “let their hair down,” we begin to settle back and before long we are drawn into the rich world of depth therapy they know so well. We realize with appreciation that the book follows the arc of the sandplay process itself, not always in the exact order of the topics, but in the connections explored. We travel with them now, drawing out some of the threads weaving through the fabric of the themes.

It speaks to the wisdom of these three women that once we have been engaged by the Therapist trialogue, they next address the profound value of silence. What is so beautiful about this primary placement of Silence is that the authors not only describe the nature and importance of silence in sandplay therapy, but also show how our relationship to silence will deeply affect all the subsequent relationships that arise. “Meeting another human being in that place of silence allows for a... different kind of meeting to happen. Valuing what emerges out of that silence is critical to sandplay” (Chiaia, p.31).

Chiaia then speaks to the silent resonance and co-transference experiences that arise in sandplay, the importance of not interpreting, and the possibility of experiencing in the silence of the relationship the spiritual, numinous aspects of the psyche (pp.41-44). Bradway gives two beautiful examples in which the sandplayer, not the therapist, provided the silence (pp.47-49). Chambers helps us clarify definitions of silence, starting from Webster’s “the absence of any sound or noise... making no sound... quiet... still... speechless...” to the creation of communal silence where, “free from the confining definitions of the human voice, the path is open for a message from the deepest layer of the unconscious.” She reminds us that silence not only holds the sought-for wisdom, but the “dark pain and surrender” from which the living energy of the Self arises which has the ability to move us into a new awareness of life. “Therapists sit in that place of no words, hold and wait, turning themselves over to the deeper wisdom of the process” (pp.50-53).

The trialogue then moves into the earliest template of relationship we know: Child and Mother: Winnicott has said that in the first year we cannot even separate these two archetypes or experiences. There is one “mother/child unity.” What is the child’s experience of this unity and then the separation? What issues relate to this archetype? Chiaia tells us:

The child archetype is an aspect of individuation. In individuation the symbol of the child represents the figure that synthesizes the conscious and unconscious elements of the personality; it unites the opposites and makes whole... We may experience all that is abandoned and neglected and/or all that is divinely powerful... And there will be the opportunity to touch and experience the “eternal child,” an experience that cannot be described in words, but only in images. (p.68)

This is where we begin as sandplay therapists, by offering the client the means to reconnect with what Jung called this “indescribable experience” (p.68).

The authors talk about the importance of the play in sandplay. “Playing is part of human life at all stages. The ability to play and imagine and be creative is our birthright” (Chiaia, p.65). In our times, children and adults are often disconnected from this creative imagination through attachment difficulties. We learn ways we can help these clients reconnect with the healing instinctual Self; through listening, through ritual, through appreciating the playing, the doing and

the creating, through our joy and pleasure in being with this person. One of Bradway's favorite words is cherishing.

The Child is born from the Mother, and our experience of her permeates all of our senses. We do not have to go very far to find her. Yet sometimes, when what we are looking for is this close, this elemental, we can miss it. Central in the authors' conversations about the Mother is the understanding that the relationship to the mother, and the experience of the mother/child unity, is essential to the constellation of Self which will consolidate and guide the client's healing. The authors' phrases in this triologue help us recognize the subliminal places and sensory experiences through which the mother's presence can be welcomed and attended to in therapy:

Sandplayers are going towards the mother-child when they touch the sand... in touching the sand they are touching the earth... the earth is the prima materia... The body of the mother... the mother comes in through the hands of the client... we see breasts in the sand... we see a belly mound in the sand... she buried and dug up... she practiced and played at losing and finding what she had lost... this realm is touched through feelings and emotions... this is the first relationship before there were words... the sound of my voice is soothing in the realm of the mother-child unity... empathy is non-verbal... It's the holding. (pp.79-92)

Then the sandplayer matures. "I want you to not just love me for myself. I want you to love me for what I can do," states Bradway's client (p.83). We hear the shift. The chapters on the Self and the numinous help us to approach and understand this profound shift that has taken place. How do we as therapists shift with it?

The Self and the numinous are life-changing experiences, almost indescribable, and yet as we read these triologues we come to remember that these experiences are deep in our bones. "The psyche knows the Self" (Chambers, p.114). We are called back to this renewing experience of our wholeness again and again in the course of life through the vehicle of deep relationship. We, as sandplay therapists, have the extraordinary privilege of re-entering this numinous realm time and again through our call into unusually deep relationship with our clients. There is far more in these chapters than we can relay. Read them slowly. They are contemplations on the mystery that we, therapists and clients, are and always have been, whole. The authors remind us that our primary task is not to analyze or interpret or reduce the client to a category of pathology, but to mirror their intrinsic wholeness back to them. In Chiaia's case study in chapter eighteen, the Self manifests within a "positive co-transference" relationship (pp.118-119).

The triologues on Shadow and Chaos take their place between the Self and the Numinous. Chiaia tells us that Henderson, in *Shadow and the Self*, says the shadow is opposite to the Self, and wherever the Self is, the shadow is. "So we are holding the opposites at the deepest level of the psyche" (p.141).

Chambers says:

Mining for the gold then becomes a struggle; a struggle that we experience as suffering...the Self is attempting to direct our consciousness to an awareness of a rejected side of the personality... Suffering is acknowledged as containing an 'element of the divine'...and this aspect of the psyche can be welcomed by the sandplay therapist who knows that the darkest moment always comes before the dawning of new light. (pp.156-157)

"As sandplay therapists," Bradway adds, "we're different from most people because we know it [the shadow] doesn't have to be gotten rid of. And our knowing this is what is healing for the sandplayer." "Yes." says Chambers, "In the sand there is always a place for the dark and the scary..." (p.139).

Chaos and darkness are indeed scary:

We leave the conscious level and we descend. And it's not so bad at first. The animals come in and there are plants and rocks... then, if you keep on, you will descend into a place where there is a rearrangement of all the elements as they were existing up to this point in time... And you can't let go and know that something else is coming. So you have to let go into nothingness... Jung called it 'the dark night of the soul'... The old is gone and the new is not yet there. (Chambers, p.163)

It is here, Chiaia says,

that the relationship to the therapist comes in. Because the therapist has been through this and holds the possibility that something will emerge...Chaos and darkness have a light, a meaning, and a dark radiance that will shine if we create a space for their expression and experience. (pp.163, 170)

And so we wait, sometimes for a long, long time, for the experience of that dark radiance. We track the combined voices of the authors in this trialogue:

The sandplayer enters into a realm of mystery... One can't believe it until one has experienced it... A resonance between the sandplayer and the sand, water, and figures begins to happen... [but the numinous] is deeper than the objects... it's the objects imbued with the psyche, the objects imbued with the inner experience of the person who uses them... In relationship to the therapist. It's the whole connection. Numen is the spirit... the breath of life... called forth... the material imbued with spirit... If you cross into this place, your whole world is going to change... you can't go back...you go through the gate, and you go on, it's all new. (pp. 179-187)

In *Sandplay in Three Voices* we are guided to the numinous through the complex relationships, the emergent oppositions, the shadow, the destructuring chaos, that are all stages of the therapeutic journey. The recovery of the divine child and a deep experience of the Self are critical to the individuation process and to a meaningful life. This is the splendor of the One. Coming to rest in the generous lap of the archetypal mother replenishes us in the bountiful compassion of the Two. The unpredictable terrain of Three calls us to enter into relationship with the moving, spiraling archetype of cosmic creativity.

On this journey the dynamic trialogue, what we might call the archetype of three, is set in motion by the authors and held by the constancy of their love of depth and their trust in that place of silence which allows "the unconscious, unknown parts of us that are numinous and mysterious and shadowy to come forth" (Chiaia, p.38). There are many names for this ancient form of the triad: the world triad, representing the eternally spiraling cycles of time—past, present and future; the triple goddess – virgin-mother-crone; the three fates; the Christian trinity; the Sanskrit triangle of life are just a few. The triangle has predominantly represented the female principle, but the double triangle is a symbol of creation itself. It is the union of the masculine (rising up) and the feminine (coming down), the movement of opposites.

This movement chosen by three senior sandplay therapists may be a fertile template for this time in our world. In Buddhism this would be the recognition of the law of “dependent arising” or interdependence. The answers we most seek will not arise out of oneself alone. As Chambers quotes Hillman: “The heroic age of psychology is past...The end of analysis coincides with the acceptance of femininity... We cannot go it alone...we must have a ‘knowing together’” (p.106). The space this book holds is broader than the essential and deeply transforming relationship between two. “The many deep meanings” of relationship carried through Sandplay in Three Voices suggest that some of the answers for our complex times may be fruitfully accessed in encounters of three and more, where the rich seeds we’ve planted in the depths of the psyche are gathered and combine in new and creative ways. The book is calling us towards a dynamic experience of the Trialogue, of trust in the spiraling movement of life, and in its last phrase, to a relation to the Infinite.