REFLECTIONS ON MALTA ITW 2018

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The reflections here are my own, followed by those of students who came from Denmark, Turkey, and Canada. Other thoughts on the ITW experience may be found in the ISST newsletter for December 2018.

The humid and relentless Maltese summer heat presented those of us from more moderate climates with an adaptation challenge. The inescapable heat formed the backdrop for our initiation into Malta’s fascinating history and culture and the intensive learning experience ISST provides.

As I think back, memories of many interactions with students and colleagues stand out as we shared and expanded our knowledge and understanding of sandplay, learned about other cultures, and created new and deeper friendships.

When I recall the many visual impressions, the experience of Malta comes alive again. I remember the rows of low-rise limestone buildings and narrow, winding streets that once protected citizens from enemy arrows; cathedrals and churches with fabulous interiors built by the Roman Catholic church; archaeological sites of Christian catacombs, and Neolithic temples treasured and preserved; palaces and museums honoring hundreds of years of battles for ownership of strategically situated Malta; the failing infrastructure – broken down narrow pavements, streets and exterior walls of buildings; tiny specialty and variety shops; olive trees, carob trees, lemon trees, and the edible fruit of prickly pear cacti; hazy vistas of dry fields and nearby towns nestled into the landscape; wary feral cats everywhere, a tiny baby hedgehog out of place blending into the curb of the road; fabulous coastal cliffs, the sparkling blue, salty and buoyant Mediterranean; steep hills and narrow highways negotiated by skilled and fearless bus drivers; and the well-used, large Seminary complex where the ITW was held, officially opened by Queen Elizabeth II 64 years ago, and showing its age.
These memories of our environment were the setting for my week of teaching during the first of two Intensive Training Weeks. Until this year, one week has been offered by ISST on alternate years in parts of the world where sandplay trainees do not have the benefit of training with their own Society. This year, the first week’s spaces were filled immediately, and the organizers offered a second week for the first time, also accepting students from countries, like Canada, with an ISST Member Society.
MALTA: THE MAIN ISLAND OF THREE (MALTA, GOZO & COMINO) IS SITUATED 93 KM/58 MILES SOUTH OF SICILY AND 380 KM/186 MILES FROM THE COAST OF NORTH AFRICA

The Island’s golden limestone buildings were built during the occupation by the Order of St. John (1530-1796) whose knights were responsible for gardens, towns, palaces, and fortifications. Air conditioning is rare. Thick walls and high ceilings were built to preserve cooler air. Fans are everywhere, attached to walls or free-standing, even outdoors. It is impossible to move quickly – the natives wisely give in to the stifling heat by taking long afternoon siestas. It is mandatory to drink plenty of water. Bottled water is available everywhere if you don’t like the taste of desalinated seawater, which I found unpleasantly fishy, or don’t want to risk drinking from the tap. In Malta only 14% of plastic bottles are recycled, but in May 2018 the Maltese government started consultations on how to implement a much-needed recycling system.

Malta has a long, rich history, evident everywhere in the carefully preserved temples, majestic harbours and architecture. Limestone brick walls enclosing fields have been hand-built to protect and preserve farm and agricultural land from rains that could wash away nutritious topsoil. Bright red British telephone booths and post boxes are on many of the narrow streets. Roman Catholic churches and cathedrals (of which there are 365) serve a population of 470,000. It’s believed the first settlers arrived in Malta from Sicily during the Neolithic Era of the Stone Age, about 12,000 years ago.
The strategically situated island has played a significant role in trade and commerce, and has defended itself from Roman, Arabian, Norman, and French invaders over centuries. Malta was granted independence in 1964 after 100 years of British rule and became a Republic in 1974. Malta joined the European Union in 2004.

Being immersed for altogether seventeen days in the stimulating culture, meeting and teaching sandplay students from all over the world, and spending time with my teaching colleagues, was a privilege. I remember being impressed by the students’ commitment to learning and the efforts many had to put into understanding and communicating in English. The collage workshop I facilitated at the first week’s conclusion gave us all a chance to creatively explore the immediate, deep impressions the week had left with us, to share them, and take home a symbol of memories. The experiences of learning, socializing over meals, sharing experiences and exploring nearby towns, museums and swimming holes with old and new friends, created a sense of community and desire to keep learning more about this complex and rewarding practice of sandplay. In my experience with those who presented cases in supervision there was plenty of enthusiasm and curiosity in our explorations of the images. We learned that no matter where we practice in the world, the sandplay images show us that our patients are struggling with universal problems and confirm sandplay’s place as a universally loved instrument for change and healing.

ABOVE:
Remnant of British rule by the Knights of St. John— a stark contrast to the limestone.
Typical street in old Malta. Photos: B. Donald
STUDENT IMPRESSIONS OF WEEKS ONE AND TWO

WEEK ONE: MARIANNE MOLBECH, FROM DENMARK

This was my third and final ITW – surely to be missed in the future. For me as an independent router this is the very significant space (often free and protected) where you can ask your silly questions, see the differences in individual style and cultures of the presenters, not to mention the experience of the collective. In short – learn.

Balancing the price and the accommodation is important since it does matter how we eat and sleep during a week with as many working hours. This year's biggest challenge was the damp heat and no air conditioning in the rooms.

The number of participants and teachers is perhaps a question to discuss – personally, I like the variety of the many but also enjoy the atmosphere of the smaller group. The pros and cons are many.

More than anything I deeply appreciate the effort made by the teachers and the local participants. Thank you.

WEEK ONE: EBRU OZLEM ALBAYRAK, FROM TURKEY

My journey to Malta was very exciting. I met again with teachers and colleagues I have known from our first meeting in Riga, and also met new teachers and colleagues from different countries. Although the weather was very hot, it was
enriching to be together with enthusiastic sandplay therapists from all over the world, and to have new experiences through the lectures and supervisions.

The topics about mythology and fairy tales in Jungian sandplay therapy and our visit to Malta’s fascinating archaeological sites were very intriguing. The collage workshop and the giving-away ceremony were emotional parts of the training that were also enriching in their teaching about self-knowledge and the collective unconscious. I should say that this association and these meetings have symbolic meanings for me that reflect the peaceful side of the world.

I appreciate all our teachers who gathered us together and guided us to improve ourselves. I appreciate our colleagues who contributed to many memorable experiences. I hold everyone in my greatest esteem. Thank you.

ABOVE:

LEFT: An Archbishop’s graffiti carved into the ruins of a temple. It was acceptable in 1870 to leave your mark to say “I was here.”

RIGHT: Evidence of the Maltese respect for their historical roots in the Neolithic era. Photos: B. Donald
WEEK TWO: CASSANDRA WHITE, FROM ALBERTA, CANADA

When I look back on my ITW experience in Malta, many thoughts and feelings come over me. What stands out is the beauty of the place and the feeling of astonishment at being somewhere with so much history. I felt so small and yet connected to something much bigger. I felt I was immersed in the history of the world!

It was wonderful to meet sandplayers from around the world. We were all different, and we also had much in common. I would like to have had a chance to play in the sand alongside my colleagues, to really experience sand and symbol with them and to get to know them in the way that I did during my training in Canada; but time did not allow. Instead, the lectures were very “heady” and densely packed with information. With no time for experientials, I wondered what it was like for my colleagues who were being introduced to sandplay. I felt as though we had jumped into the deep end of a swimming pool and wondered how they were doing with all the information. Did they have enough context for understanding what was being taught? In my early training, the experientials gave context (and excitement!) to the theory I was learning and really helped me to consolidate. I was relieved to have had background in sandplay, but even so, at times I felt as though I was grasping at concepts. Again, my mind turned to those who were new or who did not speak English as a first language and I wondered how they were managing.
It was interesting to have instructors from various countries. I noticed that each presenter had a different “flavour,” influenced by personality and culture. Some were more detailed in their descriptions of each tray in a process, some were more focused on applying Jungian theory, and still others went at a slower pace where I felt we got to know the client. This was interesting to me and made me reflect on my own thinking and assumptions about sandplay. I thought about the role of my own personality and culture, and the impact this has on me as a therapist and how I understand my clients.
I always enjoy the case presentations. I love to dive into actual cases and work with the material. This was one place where participants had time to apply their knowledge. Instructors varied in using directive and nondirective styles to facilitate this process. Reflecting on this continuum caused me to think about my own style – the kind of supervision I would like to experience next and how I would like to conduct the supervision I do.

Our training days were long, but I appreciated the time we took as a group to see some of Malta. Our field trip day was an important part of my ITW experience. I had done some exploring on my own in the days before and after the training, but it was special to do the tours during our training. The tours brought a depth and a connection to history that I believe I am still processing and don’t have the words to express. As I think about the ancient temples or the little Venus statue replica I held in my hands, I felt connected with humanity and history. As I try to reflect on it now and feel at a loss for words, in my mind I imagine my hands digging into sand, reminding me of feeling connected to the ancient civilizations, my own past, and even the present moment. In true sandplay fashion, I imagine that in doing a sandplay right now I can discover more about what I am struggling to express.

It takes time to process an experience like this one. I am thankful I went. It opened up new learning for me and new directions for my professional practice. I learned that I want to spend more time learning and understanding Jungian theory. I also gained new perspective and skills that I apply daily with my clients. I don’t know if I will attend another ITW, but I can say that I feel some completion from the experience. It inspired me to spend some quiet time studying and refining my knowledge and understanding of sandplay. This will be my next step.
About the author:

**BEATRICE DONALD, PHD, CCC, MFT, CAST/ISST**, is a Senior Teaching Member of CAST. She has taught, supervised, and presented on sandplay therapy in Canada in agency and university settings, in South Korea, the US, and Switzerland, and in the ISST Intensive Training Week, Malta. She has an independent private practice in Vancouver, British Columbia supervising, training and providing therapy and sandplay therapy to adults. In her previous agency work as a clinical supervisor and manager, she introduced sandplay as a nonverbal modality to interns and practicing therapists treating trauma in children and adults. Dr. Donald has published several articles on sandplay in the Japanese, American and German Sandplay Association journals. Her PhD dissertation placed sandplay theory and practice within a contemporary philosophical context. **CORRESPONDENCE: beadonald@shaw.ca**

About the artist:

**JENNY BADGER SULTAN, MFA** has been an artist since she was a child, finding that working with art materials and using her imagination to create images was deeply satisfying. She attended Pomona College, where she received a BA in Art in 1962. Jenny went on to Columbia University, earning her MFA in Painting in 1963. After school she soon found that the world of inner experience — dreams, visions, symbolic representations of states of being—was the area that she wanted to express in her paintings. She has lived in the Bay Area since 1965, married Henry Sultan, a painter, and together they have raised two children, shared a studio, worked, traveled, shared dreams, and made art. For 33 years Jenny Badger Sultan taught painting, color, drawing and design at City College of San Francisco. She retired from CCSF in 2006, and has been continuing to experiment with new materials and ways of working. **CORRESPONDENCE: jbadger@ccsf.edu and www.jennybadgersultan.com**