REFLECTIONS: BOOKS & EVENTS

REFLECTIONS ON
THE SPIRIT OF STORY IN SANDPLAY

By Leslie Johannes
Bellevue, Washington, USA

The spirit of story moved with vitality among events and attendees at the 2014 STA National Conference in Seattle, June 5–June 8, affecting all who participated in its mystery. Stories of young and old, lost and found, broken and transformed were given “voice” in Sandplay therapy processes presented in nearly fifty sessions. Presenters reanimated the spirit in each sandplayer’s story, once living unheard and unknown in the unconscious. The spirit of story also appeared in sharing together our own stories as sandplayers, witnesses, storytellers and teachers. All told a vast treasure trove of insights into the human mind and soul.

Duane Pasco’s Spawning Moon, which became the logo and image for the conference brochure, also eloquently expresses the spirit of story. Pasco helped open the conference, and spoke of his life work, dedicated to the study, creation and perpetuation of Northwest Native traditions in art and canoe-building. He demonstrated, via video, how his carvings of house poles and canoes, each from a single cedar tree, are infused with the spirit of story. Moving with spirit and in accord with the Northwest Native tradition of “speaking from the heart,” we were re-membered into the history of place and the meaning it ascribed to our gathering in my retelling of Chief Si’ahl’s speech, storying the sacredness of the land as mother.
Janet Tatum, STA President and Conference Chair, presided over the opening night and brought us together by showing images of local Northwest Native story poles and telling an indigenous creation story about Moon the Transformer. She continued with the story of Sandplay’s origins in Margaret Lowenfeld’s creative work with traumatized children and in the honored work of Kay Bradway and Estelle Weinrib as founders of STA and ISST. Bradway’s and Weinrib’s work has moved Sandplay therapy forward for all sandplayers then, now and for those yet to come.

During the conference, Estelle Weinrib’s Sandplay stories were presented by way of video compiled by Barbara Weller. Weinrib and her work shone brightly alongside the effects of Parkinson’s disease, the mothering story made ever more poignant in the juxtaposition between her great capacity of mind, and her body’s increasing incapacity.

Maggie Baron brought from England the spirit of story in the image of the Maypole, its historic and symbolic significance in Sandplay, and the symbolism it shares with the Northwest Native story poles as *axis mundi* and with the ego-self axis, integral to Jung’s conceptual model of the human psyche. In her playful way, Baron also engaged us in weaving our personal experiences of Sandplay into the history of Sandplay Therapy, including the development of its potential for healing by Dora Kalff, its foundations in Jung’s Analytical Psychology and Margaret Lowenfeld’s World Technique; thereby, making each one of us a valued *confrere* of the ongoing spirit of story in Sandplay.

In conjunction with the playfulness of spirit, award winning author and senior Jungian analyst, Leland Roloff, a skilled story-teller who infuses his own inimitable presence into his *play* with words, presented the story of Jung’s spirit-sustaining sand-play on the shores of Lake Zurich, bringing to life the importance Jung attributed to play in both his inner personal life and his outer professional life. The spirit of play, and the lightness of heart it engenders, has also been addressed by “the spirit of the depths,” as quoted from *The Red Book* (2009 a). “The sum of life decides in laughter and in worship” (2009 b, p.122). The lightness that laughter and play can engender is a key in opening the mind to transformative experience.
The unfolding story of Carl Jung’s personal and transformative work with the unconscious and its close correspondence with Sandplay Therapy was revealed through Sonu Shamdasani’s three talks, which elaborated aspects of *The Red Book, Liber Novus* (2009a) and the *Black Books*. Much thought, many questions and countless conversations between participants gave voice to the spirit of our unconscious human story. In one of his talks, Shamdasani, Professor of Jung History at University College London, paraphrased Atmaviktu’s story, (2009a, fn.222, p.303), including a carving and images Jung created to depict his April 25, 1917 fantasy for *The Red Book*. Upon concluding this telling, Shamdasani asked where else, other than in Sandplay Therapy, can one witness an old man become a bear that becomes an otter that becomes a newt that comes into a serpent, which is a kernel of the self that becomes Philemon? He asserted that Sandplay Therapy actually comes closer to the conversations Jung engaged in with the animated figures beneath the threshold of consciousness than does the interpretation or analysis of those images. Jung had learned for himself that “the symbol changes me,” (2009b, p.190) and found the symbol to be transformative when one is able to “sink into” (p.190) it through contemplation. An understanding that Jung, in his life’s work, had exemplified his soul’s guidance—“the way is symbolic” (p.62)—became remarkably clear.
Shamdasani’s assertion is a powerful affirmation of Sandplay’s non-interpretive ways of encouraging people, who come to us for psychological healing, to work directly with figures and symbols in Sandplay Therapy. His reframe reveals Sandplay’s living-ness, profundity, and its intimate relationship with Jung’s personal experiences of the figures encountered in his “most difficult experiment” (2009 b, p.24) with the unconscious and therein found that “the wealth of the soul exists in images” (p.130).

As we concluded our time together, Gita Morena reminded us that the journey home may be yet more difficult than the journey into new realms of extraordinary experience. The return home requires us to let go of frames and lenses that once helped us see clearly, and which the journey itself has caused us to outgrow. The return, explained Morena, can be something like the process of metamorphosis—a voracious caterpillar, once an egg, laid by a butterfly, becomes a chrysalis, for the now full caterpillar, that serves as its container, while it turns completely to “mush.” Miraculously, if allowed to do its work, that “mush” will transform into an intricately designed butterfly that knows how to navigate and fly hundreds of miles to the next stage of its journey. The butterfly’s story is reminiscent of Atmaviktu’s story (2009 a, p.303, fn.222)—things turning into other things then ending up with wings, perhaps signifying the enduring presence of spirit in the process.

Conference participants have since returned home from their extraordinary experiences and have resumed their practice of Sandplay Therapy, each carrying the gifts that the Spirit of Story in Sandplay bestowed—for the people they serve and for their own in-spiration.

REFERENCES
The JayHawk Institute, a nonprofit foundation whose legacy is: Sharing Northwest Coast Native Culture, Art and History. www.jayhawkinstitute.org
ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

**LESLIE JOHANNES, MED, LMFT, CST** is a certified member of STA and ISST and a founding member of Northwest Sandplay Therapists (NWST). She is a Clinical Member of the Jungian Psychotherapists Association (JPA), Northwest Alliance for Psychoanalytic Study (NWAPS), American and Washington Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT and WAMFT), and is a Washington State Supervisor and an AAMFT Supervisor in Mentorship. Leslie Johannes has also completed the North Pacific Institute of Analytical Psychology (NPIAP) two year program, Seminars for Professionals and a two year Psychobiological Approach to Couples Therapy (PACT) training. Maintaining a full time private practice in Bellevue, Washington for nearly twenty years, Leslie Johannes sees adults, couples and children for personal, depth and relational psychotherapy. She also facilitates psychotherapy groups for professional women and helps divorced parents with co-parenting issues.

**CORRESPONDENCE:** leslie@lesliejohannes.com

ABOUT THE ARTIST:

**DUANE PASCO’s** work as a Northwest Coast Native Style Artist began with serious intent in 1976 after visiting the Sacred Circles exhibit, with an array of pre-twentieth century Northwest coast pieces, at the Tate in London. He began visiting museums and their store rooms in earnest. He studied Bill Holm’s *Northwest Coast Indian Art: An Analysis of Form* along with his vast collection of slides, serving a formidable foundation for Duane Pasco’s gallery level art works, which are collected, displayed and garner attention worldwide. He has been influential in the revival of traditional canoe carving, having made several for various tribes and teaching the skills to Native people. Duane Pasco has illustrated the book, *The Prince and the Salmon People*, and is co-author with Barbara Winther of his recent publication, *Life as Art*. He serves on the JayHawk Institute’s Board of Directors.

**CORRESPONDENCE:** duanepasco@gmail.com, www.duanepasco.com

ABSTRACT & KEY WORDS

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**ABSTRACT:** The world of images, its historical expressions and animating spirit—in story, culture and art as well as in dreams, active imaginings and Sandplay—together with the healing aspects of play were highlights of the 2014 STA National Conference in Seattle, Washington. This reflection piece draws attention to the events shared by all who attended.