TWENTY-ONE POINTS TO BE CONSIDERED IN THE INTERPRETATION OF A SANDPLAY

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ON THE LIMITS AND SYMBOLIC NATURE OF VERBAL INTERPRETATION

Central to sandplay is the idea that through playing in the sand, inner unconscious contents of the mind can be expressed and, thus are made conscious on a preverbal level of consciousness. This level can be called “lunar consciousness” in order to distinguish it from the “solar type of consciousness” which conceives its objects in a verbal, rational and precise way. Neumann describes the qualities of this level of consciousness in his article "Ueber den Mond und das matriarchale Bewusstsein" (Neumann, 1975). He calls it "matriarchal consciousness." In relationship to sandplay it is discussed by Estelle Weinrib in Images of the Self (1983).

The idea of the preverbal or lunar level of consciousness implies that consciousness should not be limited to what can be verbally expressed. The effects that persons have experienced through working with the sand without analysis of the contents suggest that personal transformation, or, in other words, changes of one’s sense of being in the world and capacity to relate positively with the world and other beings, does not necessarily depend on making an inner content conscious on a verbal level. Such transformation, to a large extent, may also come about through the experience of the expression and concentration on one’s personal inner images. This preverbal level or level of matriarchal consciousness cannot be fully expressed on a
verbal level. This idea corresponds to Margaret Lowenfeld’s hypothesis of a "primary mental system" (later called "protosystem") which cannot be represented on the rational level of the "secondary mental system" (Lowenfeld, 1979, p.16, p.72). It could however it could be expressed by art, poetic language and of course the playful creations in the sand.

In a similar way also Daniel Stern in his The Interpersonal World of the Infant has powerfully reflected on both the limitations and possibility of language. He focuses among other aspects on the fact that language is unable to represent the perception of the child, which is not limited to perception operation just through one mode, let’s say the visual sense, but combines various modes of perception in one moment. Perceiving a patch of yellow sunlight a child perceives its intensity, warmth, shape, brightness, pleasure and other aspects as a global experience. The phrase “yellow sunlight” that may be used to express this experience, fractures the amodal global experience by focusing just on one single modality of sensations. Stern goes on to say:

The paradox that language can evoke experiences that transcends words is perhaps the highest tribute to the power of language. But those are words in poetic use. The words in our daily lives do more often the opposite and either fracture amodal global experience or send it underground. (1985, p.77)

Moreover, the creations in a sandplay process have to be seen as symbolic. Symbol, understood in the sense of Jungian psychology, is to be distinguished from sign. A sign points to a clearly definable object. Different from a sign, a particular symbol points to a level of inner experience which cannot be reduced to words. (For a discussion of the meaning of symbol see C.G. Jung, 1971, Psychological Types, under "Definitions").

Thus, if we speak about interpreting symbols, as in the case of a sandplay process, we must remain aware of the fact that an interpretation on a verbal level can never fully represent the contents of the images with which it is concerned. I suggest that a verbal interpretation is successful when, although on a verbal and rational level, it is also symbolic; that is, it points beyond itself to the same inexpressible level of experience which is pointed to by the images, and it helps to intuit and participate in that level. Such interpretation avoids reducing the contents of the sandplay images to mere concepts and words. It is cautious, full of respect for the inner experience of the client, and leaves open other possible ways of understanding. It avoids appearing “all-knowing” and offers suggestions for understanding rather than the “full truth.”
Concerning this it may be helpful to recall that Jung approached the images of active imagination with great respect and even hesitation:

I had to try to give provisional interpretations at least, so far as I was able interspersing them with innumerable “perhapes” and “ifs” and “buts” and never stepping beyond the bounds of the picture lying before me. I always took great care to let the interpretation of each image tail off into a question whose answer was left to the free fantasy-activity of the patient. (1927, par.400)

Jung talks about his attitude in the session itself, about how he struggled to find the right words for the patient. Some of this respectful and searching way should also be preserved in our own personal attempts to decipher sandplay images.
When giving an interpretation one has to remain aware of the fact that the experience on the level of images is multidimensional. Here the concept of “clusters” coined by Lowenfeld (1979, p.21) is very useful. That means that one image may simultaneously condense emotions and memories related to perinatal, early childhood experiences, as well as experiences from later parts of the life as well as the present. Most of the time it is impossible to identify more than just a fraction of the experiences condensed in a particular image.

In general, the process of arriving at a given interpretation involves not only the application of a single function, such as thinking. All the four functions described by Jung should be utilized in this process according to one’s capability. Thus in addition to the thinking function, intuition, feeling and sensation should also participate. The resulting interpretation is based on subjective elements, such as one’s feeling impression (a scene might strike one as sad) or intuitive understanding (as in a case when one has hunch without being able to give a specific reason), as well as objective elements that can be derived from observation of the facts (for example the biographical data of the client, statements by the client, or the observation that there are only animals in the scene) and reasoning (again, for example rational conclusions from the fact that only animals are used). An interpretation in this sense is never just a statement of an objective, scientific fact but also contains the therapist’s subjective evaluation and response to those facts. It is, rather, a form of art which skilfully combines a totality of approaches in a balanced manner. Interpretation is useful and necessary on the level of the study and systematic understanding of sandplay processes.

During the actual work verbal interpretations of the sandplay scenes have to be avoided (of course exceptions are possible, for example when a patient is extremely perturbed by a motif that arose in the sand, one may explore its possible meaning together with the client more deeply). The main reason for this abstention is that it will interfere with the spontaneity of the creative process of the client. Thus it will hinder the client in establishing a genuine and personal contact with the unconscious through the activity of free play. This restriction does not concern dreams the client might want to discuss.
It might be useful to remember that Winnicott cautioned in *Playing and Reality* not to engage in premature interpretation. He states: “interpretations are useless and can create insecurity in the patient as long as he/she does not have the capacity to play.”

Jung also beautifully stated concerning the images in active imagination: “Image and meaning are identical, as the image is formed its meaning becomes more evident” (1927, par.402). This applies as well to sandplay where we can say it is a meaning that can be sensed by the body, by the mind and as it is self-evident it is not in need of further interpretation. I noticed, however, that often, clients want to be reassured by comments or interpretations of the therapist. This insistence on an explanation is often a sign that the client has not yet really been able to enter into the flow of play. Certainly such a wish must be met in a skilful way with mirroring of possible meanings which can reassure, but which also leave space for the capacity to play to grow.

Interpretative skills certainly can help the experienced therapist enhance the clarity of understanding of the sandplay work in process. This understanding may be used indirectly in the interactions with the client. The capacity to form ideas about the contents of the process within the therapeutic situation, however, is secondary only to the more important capacity of understanding and participating in the process of the client on a preverbal level. The formation of ideas is only a minor element in the general task of forming a relationship with the client that is based on the idea of the "free and protective space." Too many concepts and fixed ideas about the symbolic process and the expectations based on them create the risk of hampering the capacity of the therapist to remain non-judgmental and open. On the other hand, it is also true that a deepened capacity of interpreting sandplays brings about respect for the way the individuation process can unfold. Thus it protects one from misjudgement, premature and wrong interventions, and tends to strengthen the trust in the inner healing capacity within the client.

Some clients might feel a need to review the slides of the process with the therapist after concluding their work. It is on this level of the interaction that an interpretation of the scenes on a verbal level can be attempted with the active participation of the clients and prove very rewarding.
TWENTY-ONE POINTS TO BE CONSIDERED IN INTERPRETING A SANDPLAY SCENE

In the process of making an interpretation of any given sandplay scene there are a number of aspects that can be considered. I have gathered twenty one different such aspects without the intention to be complete.

I. Any interpretation needs to take into account the history and actual external situation of the client. This also includes the particular clinical history of the person and the nature of the client’s pathology. The same type of scene might have a very different meaning depending on the background of the person. Developments as seen in terms of images need
to be viewed in relationship to the external life situation and to the subjective sense of well being or suffering of the client. This includes the external progress and changes the client initiates, as well as both positive and negative external influences from external situations and the client’s reactions to them. We must, however, be aware of the fact, that many of the developments and changes which are expressed in the sandplay process are anticipatory and may not be realized in the external life until a later point.

II. The contents of the session need to be considered. This includes the record of what has been said by the client, the interactions between client and therapist, the quality of the atmosphere (heavy, tiring, inspiring, light, etc.), record of nonverbal signs of sadness, anger etc. of the client, one’s own countertransference (anger, protective feelings, feelings of heaviness or tiredness, etc.), any comments on the sandplay by the client, the emotional reaction to it. One should notice if the figures are placed fast, with a gesture revealing anger, etc or with careful consideration. Important indications for the meaning of a particular sandplay can also be gained by dreams of the client.

III. When we enter the process of interpreting a sandplay scene it is helpful to first investigate what emotions or feeling response we have with regard to it. This can be either to the scene as a whole or individual elements in it. Does a scene strike us as cold, warm, joyful, sad, overwhelming or confusing? Do we respond with a sense of impatience, protective feelings, fear or relief? After allowing such a feeling response we might also check how we personally felt before seeing the scene and connect these feelings and our own life situation and history, thus bringing this to consciousness. This will help us recognize our own projections and to become aware of our own countertransference. To sort out our own projections, it is also necessary to compare our own responses with the way the client was feeling about it.

IV. We can direct our awareness towards the way space has been used. Is a scene full, empty, is the space used equally or are there empty halves or sections? Very full images can point to overflowing unconscious activity, while empty pictures may point to depression or a lack of inner energy.
On the other hand, depending on the quality of the scene, it may also indicate inner clarity, calmness, or an emptiness in the sense of getting rid of old images before getting ready to allow something new to arise. Consistent empty halves or sections in a series of plays can point to a deep inner imbalance and the inability to express threatening or painful inner experiences, particularly when the sections which have been used contain predominantly positive and non-aggressive elements. Sometimes also very timid personalities with low self-esteem use only small parts of the tray. We should also observe a number of trays to see how the use of space changes and develops.

V. Use and selection of the sand. Here we consider whether dry or wet sand has been selected. Sometimes reasons are given for this such as that the wet sand feels “dirty,” causes “unpleasant feelings” or is “fun to work with,” or that the dry sand allows no solid forms, has a transient character.

In the use of the sand we observe whether it has been left untouched or whether it has been formed, flattened, stirred up. We observe whether the contact with the sand evoked feelings (for example: “It feels like caressing a body”) or not. A reluctance to touch the sand and move the sand can be indicative of fear from unconscious contents or difficulty relating to the physical side of life. Flattening can be indicative of the desire to control emotions, or depending on how it is done, of fear from unconscious material and obsessive defense.

VI. Basic shapes in the sand and arrangement of the objects. We can observe if certain shapes are dominant, such as those that are round or shapes with sharp corners. Formations in the sand with dominant round shapes can point to a more feminine and feeling quality in the client whereas trays with geometrical, exact structures may point to a dominance of masculine or intellectual values. Shapes can be carefully formed or shaped careless and in a casual way: this can indicate presence or lack of will or intention, as well as tenseness or relaxation in a person. Certain shapes might resemble forms of the body or inner organs and can thus be indicative of the physical level the process is touching. Similarly, with the use of objects, we should consider the shape of the arrangement. For example: is everything arranged along strict geometrical patterns or more freely distributed?
VII. Dominant colors. It can be useful to consider the colors which dominate in a sandplay. Many colors can be indicative of life. Lack of color can indicate retreat to the inside or depression. Intensive red, not mitigated by other colors, can be seen in trays of depressed persons and may represent a longing for being alive. A not yet published study of the colors red and green in sandplay processes has been done by the Italian sandplay therapist Maria Rosa Calabrese which showed processes that moved from a predominance of green towards a gradual appearance of red and a final integration of the two. A predominance of green can point to a passive and therefore a more plant like or “vegetative” inner attitude dominated by the archetype of the great mother, whereas the red brings activity and emotions, ranging from, depending on the quality of red, burning emotions, anger, passion to warm feelings.

VIII. Use of the blue bottom. Frequently the blue bottom is used to indicate water. We can observe whether the client goes down to this water level by opening a hole in the sand or by pushing sand to one side. If a client avoids doing this for a long time, it also may indicate a fear of going too deep. If on the other hand, from an early stage on, access to the ground or water level of the tray is present, this can indicate access to a deeper nourishing side within. One might also observe whether the water area is used in a clear way as water, or whether houses and trees along with fish placed in it. Sometimes animals and objects belonging to the water are also placed on the land or outside the water. This can indicate an underdeveloped capacity of discrimination in the client. Moreover, sometimes the blue ground is used in a different way, for example to create a clean, neat surface like a hospital. How these variant uses of the blue ground should be interpreted depends a lot on the context.

IX. Use of figures. We observe whether figures have been used or not and if figures that have been used represent exclusive use of a specific category of such figures. Avoidance of use of figures can, in certain cases, be seen as a sign of defence, especially if it is consistent throughout the whole process; it can imply a rejection of something the therapist offers. The choice of figures is usually more revealing than an abstract scene without figures. However, there can be other reasons for not using figures. Certain deeper, inner levels of consciousness have a more abstract quality which a client might want to express without figures. Moreover, in the work without figures, predominance may be given to body sensations or the need to
caress, touch or hit the sand, as if it were a living body. This experience may represent an important preverbal and also pre-image level which needs to be healed or be reconstructed. If figures are used, we need to observe whether, for example they are exclusively humans and no animals, or only female figures, only peaceful figures. Also, the presence or lack of vegetation can be an important indication of the inner state of the client, such as the appearance of green after a long sequence of scenes without any vegetation.

X. Placement of the figures within the space. Some sandplay therapists interpret the meaning of the figures according to the corners within which they are placed. They import the meanings attributed to higher and lower left and right corners of a drawing into sandplay interpretation. This type of interpretation should be used with caution if at all. It is questionable whether a two dimensional system can be projected on the three dimensional representations in sandplay. We should be aware that in sandplay it is a mistake to speak of upper and lower corners. We should consistently speak of near and far corners. This corresponds to the perspective of the maker of the sandplay, as long as the person is not shifting positions in the course of the work. Thus the placement of the figures should be interpreted in terms of being near or far away.

At times an inner relationship exists between those things that are placed in the opposite ends of the diagonal since this is the longest possible spatial distance between two objects in the tray. The figures thus placed sometimes illustrate opposite qualities which need to be realized.

XI. Level of differentiation. A helpful indication about the level and intensity of ego development can be the level of differentiation of a scene. This can range from just dumping the figures into the tray, the seemingly random placement of figures, or confused battle scenes where it is not clear who fights against whom, to well organized scenes with clear separations and divisions. A zoo, for example, can mean a positive differentiation on the level of the instincts or, depending on the context, a rigid, controlling attitude with regard to them.

In completely confusing scenes it might be helpful to look for the presence of ordering principles on a more primitive level, such as circular arrangement, grouping according to size or color, a similar direction of a assemblage consisting for example of a mixture of animals, cars, dragons and humans.
XII. *Relationship among the figures and parts of the scene.* It is important to observe whether the figures which have been used are related to each other, interact with each other, or whether they stand more by themselves and are separated from each other. This can give indications about how the client feels in relationship to other persons or how he/she relates the inner parts of the mental system with each other.
Moreover we can observe also the quality and type of relationships expressed, what type of relationships dominates and how they change in the course of the process e.g. mother-child, father-child, male-female, human-animal, domination-submission, aggression-friendship.

Similarly, we need to observe the relationship among the different parts in a scene. With severely disturbed subjects we can find parallel scenes standing completely unrelated next to each other. The unrelatedness would, in such cases, be accentuated by the fact that the contents in the fragmented scenes differ strongly from each other. In such cases a process may gradually move towards the capacity to create one entire scene with related parts.

In terms of relationship which we might observe is whether bridges are present or not, whether they bridge something, or whether they are put into the scene without obvious function. Bridges connecting identical parts may point to low energy or an inability to make decisions. There is generally more energy if they bridge aspects with distinct qualities, as there is more to be gained when moving from one side to the other.

XIII. Creating faces, bodies etc. in the sand. Sometimes clients feel ready for a very personal expression. They may use the sand to form faces or bodies. Such forms sometimes emerge spontaneously from the active physical interaction with the sand and spring from a deep preverbal level.

On a different level the need for a personal expression, not being satisfied with the provided figures, can be satisfied by creating one’s own figures from clay, figures which more precisely express the emotion which needs to be seen or with which one needs to get in touch. Related to that need may also be the desire to bring one’s own figures, as in the case of children who bring their own toys. This can also be significant in terms of the trust the client experiences.

XIV. Dynamic or static nature of the scene. Does a scene contain movement? For example: Horses racing over a plane, a path with someone walking on it, rivers with boats or streets filled with traffic. Or, is there an absence of any movement or even blocked movement: a traffic jam, many horses in a very narrow fence. Margaret Lowenfeld’s first case, a depressed child that she presented in her book The World Technique illustrated well the development from blocked systems towards the possibility of
increased movement of energy that corresponds with the emotional changes of the child (1979). Thus we can ask the question: Is there a repetition of closed systems? For example: lakes without rivers flowing towards or from them, fenced sections without gates, or are there outlets for the dammed up energy? Again, to arrive at an interpretation we must also look at the quality of a closed system: do closed systems indicate a need for safety, concentration, demarcation or do they prevent activity and express a blocking of energies? We may also consider whether the movement is contained, channeled, free or chaotic.

XV. Two dimensional use of the sandplay. The sand may be used for drawing things in it, or figures may be laid down to create two dimensional, picture like scenes. The significance of this may vary a great deal depending on the case. One possible meaning is that the expressed contents cannot yet be realized or experienced in a concrete fashion.

XVI. Closeness to consciousness. Sandplay scenes may be considered in terms of their closeness to consciousness: whether they represent everyday scenes or scenes that take place in far distant places and times, or in imaginary spaces or a in mixture of levels.

XVII. Considering psychotherapy as a task which moves towards a better integration of the various levels of the brain -- top down integration of the three levels of the “triune brain” and the body, emotion and conscious awareness and left right integration requiring the input of both the left and right cerebral cortex and limbic regions (Conzolino, 2003, p.29)-- one might look for indications of a dissociation or integration of these parts expressed in the symbolic language of sandplay therapy. For example, more primitive levels such as the brainstem/limbic system may be represented by the use of dinosaurs, snakes, animals and the neocortex by humans and advanced technology. This might be at the least a rewarding theme for researching to what extent the activity of the various levels of the brain show themselves in symbolic representations.

XVIII. Interpretation of the symbolic value. The interpretation of the specific symbolic meaning of individual figures or motif in a scene requires a thorough knowledge of symbols in fairy tales, mythology, religion and dreams.
We need to be aware that any symbol may have positive and negative poles of meaning, beyond that, a large variety of possible meanings. To determine what a given symbol may signify in a particular sandplay we need to be able to relate our knowledge of the symbols to the concrete scene and the situation of the client. In this way we must determine from case to case whether a particular meaning of a symbol can be applied or not. Symbolic meanings taken from dictionaries of symbols, although frequently offering important information, should not be applied blindly. It is also not sufficient to just quote all the meanings without showing why a certain meaning is relevant for the understanding of a scene.

Moreover, any personal associations and feeling reactions to a particular figure that has been chosen or made by the client are to be taken very seriously. This does not exclude the possibility that a certain meaning of the figure (gained from a study of its various meanings in mythology) has been intended in an unconscious way by the client who goes beyond his or her conscious associations.
IXX. Interpretation in the context of the whole process. This is one of the most important points. The understanding of an individual scene must be related to the scenes that came before and which come later. Thus, for example, for a chaotic person it may be a great achievement to create a well ordered picture after a series of unstructured scenes and for an obsessive person who created very rigid scenes to create an inundation with mud and water can be a very liberating experience. We must keep in mind the previous scenes and precisely observe the changes. There might be a child who always creates battle scenes, and we might become frustrated and see no progress. More detailed observation may reveal however great development from having a battle all against everybody without much purpose towards the "orderly" battle between two clearly defined armies of opponents fighting for a clear motive.

XX. Interpretation in terms of inner developmental patterns. Based on a careful application of point twelve, the relationship between the figures and parts of the scene, we might then be better able to relate the process to developmental patterns as they have been described in the Jungian individuation process. Certain patterns of development have been discussed both by Dora Kalff in her book *Sandplay: A Psychotherapeutic Approach to the Psyche* (1980) and by Estelle Weinrib in *Images of the Self* (1983). Especially important is the capacity to recognize the so called “manifestation of the Self” and the subsequent steps of the ego development, as well as the appearance of the shadow, the animus and anima. Relevant to the understanding of the individuation process in sandplay are the various works of Erich Neumann which describe the development of human consciousness in relationship to the history of mythology. He also shows the parallels between the historical evolution of consciousness of mankind and the developmental stages of consciousness in a modern person (Neumann, 1973).

It is also necessary and helpful to be aware of other specific developmental patterns which can be seen as part of the individuation process such as the stages of the birth process described by Stanislav Grof in *Realms of the Human Unconscious* (1976), and in the stages of infantile development as described by Freud, Erikson and developmental psychology.
XXI. Interpretation in terms of relationship between client and therapist. The sandplays can also be seen as a reflection of the relationship between client and therapist. In general I prefer to speak about relationship, which is a mutual process, to speaking about “transference” and “countertransference.” For a similar reason Kay Bradway chose the word “co-transference.”

The manifestation of the Self can be seen as the natural outcome of a relationship determined by the quality of the free and protected space. I suggest it can also be seen as the expression of the "deep transference," a relationship between the Self of the client and the Self of the therapist. Hayao Kawai from Japan once made a distinction between "deep" and "strong transference" in a lecture. He explained that a deep transference occurs from center to center of the person, termed "Hara" in Japanese and located in the belly area. A "strong transference" may involve strong feelings such as anger and desire and is more external.
Relationships between figures or even objects expressed in the sandplay may also be indicative of the ease or difficulty the client has in relating to the therapist and reflect the effects of the conscious or unconscious reaction by therapist.

At times specific figures consciously or unconsciously are chosen by the client in order to express qualities of the therapist. On one side they may carry the client’s projections of feelings conditioned by his or her parents and other influential persons. On the other side they may reflect accurately qualities of the therapist, qualities that have been revealed in the therapists own responses to the clients feelings. Thus sandplay contents can certainly also be understood as a reflection of transference and countertransference or as Kay Bradway has called it the co-transference. Bradway (1991) uses this term in her article “Transference and Countertransference in Sandplay Therapy” to express the simultaneous character of actions and reactions in the client-therapist relationship involving both conscious and unconscious as well as positive and negative feelings by both people.

CONCLUSION

The above mentioned points represent a non-exhaustive choice. A very good additional list of aspects to be considered can be found in Sandplay: Past, Present and Future by Rie Rogers Mitchell and Harriet Friedman (1994, pp.83-87).

The specific meaning of an individual point should be arrived at by considering it in the context of the whole process and in relationship to the other points. The points can also be seen as a basis for further research. The next step would be to relate it to a large body of concrete material, ideally stemming from different therapists, in order to determine more precisely whether, for example, a certain way of using the sand can be said to be characteristic for a specific type of client or a specific phase of the process of such a client. The interest for such research needs however to be balanced with the understanding that sometimes no or only few words are the best way to express one’s appreciation of the inner value or interpretation of a particular sandplay.
REFERENCES

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