

Dora M. Kalff

SANDPLAY /

A Psychotherapeutic Approach to the Psyche

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To my sons and grandson
Peter Baudouin
Martin Michael
Christopher Baudouin

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the child has a built-in limitation; namely, the size of the box. It must be a container, a *temenos*, and the very fact that the *temenos* is there enhances the child's freedom.

We live in a time when the issue of limits is a very critical one. As I have mentioned, we are now seeing the unconscious breaking through as a powerful energy system. When this kind of breakthrough takes place; when one experiences this kind of Dionysian energy after a lifetime of what feels like sterility, there is a tendency to over identify with the Dionysian impulses. This tendency to over-react is, of course, more strongly constellated in the parental figures (or surrogates or establishment) who are too stuck on the side of the image of "goodness," and/or excessive structure, and/or non-emotionality.

What this leads to, in our time, are people who feel they must express everything which is in them, as though the answer to the ills of society were a massive cathartic. There is no question about our need, individually, to loosen up, for we have indeed suffered from a state of severe repression of our emotions. Our need for expression must be tempered, however, by some feeling of responsibility towards our fellow man; otherwise, that elusive freedom we are looking for in expressing ourselves will be lost. If one has to "let it out" on the basis of an idea that this is *the* thing to do, then there is no longer freedom but rather a new dogma.

One of the phantasies of the new encounter-ethic in contemporary psychology is that it is always good to "encounter" someone—to really "let someone have it." This is just what I have called it, a phantasy. It may lead to a creative and positive human communication, or it may release the demonic contents of the unconscious in a most destructive and damaging way. This is why emotions are so often repressed. These contents have been underneath for centuries, and they sometimes need to be transformed before the individual can allow them to come out. Sandplay is one way of accomplishing this transformation of energy.

Sandplay originated with Margaret Lowenfeld in England. It was picked up in the United States by Charlotte Buhler who used it as a diagnostic agent and prepared it as an actual kit that clinicians could purchase. It was then taken up by Mrs.

Kalff whose widespread travels have started people working with the sandbox in all parts of the world.

Why have therapists taken so to this method? The reason, I think, is similar to the phenomenon one experiences if one is an observer of some ritual activity. Observers of a real ritual actually become participants, chords of deep feeling are touched, and there is a sense of identity with the group. The therapist who observes the symbolic portrayals and the verbal phantasies of sandplay becomes involved in a deeply meaningful ritual. We are affected by these symbolic portrayals, and our own symbolic life is activated. A true symbol is always experienced by the patient and by the therapist, unless the therapist insists on reducing the symbol to a purely causalistic system and thus squeezes all the juice out of it. The interest in sandplay has spread, not only because it is such an effective tool in the healing process, but also because the therapist is touched so deeply by the experience.

I remember the first time that I ever saw Mrs. Kalff's slide series. It was many years ago, and I had already been using a sandbox in my work with children—using it, though, in an interpretive way, setting up scenes, making suggestions. When I first saw Mrs. Kalff's work; when I saw the evolution of imagery in a particular child, I felt as though I had come home. Here was someone who could let a development take place, who related to the child with the deepest warmth and connection, but who could allow the symbolic life to live its own way. One becomes involved even by watching the development of these symbols on slides—let alone having the privilege of seeing them in one's office.

I must warn those of you who are therapists that the use of the sandbox is an expensive disease to catch. Once you start building sandboxes, making shelves, and, particularly, once you start buying figures, you are hopelessly ensnared in the joys of the playful child (and I hope not compulsive child, for your sake) who wants more and more toys, ostensibly for your patients to have at their disposal.

I want to emphasize again that the use of the sandbox is not a method of therapy in and of itself. It is a tool in the hands of the artist. It is a method used in therapy to objectify the contents of imagination; what happens to the child is going to de-

pend essentially on the artist-therapist, who he is, and what he is. It is not a substitute for the multitude of decisions and interventions one has to deal with in child guidance problems. It provides us with a tool which not only facilitates therapy but also gives us a way of studying the healing and growth process itself. A physician may study a disease process by using a multitude of indicators daily to determine what is happening to the patient. He may use temperature, red-and-white blood-cell count, urinalysis, and a multitude of other variables. In studying the processes of the unconscious, we have a much harder time, and the use of the sandbox is an excellent way of observing and studying its workings.

This book represents a milestone in the emergence of a creative psychotherapy. Whether for the professional therapist or a generally interested person, this book promises to be an informative and involving work which cannot help but reach deeply into the reader's soul.

Like the fairy grandmother of our fairy tale, with her sand-play Mrs. Kalff has brought to us the refreshing fragrance of the mystery of life. In a time when science is supposed to solve all mysteries, she again makes life an eternal mystery, and the gift to each of us is an invisible ball of thread which we cannot see but can only feel; the core of that ball resides, for each of us, in that deep image-producing center of our being which so powerfully calls to us for help in its unfolding.

Harold Stone, Ph.D.

President

C. G. Jung Institute of
Los Angeles, California

1970

SAND PLAY: A Pathway to the Psyche

Working with children and adolescents, it has become clear to me that analogies occur which can be compared to the dynamics of the individuation process during childhood as they are described by Carl G. Jung. I would like to outline these findings with several case stories of development as they have happened in my playroom; first, however a few clarifications are necessary.

The results of my observations are in agreement with the psychological experience that the Self directs the psychic developmental process from the time of birth. The "Self," according to Jung, consists of "the sum of its conscious and unconscious, given facts (data)."¹ Man is born as a totality which, according to Eric Neumann is kept preserved for the time being within the mother's Self.² All the requirements of the newborn infant that make a direct appeal to the maternal instincts in general, such as appeasement of hunger, shelter from cold, etc. which are met by the bodily mother. We call this the phase of mother-child unity in which the child experiences an unconditional security and a sense of safety through motherly love.

After one year the Self of the child—that is to say, the center of his totality—separates itself from that of the mother. The child experiences security more and more in the relationship to the mother; in her caresses and displays of tenderness. A relationship of trust grows out of this experience.

The security which is the result of this first relationship is the basis of the third phase, which begins around the end of the sec-

¹ C. G. Jung, *Symbols of Transformation, Collected Works, Vol. 5* (New York: Pantheon Books, Inc., 1967).

² Erich Neumann, *The Child* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1973).

and year of life and at the beginning of the third. During this phase, the center of the Self, is stabilized in the unconscious of the child and begins to manifest itself in symbols of wholeness.

Thus, the child plays, draws, paints or speaks in the ancient language of symbols with which adult man has, consciously or unconsciously, throughout the ages and in all cultures, expressed his wholeness. These symbols are either human figures of godly content, like the figures of Christ, Mary, Buddha, etc. or they are of a geometric or numerical nature, such as the circle or the square. We accept the validity of these symbols of the wholeness of the human psyche because they have occurred everywhere without exception from the earliest times of man. The circle, particularly as a “symbol of perfection and of the perfect being,” is, as Jung puts it, “a well known expression of heaven, sun, God and for the ideal of man and the soul” [illustrations 1, 2, 3 and 4]. The square, my experience has shown, appears when wholeness is developing.

I have observed that in psychic development, the entity of

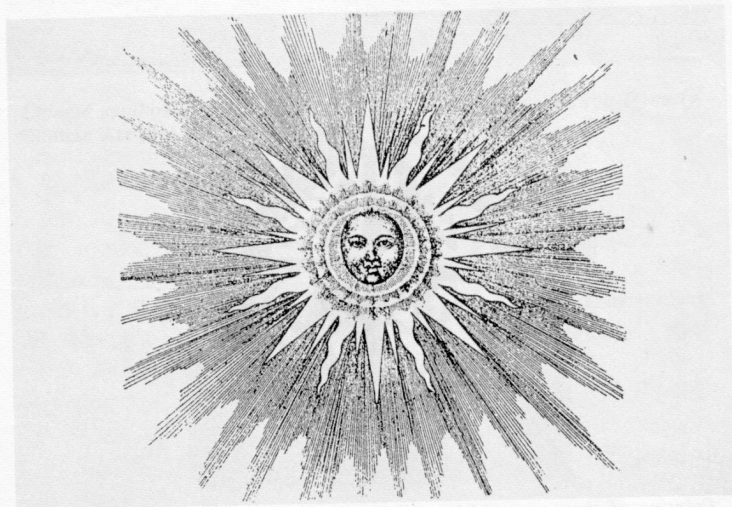
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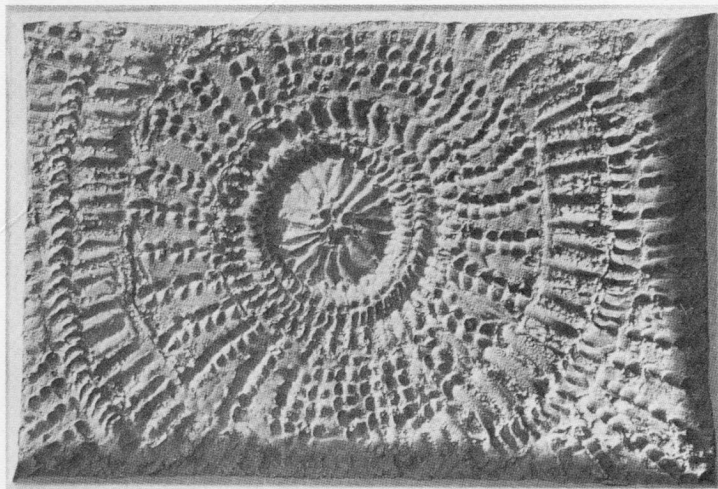
1 Circle, triangle and square as original forms of the universe, Sengai's The World of Zen.



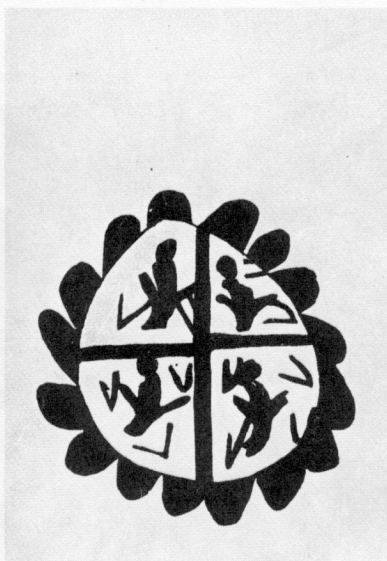
2 Sand picture "Circle in Sand," done by 11-year-old boy.



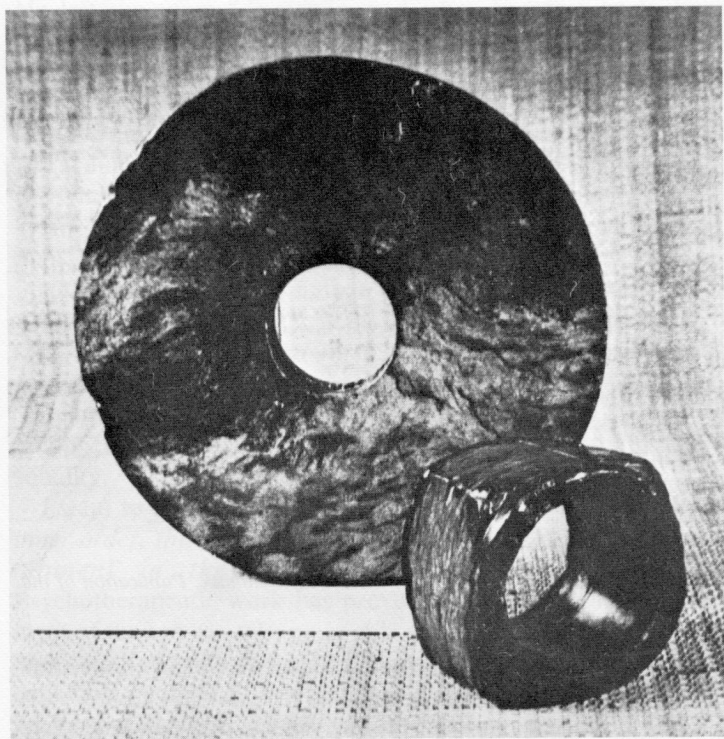
3 Sun as image of God, Jung's Symbol of Transformation.



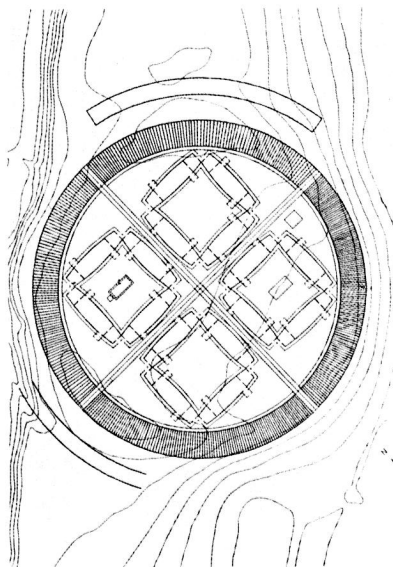
4 Sand picture "Sun" of 15-year-old boy.



5 Painting of three-year-old boy (Collection of Rhoda Kellogg, San Francisco).



- 6 *Chinese symbols for heaven (round) and earth (square), Chou-Dynasty.*
Chinese Art by MacKenzie.



Excavation of a settlement of the Viking time, Denmark. Publication of the Danish National Museum.

four appears before the symbol of the circle or in connection with the circle [illustrations 5, 6 and 7].

My ideas were confirmed a few years ago in San Francisco when I saw Rhoda Kellogg's collection of children's artwork. During her many years as director of a nursery school, she collected thousands of drawings and finger paintings by children from two to four years of age. An enormous number of these pictures showed the familiar well-known symbols of wholeness.

Such symbols appear not only in drawings and paintings of children, but also in their verbal communication. A three-year-old boy asked me one day, "If it is true that the earth is round and that God can see everybody, does that mean He is like a circle?". Over each of his drawings, on the upper side of the picture, he drew a blue line from one end to the other. When I asked what the lines meant, he answered that it was God. These lines, each a very small part of an enormous circle, told of his conception.

Another boy of about the same age once discovered some tin

figures on my piano. He positioned them to form a full circle. He left the room for awhile, and when he came back, he brought a small, white porcelain dove and put it behind a photograph which was on the piano. When I asked him what the dove was doing in this hiding place, he answered, "We can't see God either."

✓ Through such statements we can see the numinous content of the symbol. The circle is not only a geometrical form, it is also a symbol that brings to light something which lives invisibly in man. Symbols speak for the inner, energy-laden pictures, of the innate potentials of the human being which, when they are manifested, always influence the development of man. These symbols of a numinous or religious content tell of an inner drive for spiritual order which allow the relationship to the deity. This order gives man an inner security and insures for him, among other things, the development of his inherent personality.

I want to emphasize that *the manifestation of the Self, this inner order, this pattern for wholeness, is the most important moment in the development of the personality.* Psychotherapeutic work has proven, that a healthy development of the ego can take place only as a result of the successful manifestation of the Self, whether as a dream symbol or as a depiction in the sandbox. Such a manifestation of the Self seems to guarantee the development and consolidation of the personality.

✓ On the other hand, in the case of a weak or neurotic ego development, I assume with certainty that this manifestation of the Self (through a symbol) has failed to appear. This may happen because the necessary motherly protection has not been given, or because the self-manifestation has been crucially disturbed by external influences such as war, illness, or lack of understanding from the environment in the child's earliest development. Therefore, I aim to give the child's Self the possibility of constellating and manifesting itself in therapy. And I try, through the transference, to protect it and to stabilize the relationship between the Self and the ego. This is possible within the psychotherapeutic relationship because it corresponds to the natural tendency of the psyche to constellate itself at the moment when a *free and sheltered space* is created.

This free space occurs in the therapeutic situation when the therapist is able to accept the child fully, so that he or she, as a person, is a part of everything going on in the room just as much as is the child himself. When a child feels that he is not alone—not only in his distress but also in his happiness—he then feels free but still protected, in all his expressions. Why is this relationship of confidence so important? Under certain circumstances, the situation of the first phase, the one of the mother-child unity, can be restored. This psychic situation can establish an inner peace which contains the potential for the development of the total personality, including its intellectual and spiritual aspects.

It is the role of the therapist to perceive these powers and, like the guardian of a precious treasure, protect them in their development. For the child, the therapist represents as a guardian, the space, the freedom and at the same time, the boundaries. The unique boundary of each development is meaningful because a transformation of psychic energy can occur only *within the boundaries of the individual*.

Gerhard Terstegen, a 17th-century mystic and pastor, lived by the following principle: "Whoever deals with souls must be like a nursemaid who leads the child by a halter and who only protects it from dangers and falls, but otherwise must leave the child to go its own way." It seems to me that he was saying that no unambiguous theories exist for the cure of souls, but that one should recognize the uniqueness of each person so that with the help of wise guidance, free development of the individuality can be guaranteed.

Development under the care of a therapist can be compared to the goal set by Pestalozzi in his work on education, *How Gertrud Teaches Her Children*, where he said that through genuine love by the mother, the child finds his way to inner unity and thus gains access to the divine.³

According to my experience, a healthy ego can only develop on the basis of the total security of the child; therefore I must assume that in case of a weak ego, the manifestation of the Self, as a symbol, which is normally observed at the ages of two to three years, had not taken place. Amazingly enough, I have

³ J. H. Pestalozzi, *Wie Gertrud ihre Kinder lehrt*, Jung's Collected Works, Vol. 9 (Zurich: Racher, 1945).

found that where the symbolic manifestation of the Self was made possible during childhood, it can often be recovered to a certain degree in therapy. This recovery can occur at any stage of life.

Jung himself says:

*In my experience it is of considerable practical importance that the symbols aiming at wholeness should be correctly understood by the doctor. They are the remedy with whose help neurotic dissociations can be repaired, by restoring to the conscious mind a spirit and an attitude which from time to time immemorial have been felt as solving and healing in their effects. They are representations collectives which facilitate the much-needed union of conscious and unconscious. This union cannot be accomplished either intellectually or in a purely practical sense, because in the former case the instincts rebel, and in the latter case, reason and morality. Every dissociation that falls within the category of the psychogenic neurosis is due to a conflict of this kind, and the conflict can only be resolved through the symbol.*⁴

In this sense, we can also understand Bachofen when he writes: "That is precisely the great dignity of the symbol, that it allows, and even stimulates, different degrees of comprehension, and leads from the truths of the physical life to those of a higher spiritual order."⁵ The symbol embodies an image of a content transcending consciousness and points to the eternal foundation of our nature given us by God. Once recognized and experienced, it leads man to the actual dignity of his existence as a human being.

The symbol plays a great role in the sand play therapy, which I have expanded, based on the Lowenfeld's *World Technique*.⁶ I use a sandbox with dimensions (57x72x7cm.)—that limits the player's imagination and thus acts as a regulating, protecting factor.

Hundreds of small figures of every conceivable type are provided. The child then arranges whichever figure he chooses on

⁴ C. G. Jung, *Psychology and Religion*, "General Remarks on Symbolism," Collected Works, Vol. 11 (New York: Pantheon Books, Inc., 1963), p.191.

⁵ J. J. Bachofen, *Mutterrecht and Urreligion* (Leipzig: Kroner, 1926).

⁶ Ruth Bowyer, *Lowenfeld World Technique: Studies in Personality* (New York: Pergamon Press, Inc., 1970).

the sand. The sand picture which is produced by the child can be understood as a three-dimensional representation of some aspect of his psychic situation. An unconscious problem is played out in the sandbox, just like a drama; the conflict is transposed from the inner world to the outer world and made visible. This game of fantasy influences the dynamics of the unconscious in the child and thus affects his psyche.

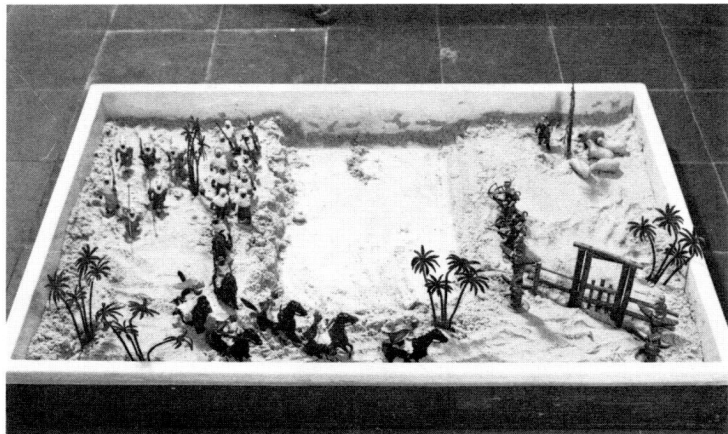
The analyst interprets for himself the symbols emerging in the course of a series of sand pictures. The therapist's understanding of the problem which emerges in the picture often produces an atmosphere of trust between the analyst and the child, something like the original mother-child-unity, which exerts a healing influence. It is not necessary to communicate the therapist's insight to the child in words. We are dealing here with the previously mentioned *experience of the symbol in the free and sheltered space*. Under certain circumstances, however, the pictures are interpreted to the child in an easily understandable way that is connected with his life situation. With the help of the exterior picture, the inner problem is made visible and brings about the next step in development.

In addition, the details and composition of the pictures give the therapist an indication of the path to follow in the treatment. Frequently, the initial picture gives information about the situation and contains, hidden in the symbols, the goal to be aimed at: the realization of the Self. In this process, new energies which lead to the formation of a healthy ego development are freed.

An eight-year-old boy has represented the normal development of these energies very nicely in a sand picture [illustration 8]. In the upper right side of the picture the Self is embodied in the good shepherd with the sheep. Dark foreign powers (Moroccans) in orderly rows move toward the space which can be regarded as representing the boy's inner peace. The powers are armed. The boy remarked, however, "Actually they wouldn't need to be armed," sensing he could cope with them.

My experience coincides with Erich Neumann's theory of the stages of ego-development⁷. These are: 1) the animal, vegetative stage; 2) the fighting stage; and 3) the adaptation to the collec-

⁷ Erich Neumann, *The Child* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1973).



tive. In the first phase, the ego expresses itself chiefly in pictures which animals and vegetation predominate. The next stage brings battles, which appear again and again, especially in puberty. By now, the child is so strengthened that he can take upon himself the battle with external influences and he can come to grips with them. Finally, he is admitted to the environment as a person and becomes a member of the collective.

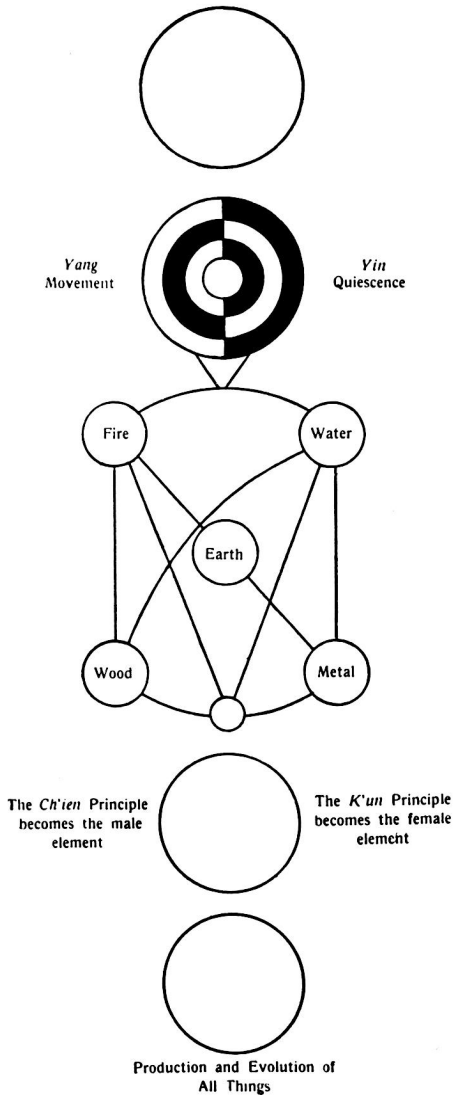
While studying Chinese thought, I came across a diagram which, it seems to me, corresponds to our viewpoint [illustration 9]. It is the diagram of Chou-Tun-Yi, a philosopher of the Sung period, who lived around the year 1000 AD. The beginning of all things is shown in a circle, in which I see an analogy to the Self at birth. A second circle shows the interfusing action of yin and yang which produces the five elements. I am inclined to relate this circle to what I have said about the manifestation of the Self. It contains the germ of those energies which lead to the formation of the ego and the development of personality [illustrations 10 and 11]. Just as the five elements arise from this constellation, the personality develops around the centering point of the ego. I equate this step with development in the first half of life. Also, in our tradition, five is also the number of the natural man [illustrations 12 and 13]. Here, man is seen as a pentagram with his head and outstretched arms and legs—a microcosm in the macrocosm.

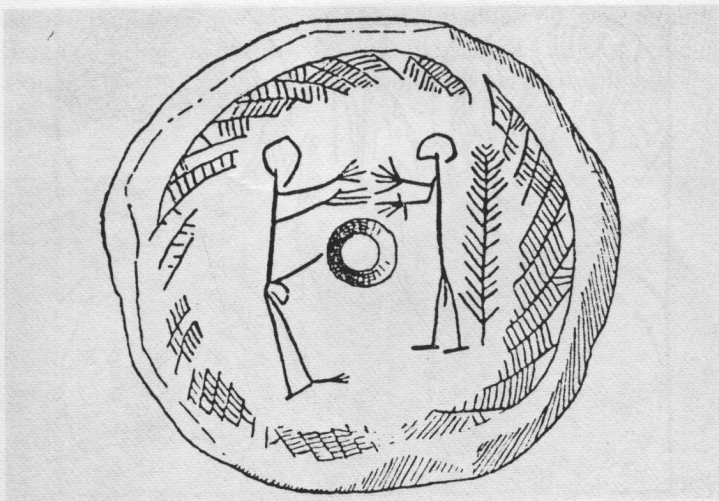
The third circle could be compared with the manifestation of

CHINESE PHILOSOPHY

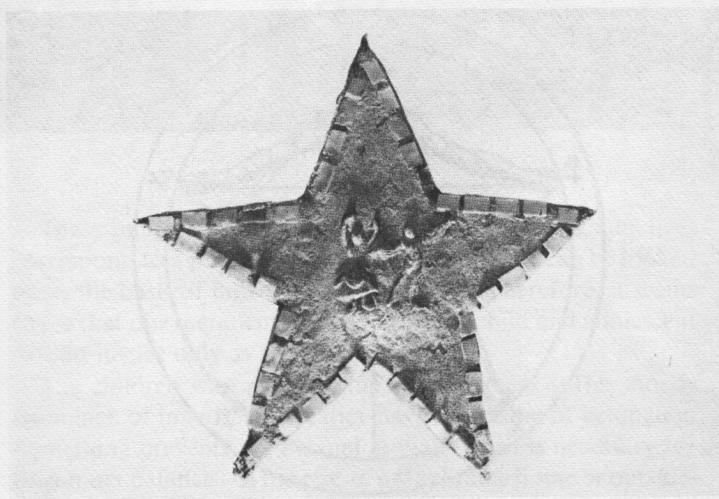
Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate

The Ultimateless!
Yet also the Supreme Ultimate!

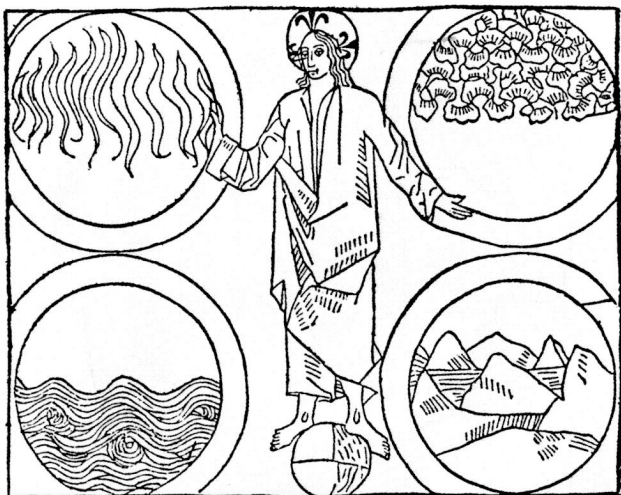




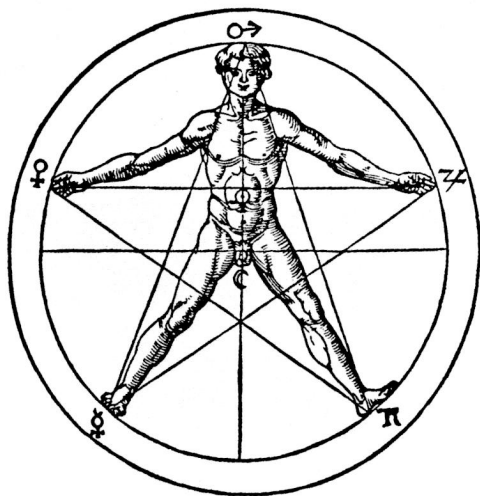
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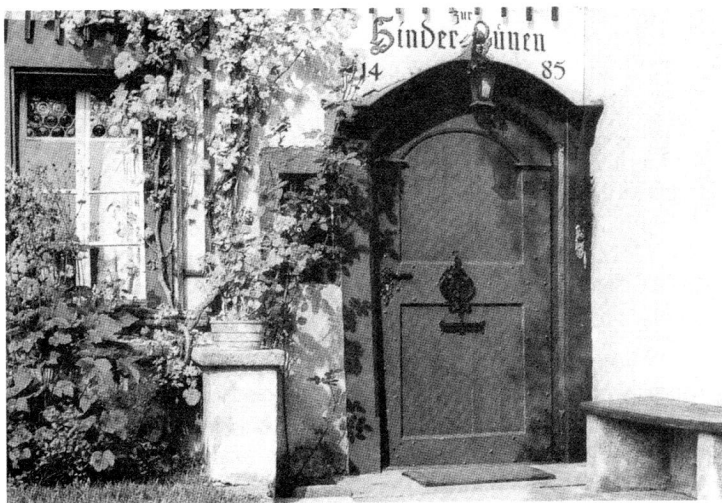


12



13

the Self in the individuation process during the second half of life. In the fourth circle, I see the ending as opposed to the beginning: the end of the movement which leads from life to death. Following the law of transformation, on which the diagram is based, death—just like the sacrifice of a psychic situation lived to its conclusion—holds the germ of new life.



14

These images may show us that in all traditions, our lives correspond to a physical and psychic flow which can be looked on as the basis of individual development. Therefore, it seems to me that our therapeutic efforts with the child and adolescent will do justice only as seen from this view.

The children who come to me for treatment suffer mostly from lack of inner security; they have no feeling of belonging. Something prevents the normal growth which is necessary for their inner balance—it may be an unfavorable home or outside-the-home situation. Because of this, I believe that it is very important not to separate the place of my practice from the environment and atmosphere of my home where it occurs. When my heavy entrance door closes (my house was first constructed

in 1485)—[illustration 14], the child enters an old, paneled room in which a magnificent tile stove is quite prominent. It is easy to climb a few built-in steps leading to the top of the stove. The child can now do what he feels like doing. He is allowed to sit or lie on the stove, to look down on the room or out through the window, where he can watch the birds which play and bathe in the little fountain in my garden. He can look at some picture books or read magazines. He may also feel encouraged to investigate the unusual objects and pictures in my old house. Its irregular order of rooms and staircases heightens its interest; small children often love to play hide-and-seek, while the older ones sometimes become adventurous and look for hidden treasures. If possible, I give them free range of the house. Often I take them to the basement, where they investigate the metre-thick walls to see if there are subterranean passages, or we go to the immense attic with its secret double floors which invite them to explorations. The children are always looking for something hidden; a treasure which they would like to find in themselves—which they have been unable to discover so far.

My house was constructed hundreds of years ago on rock; its rooms were not built and shaped with yardstick and compass, but grew according to a natural law. This house offers an atmosphere which corresponds to the natural temperament of young people. Even more, the child comes upon a world which is completely open to him, and where he *is totally welcomed and accepted*. As he enters the playroom where the sandtray is waiting, the chain of tension, which perhaps arose by wondering: "What will I find, what will I have to do?", is broken.

There are many things in my playroom: paints, clay, mosaic, plaster of Paris, etc. lay invitingly open on a large table. The sandtrays are close by and on a shelf are hundreds of little figures made of lead and other materials: people—not only of various types and professions of modern times, but also figures from past centuries, Negroes, fighting Indians, etc. There are also wild and domestic animals, houses of different styles, trees, bushes, flowers, fences, traffic signals, cars, trains, old carriages, boats; in short, everything which exists in the world as well as in fantasy.

All of the items listed above are the material which Dr.

Lowenfeld has collected for her *World Play*⁸. She understood to place herself in the world of the child; with ingenious intuition, she created a game which enables the child to build a world—*his* world—in a sandbox [illustrations 15a, 15b]. The size of the box corresponds exactly to what the eye can encompass. From among the numerous objects, the child chooses those which particularly appeal to him and which are meaningful. He forms hills, tunnels, plains, lakes and rivers in the sand, just as he views the world from his own situation, and he allows the figures to act as he experiences them in his fantasy.

The child has absolute freedom in determining what to construct, which figures to choose and how to use them. The same limitations that are prerequisite for genuine freedom in the real world, are present in the measurements of the sandbox, which are scaled down to man's size, thereby setting up limits as to what can be represented and providing a frame wherein the transformation can take place. The child experiences, quite unconsciously, what I call a *free*, and at the same time, a *protected space*. Using several cases I try to illustrate the experience which occurs within this space. I am aware, however, that in order to protect the patients, I had to omit certain information.

⁸ Margaret Lowenfeld, *The Non-Verbal Thinking of Children and Its Place in Psychology* (London: The Institute of Child Psychology, 1964).



15a



15b

EPILOG

I have chosen some cases from my practice and tried to show how an unbearable block in the psychic development of a child or an adolescent can be released, allowing him to grow normally again. It is mostly of no avail to treat such an arrested development with reason alone. We must try to understand the symbolic language with which the many-sided psyche expresses itself in images and dreams. Thus, we can reach the psyche's creative seeds which are able to effect a transformation and change in a child's relationship to life.

In all cases presented here, it was possible, sooner or later, to reach the higher developmental stage which was usually hinted at symbolically in the patient's first picture. I could mention many more examples, but I want to show only a few typical processes.

Occasionally, situations were encounters where the expected cure was not achieved, because it can happen that we do not succeed to bring about a new order of the energies in the course of therapy. When dealing with such irrational events—as presented by the psychic phenomena which are based on a hidden process—it is often very difficult for the parents of troubled children to have the necessary understanding and patients to wait for a complete cure. This is especially the case if, after a short time, signs of improvement become evident.

The course of psychic development could be best compared with flowing water. A commentary in the I Ching says:

It flows on and on, merely filling at the places it traverses; it does not shy away from any dangerous place, nor from any sudden plunge; nothing can make it lose its

own intrinsic essence. It remains true to itself in all circumstances. Thus, truthfulness in difficult conditions will bring about the penetration of a situation within one's heart. And once a situation is mastered from within the heart, the success of our exterior actions will come about all by itself.

When we succeed with this work, of bringing about an inner harmony which defines a personality, we can talk of grace.