

Twenty Points to be Considered in the Interpretation of a Sandplay Martin Kalff

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The present reflections on sandplay interpretation resulted from some need for guidelines on interpretation expressed by students of the 1992 course on Sandplay for Americans in Switzerland.

A. 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" (in Erich Neumann, *Zur Psychologie des Weiblichen*, Kindler Verlag 1975). He calls it matriarchal consciousness" (In relationship to Sandplay it is discussed by E. Weinrib in her book "Images of the Self", Sigo Press 1983, p. 24ff.)

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, 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" can not be fully expressed on a verbal level. This idea is similar to Margaret Lowenfeld's hypothesis of a "primary mental system" which can not be represented on the rational level of the "secondary mental system" (later called "protosystem" Lowenfeld, *The World Technique*, George Allen & Ulvin 1979 p.16/p. 272).

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 can not be reduced to words. (For a discussion of the meaning of "symbol" see C.G. Jung, *Psychological Types*, under "Definitions" the definition of symbol).

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 it is concerned with. I suggest that a verbal interpretation is successful when, although on a verbal and rational level, it is also symbolic: If it points beyond itself to the same inexpressible level of experience which is pointed to by the images

and if it helps to intuit and participate in that level. Such interpretation avoids to reduce 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 other possible ways of understanding open. It avoids to appear "all-knowing" and offers suggestions for understanding rather than the "full truth".

An interpretation has also to remain aware of the fact that the experience on the level of images is multidimensional (here the concept of "clusters" coined by Lowenfeld is very useful; *ibidem* p. 21): 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. It is most of the time 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 according to one's capability, be utilized in this process. Thus in addition to thinking also intuition, feeling and sensation should participate. Therefore 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 a hunch without being able to give a specific reason) as well as objective elements as derived from observation of the facts (for example the

biographical data of the client, statements by the client, an observation such as that there are only animals in the scene) and reasoning (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 therapists subjective evaluation and response to those facts. It is rather a form of art which skillfully 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 to the client have to be avoided. The main reason for this is that it will interfere with the spontaneity of the creative process of the client. Thus it will hinder the client to establish 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.

The interpretative skills certainly can help the therapist/counselor to 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 to understand and participate in the process of the client on a preverbal level. It 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 risk to hamper the capacity of the therapist/counselor to be 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 from misjudgment and 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/counselor 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.

B. Twenty 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. Without the intention to be complete I have gathered twenty different such aspects.

1. Any interpretation needs to take into account the **history and actual external situation** of the client. This includes also the particular clinical history of the person and the nature of his/her

pathology. The same type of scene might have a very different meaning depending on the background of the person. The developments visible on the level of the images need to be seen in relationship both to the external life situation and subjective sense of well being or suffering of the client. This includes the external progresses and changes the client is initiating as well as positive and negative external influences from external situations on the client and his/her reactions to them. We must, however, be aware of the fact, that many of the developments and changes which become expressed in the Sandplay process are anticipatory and may not be realized in the external life until a later point.

2. 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, record of non-verbal 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 etc. Important indications for the meaning of a particular sandplay can also be gained by dreams of the client.

3. 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**. (Either to the scene as a whole or individual elements in it). Does a scene strike us as cold, warm, joyful, sad, overwhelming, 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 bring connections with these feelings and our own life situation and history to consciousness. This will help us to 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.

4. 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, empty pictures may point to depression, a lack of inner energy. On the other side, 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 the new one's 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 (in particular when the used sections 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 over a number of trays made how the use of space changes and develops.

5. **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", that the dry sand allows no solid forms, has a transient character etc.

In the use of the sand we observe whether it has been left untouched or whether the contact with it evoked feelings (for example "It feels like caressing a body") or not etc. A reluctance to touch the sand and move the sand can be indicative of fear from unconscious contents or difficulty to relate 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.

6. Basic shapes in the sand and arrangement of the objects.

Here we observe whether for example round or shapes with sharp corners are dominant. 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, or else also 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 also on the level of 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?

7. Dominant colors. It can be useful to consider the colors which dominate in a sandplay. Many colors can be indicative of life, intensive red not mitigated by other colors can be seen in trays of depressed persons (probably as a longing for being alive). A not yet published study of the color 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 (more plant like, "vegetative" inner attitude dominated by the archetype of the great mother) whereas the red brings activity and emotions (ranging, depending on the quality of red, from burning emotions, anger, passion up to warm feelings).

8. Use of 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 for a long time avoids doing this, 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 are 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 in a hospital. How these variant uses of the blue ground should be interpreted depends a lot on the content.

9. Use of figures. Here we observe whether figures have been used or not and if figures have been used whether we find the exclusive use of a specific category of figures. Avoidance of use of figures can in certain cases be seen as a sign of defense (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. Certain deeper, inner levels of consciousness have a more abstract quality which a client might want to express without figures. If figures are used we need to observe whether for example exclusively humans and no animals, or only female figures, only peaceful figures etc. have been used. 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).

10. 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 restriction 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 mistaken 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 he/she 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 (the longest possible spatial distance between two objects in the tray). The figures thus placed sometimes illustrate opposite qualities which need to be realized.

11. 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, seemingly random placement of figures, confused battle scenes where it is not clear who fights against whom up to well organized scenes with clear separations and divisions (for example Zoo's which 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 an assemblage consisting for example of a fixture of animals, cars, dragons and humans etc.

12. Relationship among the figures and parts of the scene.

It is important to observe whether the used figures are related with each other, interacting or whether they stand more by themselves, 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 dominate and how they change in the course of the process (mother child/ father child/ male-female/human-animal/ domination/ submission/ aggression/ friendship etc.).

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 also in contents the fragmented scenes differ strongly among each other. In such cases a process may gradually move towards the capacity to create one entire scene with related parts instead of a scene with many unrelated parts.

In terms of relationship we might also observe 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, there is more to be gained to move from one side to the other.

13. Creating faces etc. in the sand/making figures from clay etc. Sometimes, if a client feels the need of a very personal expression of him/herself they may use the sand to form faces or bodies, make or bring their own figures.

14. 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, streets with traffic), or is there an absence of any movement or even blocked movement? (like a traffic jam/many horses in a very narrow fence etc.). (Margaret Lowenfeld's first case, the case of a depressed child, in her book "The World Technique" illustrates well the development from blocked systems towards more possibility of movement of energy along with the emotional changes of the child). Thus we can ask the question: Are there repeatedly closed systems (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 etc.

15. **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.

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

17. **Interpretation of the symbolic value.** This point refers to the interpretation of the specific symbolic meaning of individual figures or motives in a scene. This requires a thorough knowledge of the study of symbols in fairy tales, mythology, religion and dreams.

We need to be aware that any symbol may have different poles of meaning, positive and negative meanings and beyond that even 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 (frequently offering important information) should not be applied blindly and 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 made by the client are to be taken very serious. This does, however, not exclude the possibility that a certain meaning of the figure (gained from a study of its various meanings in mythology etc.) has been intended in an unconscious way by the client which goes beyond his/her conscious associations.

18. 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 observe precisely 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.

19. Interpretation in terms of inner developmental patterns. Based on a careful application of point twelve we then

might become 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" (Sigo Press, Boston 1980) and E. Weinrib's "Images of the Self." Especially important is the capacity to recognize the so called "Manifestation of the Self" and the subsequent steps of the ego development, 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 to the developmental stages of consciousness in a modern person.

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" (Dutton Paperback, New York 1976) and in the stages of infantile development as described by Freud, Erikson and developmental Psychology.

20. Interpretation in terms of relationship between client and counselor. The Sandplays can also be seen as a reflection of the relationship between client and therapist/counselor. The manifestation of the self for example can be seen as the natural

outcome of a relationship determined by the quality of the free and protected space. I suggest to see it also as the expression of the so called "deep transference", a relationship between the self of the client and the self of the therapist/counselor (it has been Professor Kawai from Japan who 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 internal.)

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/counselor. On one side they may carry the clients projections of feelings conditioned by his/her parents and other influential persons. On the other side they may reflect accurately qualities of the therapist/counselor, 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 "co-transference" (a term suggested by Kay Bradway to express the simultaneous character of actions and reactions in the client-therapist relationship involving

both conscious and unconscious, positive and negative feelings on both sides. Cf. her article "Transference and Countertransference in Sandplay Therapy", Journal of Sandplay Therapy, volume 1, number 1, 1991; Journal of Sandplay Therapy, 331 Thistle Circle, Martinez, CA 94553, USA).

The above mentioned points represent a non-exhaustive choice. 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 a few words are the best way to express one's appreciation of the inner value or interpretation of a particular sandplay.