

In Baum, Nehama, & Weinberg, Brenda (Eds.).
(2002). *In the hands of creation: Sandplay images of
birth and rebirth*. Toronto: Muki Baum.



Bridge to a New Millennium

Rie Rogers Mitchell

At least once a year I teach my favorite class at California State University, Northridge, where I've been a professor for almost thirty years. This class trains graduate students to work therapeutically with children and adolescents. In one particular class session, I presented a play therapy case that included slides of the child's Sandplay scenes. As I was showing the slides of the sandpictures, I explained that the child's work in the sand helped me to perceive and understand how the entire therapeutic process was progressing. The particular Sandplay scenes I presented were especially dramatic and showed strong transformative energy. Following this presentation one student expressed her confusion, "I love Sandplay and it speaks to me on a deep, intuitive level, and I see what you are talking about when I'm here. But, on a day-to-day basis, in my internship working with people I continue to feel confused when I try to understand what's going on in a client's trays. I want to know more about what my clients are expressing in their trays and what it all means."

This student's comment about feeling confused when observing sandpictures is a familiar one. I certainly have heard similar comments many times from students and colleagues and I have felt that way myself at times. Comments such as this one, as well as my own need to bring greater clarity to what I see in the pictures of my own clients, as well as those of students I supervise, prompted me to begin a quest a number of years ago with a colleague, Harriet Friedman, to discover ways of better understanding what we observe in Sandplay pictures. Of course, even with all the clarity we hope to bring to the understanding of sandpictures, I fully understand that much of the unconscious is and will continue to be a mystery.

Historically we have used our intuitive and feeling capacities to understand pictures, and I believe that has served us well for a long period of time. The founder of Sandplay Therapy, Dora Kalff, was particularly gifted in the intuitive realm. I

have observed that most Sandplay Therapists have highly developed intuitive functions. But now, today, as we are crossing the threshold to a new millennium, I believe that it is time for us to value and cultivate our other capacities so that we can continue to grow as Sandplay practitioners and reach a wider therapeutic audience.

Jung's (1971) model of individuation comes to mind wherein he speaks of developing all four psychological/perceptual functions over time: intuition, feeling, thinking and sensation. Jung talks about the need to focus on less developed parts as we mature. Based on Jung's perspective, it appears to me that it is now important to incorporate a less prominent function in Sandplay works, that of the thinking function, to complement the intuitive function that has been used so effectively by Sandplay therapists. In this spirit of moving toward fuller development, I will utilize a thinking-oriented or cognitive approach in discussing the research Harriet and I have done over the past five years observing and processing our own clients' pictures as well as other case studies. For some of us, the research-oriented thinking approach that I am going to use will not feel completely comfortable. For others, it may be a satisfying relief and may address a need to have a cognitively clearer understanding of Sandplay scenes.

I realize that many different lenses can be used to look at sandpictures, including the archetypal and developmental lenses. I will emphasize how themes of healing and positive transformation, rather than wounding or negative developments, manifest and develop in a Sandplay series of pictures created by one client over time.

I define a "Sandplay theme" as a principal visual image or set of images in a Sandplay picture. In our work, positive themes of transformation are images of transition, metamorphosis, or change that suggest healing is taking place.

Over a series of pictures, Sandplay themes change and develop: sometimes they expand and are amplified; other times they diminish or are abbreviated. Some themes are present throughout an entire Sandplay series, while others are dramatically expressed and then never reappear.

Watching Sandplay themes evolve over time can give us clues about how the therapeutic work is progressing. Themes of positive transformation in a picture might suggest that therapy is moving in the direction of healing and health. Generally, these images are more prominent during latter phases of therapy, while wounding themes are more apparent in earlier stages. Watching the themes unfold in Sandplay is much like listening through a stethoscope to monitor/observe a patient's heartbeat. You can get a sense of what is happening in the core or center of the client's psyche by observing how themes progress.

I prefer the thematic approach in looking at Sandplay scenes because it can be supported by research and it is also a gentle, non-diagnostic way of understanding pictures that is congruent with the non-intrusive process of Sandplay.

In our research, we have observed that images of healing and transformation cluster naturally into at least eight thematic categories (Table 1). Emergence of these major thematic categories gives us indications of how therapy is progressing, as well as how Sandplay is activating the psyche.

In addition to the eight themes listed in Table 1, two other themes have been suggested by members of Sandplay Therapists of America. One of the themes was proposed by Barbara Weller, whose Minnesota advanced Sandplay study group selects a Sandplay case each year to analyze in depth. To study their case, they have used the healing or transformation themes described in Table 1, as well as the wounding themes that Harriet and I have developed. Based upon her group's research, Barbara proposed that two more healing themes should be added (Table 1a).

Themes of Transformation	
Journey	Movement along a path or around a center, e.g., a knight follows a trail, an Indian paddles a canoe.
Bridging	Connection between elements, e.g., a ladder joins earth and tree, a bridge links a man and a woman.
Vitality	Alive, intense energy, e.g., organic growth present, machines work on a task, airplanes take off from a runway.
Going Deeper	Discovery of a deeper dimension, e.g., a clearing is made, a treasure is unearthed, a well is dug, a lake is explored.
Birthing	Emergence of new elements, e.g., a baby is born, a flower opens, a bird incubates eggs
Reconstructing	Elements creatively changed and/or used, e.g., sand and/or miniatures are moved, stacked, and contoured in original ways; a scene is built from unusual objects.
Centering	Elements aesthetically balanced in the center of the tray, e.g., union of opposites in/near the center, mandala created in the middle of the tray
Integrating	Congruent, organized idea encompassing entire tray; unity of expression, e.g., a day at the zoo, a baseball game, an abstract construction unifying the whole sandpicture

Table 1: Themes of Transformation

Independently, Lauren Cunningham suggested both of these themes, and Gretchen Hegeman proposed the spirituality theme. I have not confirmed their suggestions by examining the play cases from which Harriet and I extracted our original eight themes, but I do think that the themes of nurturing and spirituality may

well be found in these cases and, thus, added to our original themes.

Additional Themes of Transformation	
Nurturing	Sandplay creations that contain elements suggesting that nourishment is being provided to support growth and development, e.g., a mother feeding babies, supportive family groups, suckling animals and presence of food.
Spirituality	Scenes that include sacred elements, such as supernatural beings or sacred objects.

Table 1a: Additional Themes of Transformation

Now I want to shift from discussing Sandplay themes to presenting selected pictures from a case that illustrate how themes unfold and develop during a Sandplay series. I have received permission from “Brandon” and his parents to present his case.

My client, Brandon, created his Sandplay scenes during a little over two years of therapy. Table 2 indicates an analysis of themes present in each of his Sandplay creations and one project Brandon constructed during play therapy. Often Brandon made two or three pictures that were very similar and then moved on to create a picture with different themes.

	Date	Journey	Bridging	Vitality	Deepening	Birthing	Reconstructing	Centering	Integrating
1	9-24-92								
2	10-29-92		X	X	X				
3	11-06-92	X							
4	1-07-93		X						
5	2-25-93			X	X				X
6	3-18-93		X						X
7 & 8	4-26-93		X	X	X				X
9	8-09-93		X					X	X
10	12-06-93			X			X		
11	2-28-94			X		X	X		
12	9-01-94		X	X		X			
13	9-07-94		X	X				X	X
14	9-23-94						X	X	
15	10-07-94	X	X	X					X
16 Play Therapy	12-02-94							X	
17	12-16-94	X		X					X

Table 2: Themes of transformation in the Sandpictures of Brandon

Brandon was eight years old when he began therapy. He had experienced many traumas in his early years, beginning with his mother's induced labor and a long, difficult birth experience. After the delivery, his mother was distracted and despondent over a deteriorating marriage and consequently had difficulty in responding to Brandon's needs. His father was mainly absent, working hard and perhaps wanting to stay away from a home filled with turmoil. At ages two and five, Brandon had near-drowning experiences, and at age seven he threatened suicide. Earlier, at four years old, his parents had divorced and soon married other partners. By the time I saw him in therapy at the age of eight, Brandon had spent over half of his life going back and forth every three or four days between his parents' homes under a joint custody agreement. Brandon's unsettled life was further confounded by his parents' opposite styles of parenting. His mother was excessively permissive and easygoing, and perhaps even irresponsible at times. On the other hand, his father had an authoritarian parenting style and was very strict and sometimes even harsh.

When they brought Brandon to therapy, he was having great difficulty leaving his mother's home to be at his father's. There, he had trouble going to sleep and he sometimes complained of physical symptoms including nausea and headaches. In addition, he seemed very angry and unhappy, and his moods shifted dramatically from highs to lows, from anger to crying, from fear to bravado.

Brandon refused to be told what to do or be corrected in any way. When this inevitably happened, he would often overreact with abusive language and temper tantrums. He was a very anxious child with many fears and that, at times, immobilized him. Brandon was struggling academically, and after testing, the school found that he had a reading disability.

I gave him the following multi-axial DSM-IV diagnosis:

Axis I	309.21 Separation Anxiety Disorder, early onset 315.00 Reading Disorder
Axis II	V71.09 No Diagnosis or Condition on Axis II
Axis III	Possible neurological impairment
Axis IV	Frequent change in home environment; inconsistent parenting
Axis V	GAF = 48 (on intake)

In addition to Sandplay with Brandon, I was also doing play therapy, art, board games, batakas, puppets, dress-up, and active and imaginative play.

At the beginning of his Sandplay process, Brandon persevered and his scenes were quite rigid. I wondered if there was a neurological deficiency limiting this child's activity in the sand. Although there was no strong evidence of this in his background, I knew that a difficult birth experience, near drownings and other early traumas such as he had experienced can affect neurological development. A further indicator of possible neurological involvement was his difficulty in learning to read.

I have included pictures of three scenes that illustrate the theme of journey displayed in Brandon's third picture (Fig. 1), fifteenth picture (Fig. 2) and seventeenth picture (Fig 3). The journey theme became clearer and more defined over time.

Notice the journey's direction in each of the pictures. In the third picture (Fig. 1), the journey seemed to be lacking direction. It was a vague circle, and none of the three boats had a clearly defined course. In the fifteenth picture (Fig. 2), the river defined a clear path on which rested a canoe and small boat. However, each boat was traveling in a different direction. By the final picture, the seventeenth picture (Fig. 3), both the Indian in the canoe and the honor guard are moving side by side toward the right side of the tray. Brandon was now less conflicted and his energy was focused and mobilized to move him in the direction of outer life.



Figure 1

The theme of bridging also developed during his treatment. At the beginning he placed a large bridge located in the rear of the tray, not connected clearly to anything. It appeared that Brandon's unconscious knew that something needed to be bridged, but just what was unclear. A little later in his process, in his fourth sandpicture (Table 2), he used three bridges and moved them to the front of the tray. In therapy he evidenced an increased capacity to verbalize his difficulty in making the many transitions necessary in his life. Nevertheless, problems were still evident in his sandpictures. For example, one end of a bridge is near a house while the area near the other end is empty. After a year and nine months of treatment, his ability to bridge the opposites in his life had increased tremendously. Four bridges were seen connecting two abundant sides (Sandpicture 12, Table 2). In a subsequent sandpicture (Sandpicture 13, Table 2), two bridges (one a golden bridge), connecting to a circular island in the center of the tray, suggested that Brandon was now able to contact and get support from his internal world.

The theme of centering or unification first became evident in the ninth sandpicture (Table 2), but it is somewhat diffused. From that point, the pictures became increasingly focused, centered, and integrated.

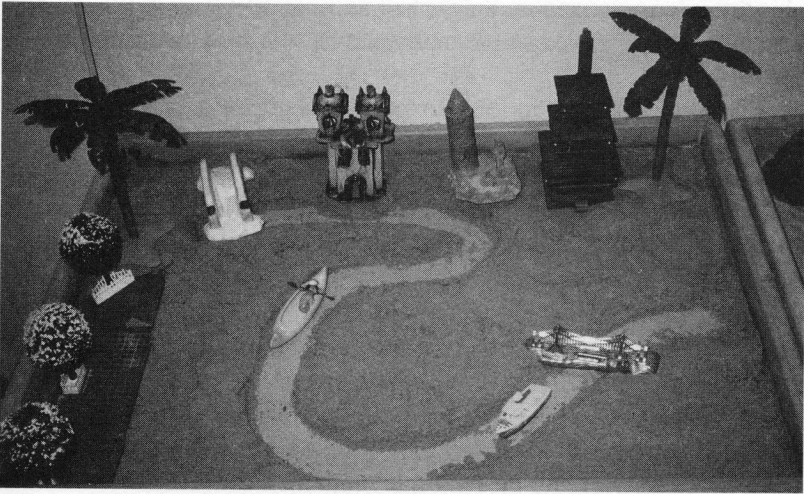


Figure 2

Referring to Table 2, one can see that Brandon's Sandplay process began and ended with journey themes. Bridging and vitality themes appeared throughout his Sandplay process. If one looks at deepening and birthing together, it appears that it was necessary for Brandon to have access to the depths before new elements could emerge. Centering was more prominent towards the end of therapy, which one would expect. His last scenes suggested integration, which typically occurs with and after sandpictures displaying centering themes.

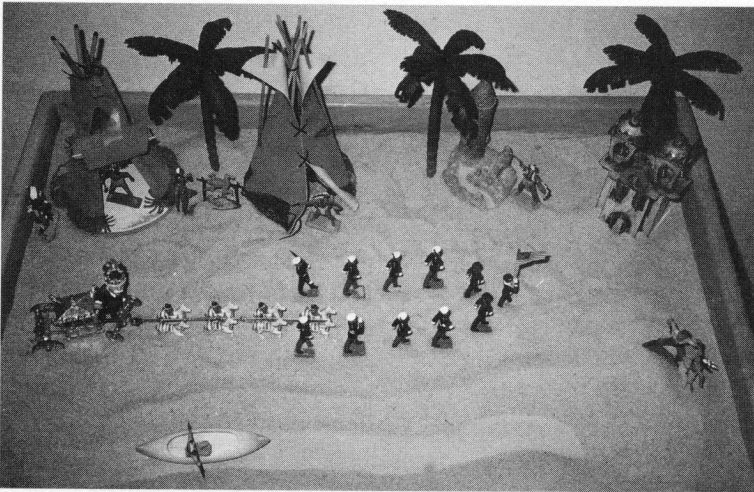


Figure 3

By the time that Brandon completed his sandpictures and his treatment, he was less anxious, worried, and reactive in his outer world. He was also more comfort-

able at his father's home, and no longer had unusual difficulty in leaving his mother. His reading had improved substantially and he was very involved and proficient in soccer.

About four years later I happened to see Brandon's parents at a school function. They reported that he was achieving very well as a freshman in high school. I was surprised to learn that each had divorced their spouses. When these further disruptions had occurred, they asked Brandon if he wanted to return to therapy. He told them that he was handling things just fine and didn't need to go. They agreed with his decision.

I hope that these Sandplay pictures of transformation themes have helped to demonstrate, in a meaningful way, the importance of integrating the analytical thinking function with the intuitive function. Integrating both functions, I believe, will enable us to expand and deepen our understanding of the inner dynamics of the psyche, as well as reinforce our ability to bring Sandplay Therapy into the larger therapeutic community during the next millennium.

Bibliography

Jung, C.G. (1971). *Psychological typology*, CW, 6. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.