

Sandplay in Spiritual Direction, Beyond Insight or Centering

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This article explores *Sandplay* as a spiritual practice that integrates the seemingly opposite traditions of east-west, mind-body, kataphatic-apophatic, and spiritual-psychological. In *Sandplay*, a directee is witnessed while creating a picture, with or without using miniatures, in a shallow, rectangular sandtray. Among the various approaches to sand imagery that exist in both psychotherapy and spiritual direction, *Sandplay* is a specific approach that synthesizes western and eastern spiritual practices with the theories of C. G. Jung. It originated with the work of Swiss Jungian analyst, and Christian-Buddhist practitioner, Dora M. Kalf.

At the root of suffering is a small heart, frightened to be here...This small unopened heart grasps and needs and struggles to control what is unpredictable...But we can never know what will happen. With wisdom we allow this not knowing to become a form of trust.

-Jack Kornfield, *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry*

What is Sandplay?

She walks into my office, slowly turning to take in the sight. To one side stand two bookshelves. No books are there. The shelves are lined with an array of items. On the lower rungs are trees, rock, shells, flowers and colored beads. Next are ones that hold farm animals, sea and safari creatures, snakes, insects, birds, dinosaurs and monsters. Above is an area with houses, furniture, food, huts, churches, temples, cars and carts. On top stand suns, moons, stars, clouds and rainbows. To the right, at eye level, is an array of mythological goddesses and gods. Below are a series of shelves with ordinary people portraying a multitude of ages, races, and activities. In front of the bookcases is a table. Sitting atop the table are two, long rectangular objects. Each one is three inches high, and covered with a cloth. An exposed corner reveals that they are wooden trays containing sand. Next to the trays is glass water pitcher, half-filled.

As new directees enter my office, I wonder about their thoughts. How do they view the miniatures and sandtrays? Often I sense unasked questions. With such an array, it would be easy to assume these 'toys' are for children, or 'artistic' types. Few people, I think, initially perceive these implements

as a form of integrative, depth prayer. Yet these are the qualities that draw me. Our era and its traditions appear deeply split. Dualities abound between the seeming opposites of mind-body, east-west, patriarchy-matriarchy and spirituality-psychology. How can we move beyond? Where might we find integrative approaches to the holy? Do they exist? *Sandplay*, I sense, provides an answer.

Yet when asked ‘What is *Sandplay*?’ I am usually perplexed. How do I begin to describe a practice that does not fit the usual categories? How do I use words to convey an experience not contained in words? How do I invite another to assume a yogi-like posture, standing on one’s head, to view the ‘known’ with radical perspective?

Before attempting that invitation, let me describe the ‘how’ of this practice. In *Sandplay* an individual is witnessed while creating a picture, with or without using miniatures, in a shallow, rectangular sandtray. Individuals may create in any way they wish. A person simply does whatever comes to her or him. Some begin with an idea. Others have no idea of what they might make. Some start by looking around at all the miniatures, others by sitting still at the tray, or placing their hands in the sand. Sometimes people keep silent while they create, at other times we chat. Sometimes a scene contains a hundred or more figures, and at other times none. Sometimes a person extensively shapes the sand, or not at all. Over a series of pictures, one may discover a preference for either dry or wet sand, or one’s use may vary between the two. At times, the creating is quick and furious, and at other times, slow and ponderous. A person is free to follow her own prompting and discover what is there in each moment. And like all meditation, the fruit of the practice grows with repetition and a patient ripening.

To open the meditation, a directee and I will step across the office to the shelves with miniatures. After removing the cloth covering the two sandtrays, I strike the Zen gong. With its reverberations, we cross an inner portal. As the directee begins to create, I take my seat a few paces away, facing her. My work is to hold her in care, care for her deepest self, her suffering, and with wonder for all that I observe. When she is ‘finished,’ she may strike the gong or invite me to do it. If she wishes, we will sit by the picture for a time. If she wishes to speak, I will act as scribe and record her thoughts as verbatim as possible. On occasion I may suggest a meditation or spiritual practice to do at home as a way of deepening her sharing. Before

we step away from the tray, I invite her to voice a prayer. She may, or may not. Depending on the moment, I may or may not.

After she leaves, a schematic sketch of the scene is drawn, listing each item and its location. Next, I take a Polaroid picture, followed by a few slide photographs. The verbatim, schematic, Polaroid, and slides ‘preserve’ her prayer for a distant time when she and I might review the series of pictures. Before taking apart the scene, I again strike the gong, praying that the picture may do its work, and bring an increase in wisdom and compassion. Then the figures are removed, the sand smoothed, and the tray covered.

Two frequently asked questions concern office set-up and the giving of photos. From the description of my office, it may be clear that the miniature collection is visually prominent. This arrangement is intentional and serves as an invitation. But it is important that the figures not be placed in ‘direct’ view. Placing them to the side or rear of where a directee sits allows each individual an option to view, or not view, the miniatures. As with any practice, this meditation suits some and not others. The second question is whether to give the directee a photo of a scene soon after it has been made. As a general rule, I do not. The reason will be more apparent when we discuss *Sandplay* principles. Simply stated, not having a picture helps the prayer remain fluid and internal rather than static and concrete. However, I encourage directees to reflect on a scene soon after a session by writing in their journal, or even sketching it from memory if they wish.

Now comes the invitation to that yogi-like posture, standing on one’s head. As we wander in this largely forgotten terrain, note the places of inner quickening, challenge and perhaps anxiety. The mechanics of *Sandplay* are deceptively simple, but its worldview is complex.

The Age of Reflective Mystery

Sandplay has roots as deep as spirituality itself. Imagine the ages. Every era and its people desire and discern Spirit. Like breath, Spirit is innate. Conscious or not conscious, we breathe every moment. ‘Bidden or not bidden, God is present.’ Each age, and its deep desire, is an expression of Spirit. And each age employs spiritual practices in concert with its desire. The names for Great Spirit are legion. *Allah, Buddha, G_d, Jesus the Christ, Kali, Krishna, Mother, and Shiva* are some of the most revered. Over time,

people in differing ages experience different aspects of *The One*. My sense is that our age is reclaiming an aspect of Great Spirit named *Mystery*.

Mystery has an ancient lineage, and its own revered practices. In earlier times when this aspect was honored, discernment was more ‘being’ than ‘thinking.’ With a question, one walked in pilgrimage, crafted a sacred text in chant, stone or paint, gazed upon an icon, or meditated on a story. From such ‘being’ with Mystery, renewal arose. Gradually over time, these practices decayed into lifeless magic and superstition. From this spiritual void, a different aspect rose to the fore, particularly in the west. The aspect was Reason, and the time was the Age of Enlightenment, some five hundred years ago. Reason, with its means of analytical scrutiny, refreshed the spiritual life. Discernment came to be largely a practice of verbal discourse, and Mystery’s means were left aside. Then with the passage of centuries, Reason’s practices gradually turned to dry bone. Now Mystery rises again, but with an opportunity. Perhaps rather than shunting Reason aside, we may reach for a synthesis, what might be called, ‘Reflective Mystery.’

The present upsurge in contemplative practices, from sitting meditation to *lectio* and *centering prayer*, are tangible expressions of Mystery’s return. *Sandplay* is another. But I prefer to call it ‘artful practice’ rather than contemplative. Why? Art is at the core of the spiritual life. When creating, a person is not moved by analysis, but lives in Mystery. Art is *the* sacred expression, though its voice has a thousand inflections: tapestry, food, sculpture, music, poetry, ritual, dance, paint, koan, storytelling, chant etc. And artful practice is one of the most ancient, if not the oldest, means of discernment. Numerous artful practices exist. ‘Praying with sand’ is simply one. I offer this way both because of its effect on my own prayer life, and because I find in its principles a possible ‘third-way’ approach, beyond the splits of mind-body, head-heart, patriarchy-matriarchy and kataphatic-apophatic.

The Question of Insight

When a directee creates a picture in a sandtray, do we discuss it, or interpret it? The issue of interpretation is at the crux where Reason and Mystery separate. Reason seeks the mind’s understanding. Mystery’s way is ‘being’ and ‘unknowing.’ Reason’s aims need no explanation. Mystery’s path challenges western conventions, for artful practice does not seek insight or

analysis. After creating a sandscene, if a person wishes to share, I listen and receive all. But interpretation, in any guise, is not offered.

This may be hard to believe. Directees often describe how their own inner voices look to me for judgment, structure, or approval. I can appreciate how anxiety provoking it may be to set aside analysis, not to mention verbal discussion. Doing so conjures the specter of magic and invites skepticism. I hear, ‘If we are not going to interpret the picture, how can this help?’ Or more pointedly, ‘I am going to *just* play with miniatures?’

Two unintended children of the Age of Enlightenment were insatiable mind and critical judge. And the practice of listening and attuning to word and emotion, the prevailing model of direction, continues under the subtle sway of these children. Artful practice reconfigures this emphasis. Certainly, the artful director respects all that a directee presents. However, in artful practice, direction arises from ‘unknowing’ and ‘play’ as much as listening and verbal attuning. The call to surrender what is known can be both comfort and anxiety. As one begins any new spiritual practice, trial and difficulty await. With artful practice, the tests are visceral. To still verbal discussion and rational thought seems useless to insatiable mind and critical judge. Play and imagery, without insight and interpretation, appear folly.

Gary Snyder, when asked to explain a line of his poetry, replied, ‘It takes a long time for me to know what I meant.’ The same is true with all art. In artful practice, meanings may arise quickly, or come gradually. Yet such insight is not the aim.

Hands and Earth in Spiritual Practice

Three stories amplify this way of ‘living-in-Mystery’ and artful practice. Each account comes from a different time and culture. The first is from the life of C. G. Jung, early in the 20th century. Jung, the Swiss founder of analytic psychology, found himself in an ideological struggle with Sigmund Freud. Freud eventually disavowed Jung. The separation was traumatic. Jung, at mid-life, slipped into a crippling depression. He largely retired to his lake home and the solace of his wife and close friends. In his autobiography, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, Jung wrote that there were few things he could do to stem what he feared was an oncoming psychosis. He depended on three activities, a regular discipline of yoga, recording his

dreams, and sitting each afternoon by the lake. While at the shore, he would idly shape scenes in the sand from twigs and stones he found lying about. Later the tide would wash away the image. The following afternoon, he would create anew. Months went by. Slowly a new energy arose. With the energy came a forgotten childhood dream. From the lakeshore pictures and recovered dream, Jung experienced a sense of direction and purpose. Imperceptible to his conscious self, Jung felt that he had been led, step by step, to his life's work. Years later, Jung wrote of such idle play, 'The hands know how to solve a riddle with which the intellect wrestles in vain.' Hands and earth joined, restoring harmony.

In the American Southwest, there are 'sings,' Navajo rituals of healing that include the making of sandpaintings. Reproductions of these paintings may be seen in museums or shops, but these are only representations. A sandpainting is an almost, life-size scene, drawn on the earth using colored sands and pollens. A person suffering, or out of harmony in some way, asks for a sing. He or she is called the 'one-sung-over.' The ritual, lasting from three to nine days, requires months of preparation. After all is ready, the 'singer' or 'chanter' arrives at the chosen ritual hogan. The rite begins. During it, a different sandpainting is created each day. The painting, drawn by a team, is composed under the chanter's painstaking attention to detail. Once each day's painting is complete, the one-sung-over is brought to the hogan and seated in the scene at a place designated by the chanter. Then as the singer chants the painting's sacred story, sand and pollen from that portion of scene corresponding to the chant, is sprinkled over the one seated. Once the chant is complete, the patient departs. All the sand and pollen from that day are removed, and the painting destroyed. Next, new sand is brought, and the hogan is prepared for the following day. During the nights and days, the one-sung-over's family, community, and invited friends keep vigil. They fast, sweat, eat and tell stories. To conclude, the person joins his or her family and community on the final night in sacred song and dance until dawn. Later, the singer scatters the sand and pollen, from all the sandpaintings, to the winds. The spirits are released. Through the sing and its paintings, Spirit is evoked, enabling the individual and her or his community to walk again in harmony.

From Asia comes a Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Hands and earth join in a prescribed meditation restoring harmony. In the midst of suffering, Tibetan monks enter a communal meditation, creating a Mandala Sand Painting. The mandala, in circular form, may extend six feet in diameter, and take up to

two weeks to complete. The intricate weaving of colors and scenes follows a formal prescription. Sometimes the mandala is created in silence, broken only by the rhythmic clicking of the monk's metal tubes as they pour and shape the sands. At other times, the monks chant in unison. In the creating, by their participating, imbalance rectifies. Living-in-harmony arises. And like Jung's lakeshore pictures and Navajo sandpaintings, the mandala, once completed, is immediately destroyed. Re-gathering the sands in a silver vessel, the monks carry them to a river. Pouring them out, earth returns to flowing water. And the monks pray that harmony, wisdom and compassion may spread like the waters throughout the universe.

Notice the similarities between these practices. Each uses hands, earth and imagery in restoring harmony. Jung, without conscious intent or verbal discourse, participated in an ancient wisdom practice. His idle play paralleled the Navajo and Tibetan and led Jung to a 'self-forgetfulness' or 'living-in-harmony.' In each account, renewal arose within the creating and ego self-forgetting. Such experiences of 'living-in-Mystery' and 'self-forgetfulness,' we may speak of as aspects of grace, and fundamentals of the spiritual life.

These artful practices may appear simplistic. They are not. The numinous journey is perilous and hazards abound. An individual needs guidance and protection. Besides an honest self-evaluation, three basic safeguards are required: a sense of belonging to another or to a community, a firm commitment to a tradition, and the presence of an elder/mentor. The Tibetan and Navajo peoples have an intact sense of community, a living tradition and the presence of elders. Jung, like many of us, had none of these. He was truly fortunate to have found his way back.

Contemporary Rediscovery

The use of hands and earth as a discernment practice seems far removed from western thought. We might ask, How was the practice rediscovered?

The first reappearance was psychological. One could say children rediscovered it. In the late 1920's, a physician, Margaret Lowenfeld, opened a pediatric clinic for mothers and children in London. Besides medical care, she wanted to conduct research. She believed that play might be the child's

language and primary way of expressing thoughts and feelings. Recall that this period pre-dated child development theories, including Piaget.

For her research, Lowenfeld created an extensive play area next to the clinic's waiting room. She filled the room with an array of toys including a shallow sandbox, and she trained mothers to observe and record the children's play. What was observed was a surprise. Of all the possibilities, the children predominantly used the miniature figures and toys to make scenes in the sandbox. The children called their scenes, 'my world.'

To preserve the data for later analysis, Lowenfeld had each scene sketched, and the sketches placed in the child's medical record. Eventually sketching scenes gave way to slide photography. When data analysis began, Lowenfeld made a startling discovery. The children making scenes seemed to experience symptom relief more quickly than those not making scenes. With this realization, she soon shifted from research to treatment. By the mid-1930's, she had standardized the method, calling it the *World Technique*, after the children's own name. Then with the bombing of London in the 1940's, her method gained even more popularity as an effective treatment for war trauma. Gradually, Lowenfeld articulated a theory. She posited that if play were a child's primary language, and a child were provided a forum (sandbox and toys) where the child might communicate (play), and have the communication valued (observed and recorded), then healing might quicken.

What Lowenfeld re-opened, Jung aided with his theories of the unconscious. But it was Dora Kalff who returned it to spiritual practice. Kalff was an unlikely person in this lineage. Born in Switzerland, she aspired to be a concert pianist at a time when that was not acceptable for a woman. By the late 1940's, she was a single mother of two sons, in her mid-forties, and a caretaker of others' children. Two of those were Jung's grandchildren, and they occasioned a fateful meeting. With Jung's guidance and support, Kalff eventually entered analyst training. At that time, no Jungian method existed for child treatment. Kalff hoped to devise one. Shortly after she completed her analyst training, a second fateful meeting occurred. Lowenfeld came to Zurich to present on the *World Technique*. Dora Kalff was in attendance. Seeing the slide photographs of Lowenfeld's work, Kalff recognized that the sandscenes held the same symbolic process as the dream, and that inner development was happening, not through intellectual analysis, but in play. Kalff had her key. After studying with Lowenfeld in London in 1956, Kalff

returned home, and created a *World Technique* office in her house. There, she initiated her work with children, using Lowenfeld's method. But quickly a new method began to evolve as Kalff shaped her work to Jungian analytic theory.

A third fateful meeting occurred in 1959. Kalff was asked to extend hospitality to an exiled Tibetan lama. She provided him a room in her home where he lived for eight years. The lama, Geshe Chodak, deepened her interest in Buddhism that had been initially sparked by the work of D. Suzuki, the Zen scholar. With the lama, she began a sitting meditation practice that continued until the end of her life. His teachings seeped into her. Gradually, she came to appreciate the similarity between creating a Tibetan Sand Mandala and the sandscapes in her office. The method now moved beyond the sole province of psychology. Sand pictures could equally be one-pointed, eyes-open meditation.

Joining the *World Technique* and Buddhist practice to Jungian analytic theory, Kalff entered uncharted waters. Clearly, this was no longer Lowenfeld's method. The work needed its own name. Kalff crafted a German phrase, *Sandspiel*, and its English translation, *Sandplay*. Interest grew among Jungians as *Sandspiel* was seen to be suitable for both adults and children. By the mid-1960's, Kalff was training therapists throughout Europe, the United States and Japan. The culmination of her work came in 1985, with founding the *International Society for Sandplay Therapy (ISST)*. She died five years later in 1990.

Sandspiel or *Sandplay* formed a bridge between analytical psychology and spiritual practice. What had appeared to Lowenfeld and Jung as psychological method, Kalff saw in a larger dimension. Her perspective offers gift and challenge. She taught orally with just a few writings. And she rarely articulated the threads of her own synthesis. In essence, she herself was the text. Today, a decade after her death, questions abound. Trainees at different times and places heard different aspects of the teachings. Some maintain the work as strictly clinical and psychological. Others describe it as equally shamanic and spiritual. In the sorting, how are the threads to be teased apart? If they are, does *Sandplay's* integrity remain?

I trained with Dora Kalff at her home as part of an intensive three-week study group. It was just months before her death. One evening, she and I had a brief, personal conversation. We began discussing spirituality and its

importance to the *Sandplay* therapist. She noted my commitment to Christian spirituality, and affirmed its practice as a way to support and understand *Sandplay*. At the end, she stated twice that the *Sandplay* therapist needed to be grounded in a spiritual tradition and a continuing practice. The implication was that psychological or analytic work alone is not sufficient for the witness, and that *Sandplay* is more than simply a psychological approach.

This personal conversation proves nothing. Her voice is mixed with my own experience. Yet three aspects are apparent. The instrument came initially from Lowenfeld. The theory was Jung's. To these two, Kalff added the perspective of sitting, contemplative meditation. The result is a contemporary re-discovery of an ancient practice. And *Sandplay*, as a possible integration of depth psychology and spiritual tradition, calls the question of how spiritual direction and psychotherapy meet and diverge.

A Sandplay Case

In consort with ISST ethics, this case is an amalgam. It does not reveal the prayer of a particular directee.

Elias was just fifty, an ordained minister in a mainline Protestant church, black, tall and thin, neatly dressed, born in Mississippi, and leading a California congregation. Colleagues and parishioners respected his work. Yet he was having regrets, felt empty and increasingly bitter. Years ago he had decided to not take a life's partner, believing that congregations needed 'unmarried' pastors. Now for the first time, he doubted God and that decision. He came to me because I was a fellow Southerner, and was known for sitting with ministers in crisis. Uncertain whether he wanted spiritual direction or psychotherapy, Elias arrived at my office with no idea of what he would find inside.

At our first meeting, we agreed to spiritual direction, meeting every three weeks. He also committed to a week's retreat soon. In the early sessions, Elias poured out a story of isolation and questioning. His words were poetic, but dry. Prayer was difficult. Work consumed his days, and restless sleep, the nights. Like Dante, Elias felt lost in a deep wood.

By our fifth meeting, I sensed adequate ego strength and enough mutual trust to discuss the possibility of *Sandplay*. I spoke of it as an eyes-open, hands-

on, prayer meditation in which a person has an opportunity to be ‘directed’ by the Spirit. Elias listened pensively, whispering his response, ‘What’s to lose?’ Over the next nine months, which included a week’s retreat, he created twenty-two sand pictures. Occasionally, he would reflect on a dream, or report outer events. Primarily, he wandered in an inner wood. As he did, I worked to witness and care for all that appeared, attempting to hold an inner spaciousness, clear of judgment or analysis.

Before starting his first picture, Elias carefully looked around at all the miniatures. The picture that he eventually made contained a series of mini-scenes. One part particularly struck me. A tall, green-leafed oak tree towered over the tray. In its shade was an unpainted, plastic statute of Jesus, placed on a muddy red rock. At the base of the rock sat a pile of chopped wood. An axe protruded from the stack, as if ready to be swung. Viewing the scene, I wondered to myself if the colorless image of Jesus needed to be chopped up, becoming fuel for a deeper experience of God. But I had no way of knowing if this thought was appropriate. Nor could I have imagined or directed Elias’ path of renewal. Slowly, picture by picture as his prayer meditation progressed, a story unfolded. The story was not known in his consciousness or mine, but was a mutual living-in-Mystery.

Around the sixth scene, a dark ‘lump’ appeared. The figure had been on the shelves all along, but on that day Elias saw it for the ‘first time.’ He walked directly to the place where it sat, picked it up, and sensuously stroked it back and forth, along his forearm, palm, and cheek. Finally looking up, he asked, “What is this?” Inviting ‘beginner’s mind,’ I returned the question to his own inquisitive search. Suddenly, he blurted, “I know! I know! It’s a turtle, a black turtle.” “Ahhhh” I replied, and he began making a picture. Initially Elias called this figure ‘Black Turtle.’ Later he renamed it, ‘Wisdom.’ Along the winding path, scene after scene, Black Turtle accompanied Elias, like Dante’s Virgil. Interestingly, this figure sat on the shelf amongst various mythological Madonnas. Others saw this figure as a wide bellied goddess, similar to the Venus of Willendorf. Elias’ use taught me again the importance of ‘not knowing.’

With his sixteenth picture came a feeling of terror and awe. The picture began with his carefully crafting a mound at the tray’s center. At the top of the mound stood an upright, black stone. Its presence seemed numinous, like a Celtic standing stone or a Hindu linga. To its side was another oak tree. But this one was half green-leafed and half-barren. Moving out like

spokes from the stone and oak were young boys and men: playful, fighting, working, lovemaking and serene. Each appeared connected to the black stone-oak and to each other. Elias worked on this picture in a hush. After the gong, he sat gazing at the scene, and left the session without a word being spoken.

Three weeks later, he reported gripping dreams and a verbal confrontation with one of his congregation's elders. His enthusiasm for prayer seemed boundless, and he began to 'fantasize' about living in a way that might mean leaving his congregation. At the same time, the thought filled him with anxiety and grief. The frequency of his making pictures diminished. Sessions now were as likely to be ones where we pondered his thoughts and confusions. The few scenes that he did create seemed chaotic. One pictured a series of train tracks headed in many directions, unconnected. Another portrayed a small town after a flood. The town's church was left tilting badly, its foundation having been washed away.

Months passed. Elias' tension with the elders increased. He struggled to find his way, and a way to be with them in compassion. One day after making a scene, he told me this picture might be his last one for a while. He did not know why. It just seemed to be true. On the right side was a rather ordinary town. At its center was a park with the half-green, half-barren Oak, Black Stone, and a bench where two men, one dark and the other light-skinned, sat talking. To the left of the town, a stone bridge arched a river. Crossing the bridge, one could look down and see Black Turtle. On the far side of the river was a circle of men, women and children gathered around a fire. Beyond the circle stood a dense forest.

Gradually, Elias found himself living-in-Mystery with more conscious reflection. He came to appreciate a fundamental change in his approach to prayer. God was no longer lifeless, but rather vibrant and disturbing. And Elias was surprised to experience this paradox as a comfort. As his sense of internal freedom increased, he also found a new surety in his own convictions and more equanimity when faced with other's disagreement. The figures of black turtle, stone, oak and river water remained numinous. Though now he researched their history and lore, and through that study he discovered layers of meaning. As our sitting together continued, Elias deepened, exploring various artful practices, interwoven with periods of pondering and verbal reflection. But praying with the sand, he called 'home.' And he returned home often.

Jung, Sandplay and Spiritual Practice

*Grant that we may be given the appropriate difficulties and sufferings on this journey
so that our heart may be awakened and our practice of compassion
and universal liberation for all beings may be fulfilled.*

Buddhist prayer before meditation

To explore *Sandplay* as an integration of depth psychotherapy and spiritual practice, we begin with Jung's findings. His re-discoveries were some of the most spiritually significant of the 20th century. It is through his work that many westerners have come to an experience of *Reflective Mystery*, finding a way for symbol, body and ritual to hold the numinous as well as critical thought. Three Jungian principles are key to this integration. To each, *Sandplay* adds a further perspective.

First, Jung demonstrated that knowing is a continuum. At one end of the spectrum is conscious knowledge or what the ego knows. Many consider this the only 'valid' knowing. At the other end of the continuum, is 'unconscious knowing.' This is the knowing evidenced in image, dream, symbol, art, body and ritual, and it holds the wisdom of the ages. Each type of knowing communicates in its own style and language. Ego's way is largely through conceptual words, that flow from the languages we learn beginning in our first years. Body, image, and dream are the voice of unconscious knowing, and if not inborn, this knowing begins with our earliest moments. Each type of knowing is effective in its own way. Conscious knowing tends to think that its language and style are the highest truth. But Jung demonstrated that image, dream and body convey the numinous, and have the capacity to spur inner growth beyond the ego's appreciation, control or even conscious reflection. With Elias, 'Black Turtle' had a knowing far removed from ego knowledge. 'Turtle' held a path so numinous that Elias came to call the figure 'Wisdom.'

The second key was Jung's belief that each person has a distinct, inborn life's purpose. In part each one's purpose is to discover and live out his or her personal meaning or myth. The expression of that meaning comes from one's active participation with the continuum of conscious and unconscious knowings. Artful practice would describe this interplay amongst knowings

as ‘living-in harmony,’ or ‘living-in Mystery.’ In common idiom, it may simply be described as ‘Let go. Let God.’”

For Jung, dreams and active imagination were the methods for such respectful participation. Active imagination is a meditative process of re-entering a dream or image to amplify its story. Though effective, both dreamwork and active imagination are inner, private experiences. Sharing this type of inner experience with another has inherent difficulties. The recall may be censored or have other forms of omission. Also the report is of a past event, if only by a few minutes. Robert Johnson and Robert Bosnan, both Jungian analysts, address these concerns in part when they suggest that dreams be visually ritualized in some way. Kalff believed that *Sandplay* offers a way through these limitations. In *Sandplay*, the ego is more awake. The eyes are open. The hands physically shape. And the creating takes place in the present moment between a person and a witness. The result is like a mutually experienced, three-dimensional ‘dream.’ The involvement of eyes, hands, and the presence of a witness, increases the ego’s participation with ‘unconscious knowings,’ thus quickening inner movement and transformation.

Jung’s map of the inner movements is the third principle. Despite each person’s uniqueness, Jung found that the movements of the journey follow a somewhat universal pattern. World spirituality names this pattern as the spiritual movements or ‘the way of grace and wisdom.’ Jung termed it the path of individuation, the search to find and express an ‘original self.’ Along the path is an ever-repeating cycle: coming to and crossing a portal, wandering in chaos, experiencing the deep Self, and returning to ‘ordinary’ life with new responsibility. With Elias, he seemed to cross the portal by his simply making a first picture. This was followed by a series of pictures as he wandered an inner wood. Suddenly in the sixteenth picture, black stone arose with feelings of terror and awe. This scene held a new expression of the deep Self, calling for an inner and outer reorganization. Winding his way back through his new terrain, Elias finally arrived at an ‘ordinary’ town, energized by a new center.

Perceiving an ‘order’ in flow, Jung described energy as a continual oscillation between seeming polarities or opposites. If flow is disrupted or blocked, what results is mounting tension, and increased internal splitting. The ego’s usual response is to seek resolution by imposing its own answer. The more the ego holds to a sense of primacy, thinking itself in charge, the

more it experiences a crucifixion, like Elias' sense of bitterness at the beginning of his work. Inner flow pulls the ego simultaneously in opposite directions. As the inner pain increases, the ego tends to use denial, repression or sublimation, to value one aspect or polarity over its opposite, and resolve the dilemma. Ultimately, these attempts do not work. Wholeness or flow insists on its due. The person loses heart. Activities that once inspired, become dust. In the end, an external obstacle, a difficulty in relationship, a depression, a scandal, or even perhaps a physical ailment may arrive. Each difficulty may seem like chaos to the ego, yet each is a call by Spirit to return to flow.

For living-in-harmony, the ego must remove its crown, sit amidst conflict, and wait out its crucifixion. Eventually a unique synthesis, or 'third way' arises. What was beyond the ego's ability to reconcile becomes a synergistic whole. Jung called this arising, the transcendent function. Its arrival is unexpected. Energy bursts or floods. All seems grace. Yet the struggle does not disappear. In fact, this arising usually ushers in a time of intense trial as it did for Elias. Ego or conscious knowing struggles with competing inner and outer realities. What is different about this movement is that a fresh energy is present. The transcendent's arising, rather than alleviating suffering, transforms one's relationship to it. The suffering, which before was a desert, is now an oasis. Like Jacob's wrestling with the angel, there is a wounding. The wound remains. But Jacob perseveres, receives a new covenant and a deeper name, *Israel*. Wound synergistically bound with covenant, *Israel* lives-in-harmony. Wound with covenant, each person finds gift, charism and larger responsibility.

Jung's description of the movements came from his study of myths, dreams and active imagination. While he analyzed the deep structure of rituals like the Catholic Mass, Jung studiously avoided connecting his work with any spiritual tradition, east or west. Kalff witnessed the same inner movements and their visible expression in meditative play. But unlike Jung, she explicitly connected her life and work with spiritual practice. When asked, "Do you believe in God?" Jung responded, "Believe? I know!" However, he did not remain within a tradition. Jung's father, a parson in the Swiss Reformed Church, required his son to believe the Christian faith with unreflective allegiance. Rejecting that attitude, Jung never embraced another traditional path. By contrast, Kalff's life was devout. She combined Christian and Buddhist practices as an outer expression of her inner

synthesis. Her funeral, co-versed by Christian pastor and Tibetan lama, evidenced the tapestry.

Through her meditation practices, Kalff came to value an inner quietude. This quietude, not emphasized by Jung, she placed at the heart of her work, perceiving how the swirl of creating was a practice of stillness. Coming to view *Sandplay* as one-pointed meditation, she moved to standardize the physical dimensions of the sandtray, matching its length and width to the visual space seen by the eyes in a fixed, one-pointed gaze. Also, she departed from analytic practice by advising that sandscene photos not be reviewed for interpretation for perhaps ten years. The lengthy time before interpretation strengthened her emphasis on the quietude and the creating as the salient ingredients, not the ‘thinking’ about them.

In a further step away from standard analytic practice, Kalff increasingly turned to Buddhist metaphor to describe her work rather than clinical language. Her famous dictum, ‘*Sandplay* provides the free and protected space,’ restates the Tibetan aphorism, ‘wisdom and compassion,’ as follows. In Tibetan Buddhism, freedom, or the free space, is considered the ground from which compassion grows. With respect and fair witness, a lama or teacher invites the other to ‘be’ without judgement. Enveloped by the teacher’s freedom, the learner may come to discover her own inner spaciousness. *Sandplay* is similar. The spiritual director serves as a witness, holding a directee, her imagery and all she presents in an attitude of equanimity. Enveloped by the witness’ interior freedom, a directee might welcome her own suffering as an ‘appropriate difficulty’ (note the Buddhist prayer at the beginning of this section) from which ‘compassion’ and ‘liberation’ may arise. The directee is free to suffer, and to follow her own stumbling. Nothing may be judged apriori. How could it be? Witness and directee sit with ‘beginners’ mind.’ What will come, will arise from a directee’s unknowing, supported by the witness’ compassion. Rather than the work of ‘listening or noticing,’ the witness holds spaciousness with radical trust. Such trust may evoke a directee’s anxiety. Especially here, the witness’ equanimity is needed.

The dictum’s second part speaks of a ‘protected space.’ Where is this? The easier answer is the tray, a bounded space where a directee is free to create whatever she wishes. While in part true, this is not the deeper work. The fundamental place of freedom and protection is the space within the witness. The witness’ work is not collecting miniatures, purchasing a tray or a

garnering a head full of interpretations. The witness' essential work is her own spiritual practice, deepening compassion, and awareness of living-in-Mystery. The 'fount' of freedom and protection is within the witness. The directee, through her unknowing knowing, experiences and is affected by the witness' consciousness and unconsciousness. If the witness is able to provide an adequate freedom and protection for a directee, the soul's movements progress. If not, the movements stop, and *Sandplay* ceases. This does not mean that a directee stops making sandscapes. But without the witness' adequate holding and spaciousness, a directee's soul movement stops, and the *Sandplay* meditation ceases.

Another aspect of protection is the witness' setting of appropriate limits. A directee may start a fire, flood a tray with water, wish to break a figure, or ask to extend a session's length to 'complete' a scene. In each instance, the witness is called to discern right action. What is the directee's deep need? What is the witness' truth? Appropriate protection entails right use of authority, but it risks over-control. Protection largely depends on the witness' self-awareness. Purchasing a sandtray is easy. Providing a free and protected space is an art, an on-going inner work, and a deepening spiritual practice. A witness' awareness and compassion is in continual interplay with a directee's suffering, inner need and the outer limits of time and physical space.

The Buddhist aspects of *Sandplay* may appear easier to note than the Christian. Yet when something is not addressed, is it because it does not exist, or that it is so obvious it does not need to be addressed? Kalff was rooted in Christianity by culture, family tradition, and continuing personal practice. Her synthesis came from nurturing the opposite, the East. Embracing Tibetan Buddhism did not diminish her Christianity, and her personal synthesis does not end our exploration. *Sandplay* invites practitioners of every spiritual tradition, including Judaic, Christian, Islamic, and Shamanic, to mine for their own syntheses.

My synthesis is born from Catholic practices. Catholic sacramental theology expresses *presence* in such rituals as an immediate, sensory (image-based) experience of Mystery beyond cognitive understanding. Similarly, *Sandplay* is a ritual form where creating *is* presence or a living-in-Mystery. As such, praying with sand does not point to 'interpretation,' but rather is a practice of awareness, where a sense of the numinous might ripen within the 'ordinary.'

Second, the Eucharist (Mass) is a communal rite, requiring the presence two people. Mass cannot be ‘said’ alone, for Eucharist is a communal incarnation, or living-in-Mystery, that flows between two or more. Similarly, one person alone creating a sand image can be a powerful, personal meditation, but it is not *Sandplay*. *Sandplay* is an intimacy, conscious and unconscious, where directee and witness breathe together. It is a corporate work, not the prayer of a directee alone. Like the Eucharist’s communal incarnation, *Sandplay* is a living-in-Mystery that flows within each individual, amongst them, and beyond them to *The One*.

Another *Sandplay* aspect matching sacramental ritual is the spiritual practice of impermanence. In the Eucharist, as with Navajo Sandpainting and Tibetan Sand Mandala, the sacred elements are consumed or dispersed. There is wisdom in this. Living-in-harmony flows *in* creating, not in holding to a static object or moment. The practice of impermanence leads to *The One* that is unchanging. In *Sandplay*, impermanence is expressed by the general rule of not giving pictures of a scene to the directee immediately after the scene has been created. Often the ego needs to forget what was created, in part or in whole. Having a photo for ‘remembering’ could reinforce a static, ego knowing that potentially hinders inner flow. The prayer is ‘preserved’ in diagram and slides. But these records are initially more for the witness, as she seeks to provide the directee an adequate free and protected space. Years later, a directee may wish to review her prayer photos. After a substantial time has passed, viewing one’s series is not likely to disturb inner flow. For quietude and the practice of impermanence, the better approach is to ‘let be.’ Let be the scene’s creating, and its’ passing away.

A fourth expression comes from Christian spirituality and its’ maps of the soul’s journey. These descriptions include the Ignatian Exercises, Rites of Initiation, Three-Year Sunday Gospel Cycle, and Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. Others, like the Enneagram and Labyrinth, are equally applicable to Christian spirituality and *Sandplay*. With varying imagery, each describes the cyclical movements of grace and wisdom, and each is matched by Jung’s path of individuation. These maps offer history and perspective to analytic psychology. Comparing and contrasting these more ancient and time-honored portrayals with Jung’s map provides both the witness and directee a sense of cultural balance, complexity and inner richness.

Third Way Approach to Spiritual Tradition

We are creating a new visible world that requires a fresh approach to the invisible world where lie the narratives that shape our lives.

*- Thomas Moore, **Original Self***

Many spiritual traditions contain a tension between seemingly opposite approaches to meditation and prayer. This is true for both Christianity and Buddhism. In Christianity the opposites appear as the prayer practices named, kataphatic and apophatic. Kataphatic, literally meaning ‘with image,’ is a prayer style that uses imagery. Apophatic, meaning ‘no image,’ is conceived as a way of emptiness or stillness, or prayer without imagery. In Buddhism, the tension is seen between the Tibetan and Zen traditions. Tibetan meditation employs imagery. Zen stresses emptiness, and no-image. These opposites express a universal, ‘ambi-valence’ or polarity present in all archetypal energies. Such inherent tension, between seeming opposites, consciously endured, is the Jungian path to an original arising.

Sandplay, as a creating with the hands and sand, is kataphatic. But its emphases on inner stillness and unknowing are equally apophatic. My perspective is that *Sandplay* is a ‘third-way’ approach, bridging the opposites into a new arising. As a ‘third way,’ is it a remnant from a time before the Age of Enlightenment, when kataphatic and apophatic prayer styles were more in union? Could it have been Reason’s disparagement of the imagination that caused or furthered the split? Or is *Sandplay* a new bridge, opening western consciousness to new possibility? Clarity on these questions will come in time and with further research.

What seems more critical, at this moment, is the critique that *Sandplay* principles provide to our current kataphatic and apophatic practices. Both traditions are suffering from the Age of Enlightenment, and its dry bones. Kataphatic prayer, pulled by the disparagement of imagination, has drifted toward interpreting images for insight. *Sandplay* principles remind that the efficacy of image and symbol is neither in aesthetics nor interpretation. Image or symbol, directly experienced and witnessed and devoid of explanation, offers profound spiritual direction.

With interpretation, symbols die. The word ‘symbol’ means ‘to throw opposites together.’ From this meaning, symbol can be seen as a paradoxical, ambi-valent or chaotic whole. Sign, on the other hand, is literal

and one-dimensional. A current confusion exists between symbol and sign. The meaning of symbol is often reduced erroneously to sign. For instance, this confusion is often seen in discussions of Christian baptism. As a symbol, baptismal water *must* be ambiguous and chaotic. It is the odorous tomb and grave. Death water, if you will. And at the same moment, it is also the fecund, dark womb from which life *eventually* ushers forth. The kataphatic, when caught by interpretation, easily slips from experiencing symbol to instructing the mind about sign, moving from felt ambiguity to reasoned choice. With baptismal water, ‘ushering forth’ is more likely to be the interpretation. Such a choice kills symbol. Baptismal water now becomes a sign, telling a person what the experience is supposed to mean, i.e. ‘new life.’ Jung would speak of this interpretation as the ego’s hollow victory over unknowing. By splitting ambiguous symbol and reducing it to a sign, the ego attempts to protect itself from its own anxiety. The effect of such protection is to act like King Herod, in Matthew’s Gospel, massacring the innocent to save his own crown. Without the freedom to be confused or perhaps even horrified by symbol, living-in-harmony dies for both an individual and the community.

Buddhist metaphor calls such an attachment to sign and insight, ‘thirsty mind.’ It may be one of the west’s most difficult addictions, affecting western spiritual practice including scripture and hermeneutics, ethics, prayer, ritual, worship and spiritual direction. As the Age of Enlightenment decayed, insight rigidified. Western worship moved away from numinous imagery to Word and sermon. And meditative chant gave way to doctrinal hymn. Today this narrowing affects even the ‘high’ ritual traditions. Recent surveys show that the number one desire of those attending mass is to have ‘good’ preaching. No matter how well intentioned, when this is the first desire, it reveals the grip of insatiable mind. Worship as artful practice, where a community stands before ambiguous and numinous imagery and symbol, has almost disappeared. In its place, the west has come to adore insight and interpretation.

Residuals from the Age of Enlightenment are also pushing apophatic practice. In seeking a stillness described as ‘beyond’ image or content, the apophatic has increasingly cast suspicion on inner imagery, terming it ‘less-than’ or ‘illusory.’ Many honorable apophatic ways exist to pray and discern the soul’s movements. Yet when apophatic practice dismisses out of hand the inner symbolic flow, one’s spiritual life is more likely to be blocked rather than enabled. This dilemma is exacerbated in a time like ours when

traditional knowing needs renewal. Jung demonstrated that respectful participation with symbolic flow is not idolatry, but rather a fundament. How does the apophatic director keep her or his own understanding of enlightenment from interfering with a directee's unique arising, especially when that arising may include numinous imagery that disturbs traditional understanding? As the 'God' image from the Age of Enlightenment proves too small for contemporary experience, how will the apophatic respond? Today, it seems that darkness and the feminine have arisen to revitalize the divine. They return in the image of Black Madonna and Dark God from earlier times. As the dark comes to marry the light, how will current apophatic practices discern this? Will the apophatic let go of the 'Light God' and all that this one-sided metaphor has come to mean? In this new age will the prevailing 'God image' continue to be one that splits the universe? If not, how will the holy dark be held? And how will aspects that the west has 'endarkened' (like the body, emotion, imagination, gender, sexual orientation, race etc) arise, and be discerned?

Sandplay principles remind that Mystery lives in the free and protected space, between witness and directee. When the director holds her or his personal enlightenment (the word itself speaks imbalance) dogmatically, and without self-awareness, a directee's unique arising will almost assuredly be crippled. *Sandplay* principles emphasize that it is the witness' practice of 'beginner's mind' and 'unknowing knowing' that provides the free and protected space to a directee's own arisings. With artful practice, a directee's imagery offers the witness a significant self-critique and added way of nurturing a directee's unique arisings. In *Sandplay*, the sandscenes themselves may portray the witness' limitations. Through such an external portrayal, the witness may be able to observe her or his own defenses to living-in-Mystery, as well as to perceive possible blocks in the witness-directee relationship.

These apophatic imbalances also impair current western spiritual practices. When trust in symbolic flow diminishes, the apophatic bends toward 'tradition.' Responding to the void left by Reason, today's apophatic practices largely seem to seek unreflective Mystery. Regardless of this age's deep desire, or scholarship that reveals our blindness, yesterday's answer is held with an increasingly unquestioned allegiance. Under this sway, 'high' liturgical and hermeneutic traditions rigidify around historical fictions, using supposed belief about 'origins' as the basis for reverence. Caught in its

suspicion of symbolic flow, this style enshrines earlier ways of knowing, as absolute truth.

As this age seeks Mystery anew, yesterday's numinous may provide a handful of water, gratefully accepted. Sadly, this handful is not likely to nourish for long. In a time of fundamental change like ours, growing numbers will seek a direct, personal experience of the numinous. Here, artful practice and *Sandplay* principles provide a vital guidance. True depth is not likely to arise from ego derived, feel-good recipes. The journey is perilous. It requires the presence of elders who trust Mystery and are able to convey freedom and protection for both individuals and communities as they search. When the numinous arises, it is likely to inflict a wound, like Jacob's. But the wound, while it disturbs ego, offers fresh energy, filled with reflective awe, and quickening soul.

Jungian theory, with its differing ways of knowing, path of individuation, and importance in symbolic flow, when added to the meditative, ritual-like principles of *Sandplay*, potentially re-shapes the West's approach to spiritual tradition. Scripture study, individual and community faith development and worship as well as spiritual direction. Here the elders and witnesses hold spaciousness, knowing that in play with symbol, the ambiguous numinous, directly experienced, without rational discourse, will lead individuals and communities to 'right' energy and direction. All this I term, 'Reflective Mystery.' At minimum, Jungian theory and *Sandplay* principles reveal how individual spiritual direction may be a prayerful, meditative living-in Mystery. Reaching further, when these principles are applied to liturgy, homiletics, catechesis and organizational faith development, they suggest how symbolic play may be a 'spiritual directing' of faith assemblies devoid of analysis and rational discourse. As we start down the long road toward restoring artful practice as a fundament of the spiritual life, I sense a wide revitalization both within individuals and their spiritual assemblies.

Forming the Witness

One further question remains. How is a spiritual director trained to be a *Sandplay* witness? Many professions use a sandtray and figures. In psychotherapy, art and play as well as verbal therapists use tray work. Even amongst Jungians, there are various sandtray methods. Others employing the tray are school counselors, social workers, teachers and physicians. This

multitude of use and method extends also to spiritual direction. The sandtray is a widely used tool. Each method has its own gift, training and philosophy. The formation question here is the particular depth that *Sandplay* asks of the spiritual director/witness. This depth, in my experience, is significantly counter-cultural, and though rich and rewarding, it matures by a painstaking and patient integration.

The *International Society of Sandplay Therapy (ISST)* has set requirements for therapist certification. As an *ISST Teaching Member* and trainer, I work under these guidelines and know their wisdom. However, the procedures do not fully meet the need of spiritual directors. Over the last few years, a few *ISST Teaching Members* including myself, with a small number of spiritual directors who witness *Sandplay*, have begun to converse. From these discussions, a framework for training is emerging.

The path might be imagined this way. If a spiritual director senses a call to this prayer practice, one would enter or deepen her own personal spiritual direction through *Sandplay* with a trained ‘elder’ as witness. From the prayer and spiritual practice of *Sandplay*, an individual will experience whether this way takes personal root. If it does, consider training. If not, let it be.

If the prayer takes personal root, the next discernment is one’s appropriateness to be a witness for others. Again deepening in one’s own *Sandplay* prayer is the usual course for arriving at an answer. And if one discerns to enter witness formation, there is a yet further intensification in one’s personal *Sandplay* prayer. Nothing substitutes for the witness-in-formation’s own personal depth practice. It is the fundament and source. Finding the interior grace to sit with one’s own inner imagery and suffering, in a free, yet protected quietude, is a gradual development. This grace is first experienced with a trusted elder/witness, then patiently integrated.

After this inner ripening comes the time for study. First is the continual study of one’s own spiritual tradition, with its maps and metaphors for the soul’s movements. To this, a witness-in-training adds a solid foundation in Jungian theory, especially skill in recognizing the path of individuation and symbolic processes. Each trainee develops his or her own unique synthesis of spiritual tradition, prayer and Jungian theory. A significant piece of this is a trainee’s articulation of how she understands the blocks, hazards and traps to soul movement. The witness needs skill in recognizing psychological pathology, but it remains a lively question as to how much and in what form.

My hope is for witnesses who are experienced in noting and attuning to clinical pathology, yet who hold that knowledge with compassion, seeing it as the soul's wound and call to spiritual practice. Different wounds call for different types of sheltering and prayer forms. The witness needs skill in discerning when *Sandplay* prayer is appropriate.

A third expertise is acquiring an easy facility with the language of symbol, the body, ritual and dream. Depending on previous experience, this may or may not require extensive personal work as well as objective research. Reading and study is important, including the small but growing body of literature on art, artful practice and *Sandplay* in spiritual direction. Of special note in this area are the writings of Betsy Caprio and Tom Hedberg. Familiarity is needed with these and other writings on Jung, *Sandplay*, and the visual arts.

The final aspect of training is the patient practice of viewing photographs and/or re-constructions of *Sandplay* scenes. Sitting with an elder witness, either alone or in small group, a trainee gradually matures in self-awareness and an inner hearing of the scenes. With that ripening comes an increased ability to find words and feelings that convey aspects of the soul's movements, experienced through a directee's series of sandscenes. This final aspect of training in many respects never concludes. On-going consultation, or supervision, is recommended. *Sandplay*, as a 'living-in-Mystery' amidst witness and directee, is aided by an elder or guide who stands apart, offers perspective and supports the witness' work of providing a free, yet protected space, for directees and the witness alike.

Conclusion

We return to that yogi-like posture, standing on one's head. Artful practice, and living-in-Mystery, invite radical perspective. The present emphasis in the training and practice of spiritual direction is on listening and attuning to words and emotion. Artful practice reverses this emphasis. Am I suggesting an abandonment of word and listening? No. The question is this. If the Age of Enlightenment and Reason is behind, and *Reflective Mystery* is at hand, which way is main, and which ancillary? For me, when word and emotion are viewed as primary fundamentals, *more* powerful than the practice of art, symbol, body and ritual, then spiritual practice is perhaps like someone

standing at ocean's edge, cupping a handful of water, with a frightened heart. If 'not knowing' can be held as a form of trust, a wide and deep reservoir is near. May the words of the gospel chant give us courage: "Wade in the water, Sister. Wade in the water, Brother. Wade in the water. God's gonna trouble the water."

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