



# WORLD JOURNAL FOR SAND THERAPY PRACTICE

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## When Two Worlds Collide: Nortons' Experiential Play Therapy Meets Kalfjian Sandplay Creating Interactive Sandplay Therapy™

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### Abstract

Interactive Sandplay Therapy emerged from deeply grounded roots in Nortons' Experiential Play Therapy and Kalfjian Sandplay. This client-led process blends the two modalities into a unique experience, improving treatment outcomes. Clients take the lead, inviting therapists to join in their Sandplay trays. What resulted was a transformation not seen in other modalities alone. This led to a new form of therapy where interactions between clients and therapists evolved, resulting in the birth of Interactive Sandplay Therapy.

*Keywords:* Interactive Sandplay Therapy, Kalfjian Sandplay, Experiential Play Therapy, Play Therapy, Sand Therapy

Over the years, our roots in Nortons' Experiential Play Therapy (EPT) and Kalfjian Sandplay Therapy (Sandplay) became a common practice among clients, thus giving rise to a new play combination we call Interactive Sandplay Therapy. Child therapists are aware of this phenomenon, which Carl Jung refers to when speaking of the power of play. "The creation of something new is not accomplished by the intellect but by the play instinct acting from inner necessity. The creative mind plays with the objects it loves" (as cited in Erickson, 2018, p. 74). It is our role to create the space for their psyche to expand, grow, and heal. Often, specific modalities are presented to clients, and the well-intentioned therapist offers them openly yet

separately. Play, sand, and creative arts all lend themselves to expression and healing. Our original intention in becoming certified in EPT and Sandplay was to offer these treatment modalities and allow the child to choose what they wanted to do in session. EPT, Sandplay,

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Declaration: The authors state that there is no conflict of interest.



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art projects, and creative games are offered for the choosing. Instead of choosing just one at a time, children began a process of their own by combining Sandplay with EPT. After hours of consulting, we termed this natural phenomenon as Interactive Sandplay Therapy. In this article, we introduce Interactive Sandplay Therapy by describing the theoretical foundations and components, including EPT and Sandplay. Case studies include descriptions of conceptualizations and will illustrate the intervention process.

Interactive Sandplay Therapy emerged from deeply grounded roots in our chosen theories. After obtaining master's degrees in counseling, we faced the truth that our journey to become competent therapists was just beginning. Diligent study, supervision, consultation, coursework, and our own personal Sandplay processes developed our expertise. EPT and Sandplay became the cornerstone of our theoretical orientation. We both became Registered Play Therapist Supervisors through the Association of Play Therapy. We achieved the highest qualification through Norton's Experiential Play Therapy Center, Experiential Play Therapist Diplomats. We also became Registered Sandplay Therapist Consultants, and one of us (Rose) a teaching member through the Association for Sandplay Therapy. The theories are different but share core beliefs and principles rooted in metaphor and symbolism.

## **Experiential Play Therapy**

Drs. Byron and Carol Norton developed Experiential Play Therapy (EPT; 1997). The University of Wisconsin-Stout has researched it and is a proven model of play therapy (Lamon, 1999). It is a nondirective approach focused on the child. Through extensive training and supervision, we grew to understand the model, relate to children, and look for metaphors and themes within the play. A temenos or sacred place is created in the playroom for the child. The relationship is the primary focus of therapy, and the therapist is the most important toy in the room. The playroom is specifically designed and created to provide a safe and secure space for the child. Toys are carefully selected and never collected. Each toy carries a symbolic representation. "Toys are the symbols, how they are utilized in the play is the metaphor" (Norton & Norton, 2010b, p. 11). A variety of toys categorized in several themes are available for the child, encouraging the ability to attach metaphoric and symbolic meaning to the toys. "In EPT, a toy is never merely a toy. A toy is a vehicle of communicating a meaning in the child's experience" (Norton & Norton, 2010b, p. 12). The selected toys are classified into basic themes, including nurturing, regression, healing, power and control, safety and security, self-worth and self-confidence, identity, self-regulation, relationships, and family dynamics. The basic themes help the therapist make meaning of their client's play, but it is important to note that each child is an individual, and one's symbolic meaning is unique to them. When a child engaging in EPT chooses certain toys repeatedly, those specific toys hold symbolic meaning for that specific child.



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EPT is founded on the philosophy that each child has the innate desire to heal. The Nortons have divided their model into five fluid stages (Norton & Norton, 1997). The five stages include the Exploratory Stage, Testing for Protection Stage, Dependency Stage, Therapeutic Growth Stage, and Termination Stage. Through the child's experience in EPT, they are able to lead their play to promote healing, integration, and internal change. Children learn and interact through their experiences. They generally express their emotions nonverbally through metaphor (Gil, 2017). Children symbolically express themselves through play. It is essential that the EPT therapist has engaged in intense training and supervision in order to move the child through the therapeutic stages. There is no specific timeline on how long each stage or the entire EPT process will take because of each child's unique journey.

Children progress through the stages, directing their own therapy. "The stages may vary in intensity and duration, but there is a general pattern children follow in their healing process" (Norton & Norton, 2006, p. 28). During the Exploratory Stage the foundation and rapport are built between the child and therapist. Testing for protection confirms the therapist can provide safety, security, and protection for the client. When the child is ready, they will move into the Dependency Stage. This is where the most challenging work occurs, called the "drama of the trauma" (B. Norton personal communication, February 10, 2022). Fantasy play allows the child to re-experience their trauma in the safety of the playroom. "Drama of the trauma" might include battles, regression, poor nurturing, abuse, and neglect. The therapeutic response allows the child to have a corrective experience and move toward healing. The child may repetitively play traumatic events. "Repetitive play is consistent with the re-enactment that children use to convey the internal pressure the trauma has on their psyche" (Norton & Norton, 2010a, p.11). Once their expression of needs is met, the client will progress into the Therapeutic Growth Stage. This is the stage where they are able to develop healthy coping skills and manage self-regulation. Previous disruptions to everyday functioning dissipate, and an empowered, self-confident, and happy child emerges. Once their therapeutic growth is secure, the Termination Stage occurs, and the therapist prepares the child for separation of their therapeutic relationship.

Like EPT, Sandplay is completely nondirective but is done in silence. Sandplay, developed by Dora Kalff, is based on Jungian theory, the World Technique by Margaret Lowenfeld, and Eastern philosophy (Turner, 2005). Kalff had a playful style and invited child clients into her home, often playing hide and seek with them (Kalff, 2003). This playful attitude allows Sandplay to be inviting to clients of all ages. While it is play, Sandplay is an extremely complex theory requiring a commitment to extensive training in Jungian theory, Sandplay concepts, and personal process. This journey is not for the faint of heart; however, it is life-changing, worthwhile and a lifelong process that we are honored to offer to our clients.

In Sandplay, we intentionally create a temenos. A vast collection of miniature figures represents all aspects of life and fantasy. It is considered an extension of the therapist (Turner, 2005). We offer two trays, one wet and one dry, that are 28.5 inches long by 19.5 inches wide



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and 3 inches deep. These exact dimensions of the trays allow for the individual to capture the entire tray in one view without having to look side to side. "The size confines the player's imagination and thus acts as a regulating, protecting factor" (Kalff, 2003, p. 8). The sides and bottom of the inside of the tray are colored light sky blue, representing water and the color of the unconscious. "This is a medium yet bright blue that works in a neutral way in the sand tray than does a darker shade that might tend to psychically *pull* in darker directions" (Turner, 2005, p. 354). The Sandplay collection of miniature figures represents all aspects of life and fantasy and is considered an extension of the therapist (Turner, 2005). Craft supplies are also available for clients to make their own miniatures they may not find in the collection.

When a client chooses to create a Sandplay, very little direction is provided, except that one is free to create their own story or world in the sand. The therapist does not instruct the client on what to create or make a specific scene and gives no prompts. While the client works, we are silent observers, often functioning in a meditative state. We make notes and a map of the client's trays, taking particular notice of the feelings and energy in the room. The therapist holds the client's process as sacred work. We take pictures in order to hold and remember their work as well as track their individual process. We return miniatures to their home on the shelves, and trays are put back to their neutral state, but never in the presence of the client. To dismantle one's work in their presence could be detrimental to their psyche.

As therapists, we will review and analyze our clients' work while considering all possible realities. We recognize that the client is the only expert, and we only act as facilitators. In the *temenos*, the therapist's and client's psyches connect. It is instrumental that the therapist is clear and open, which is why on-going process work and consultation are essential. We maintain a sense of curiosity, strengthening our connection to our clients and their trays (Gil, 2023). We do not offer interpretations or analysis to clients, knowing their journey will never be known in absolute terms.

## Psychic Development

The Self, the center of the psyche, consists of both unconscious and conscious components (Kalff, 2003). Consciousness is directed thinking in the form of rational and linear speech. The unconscious is undirected thinking in the form of images that we have repressed and remain unaware of. The unconscious also includes the collective unconscious which is made up of instincts and archetypes from the whole spiritual heritage and mankind's evolution (Turner, 2005). In the Sandplay process, images or symbols from the personal and collective unconscious emerge in trays as they come into consciousness.

The Self, being the center of the psyche, contains all potential, pulling for its own discovery as well as conscious acknowledgment. In competition with the Self, the Ego, the center of consciousness, attempts to build a coherent reality from bits and pieces available to it. The



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Ego has the innate drive to preserve itself. The growth we want to see in psychic development is for the Ego to develop a working relationship with the Self. When the Ego is not properly aligned with the Self, we see distress and neuroses. The Ego encounters a problem but lacks the tools to fix it, creating a crisis and a great deal of psychic energy (Turner, 2005). The energy is activated in the personal and collective unconscious, bringing a symbol to consciousness. It is only through symbol that the psyche can heal and develop. Once the symbol is conscious, it loses its charge. The Ego surrenders its hold on consciousness, integrates the symbol, and "offers the opportunity for an entirely new way of addressing the precipitating crisis" (Turner, 2005, p. 38). The Ego returns to normal functioning until the next crisis. The process repeats itself throughout our lives. Sandplay provides the symbols and archetypes from the client's unconscious to emerge into consciousness, leading to wholeness. Freedle states, "In conclusion, there is a significant and growing body of qualitative and quantitative research that establishes sandplay therapy as an evidence-based treatment for children and adults with a variety of emotional and behavioral problems" (2022, p. 134).

## Interactive Sandplay Therapy

A collision occurred with EPT and Sandplay; no longer separate modalities, clients blended them to create the process they needed. It was a humbling event, reminding us of Jung's advice: To decide when to apply the one or the other method rests with the analyst's skill and experience. Practical medicine is, and has always been an art, and the same is true of practical analysis. True art is creation, and creation is beyond all theories. That is why I say to any beginner: ***Learn your theories as well as you can, but put them aside when you touch the miracle of the living soul*** [emphasis added]. Not theories, but your own creative individuality alone must decide. (Jung, 1928, p. 361)

From this collision, Interactive Sandplay Therapy was created naturally by our clients. We simply witnessed and held their unique process. We had to let go of our categorical thinking, stay in the present moment with our clients, and be flexible as they opened up a larger world of possibilities.

Interactive Sandplay Therapy felt like a natural expansion into treatment offerings. With a steadfast belief that the psyche is self-healing, we saw tremendous growth in clients' progress. Somedays, children create a Sandplay and use the rest of the session in the playroom. Other days, children start in the playroom and have an uncontrollable urge to create a Sandplay. Children may spend several weeks in the playroom with no desire to go to the sand room until suddenly, their psyches guide them to spend several weeks solely in the sand. These are natural events that we consider normal. It then grew to something new: children created trays they wanted to play in and often invited the therapist to play along. The Jungian-trained therapist inside each of us balked at first. We wondered: If this happens, is it *really* Sandplay? The tray cannot be entered



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by another person, but how do I say no to a child so eager to share their experience? After hours of consultation, debate, and *what ifs*, we fell back to our initial belief that children lead their own process for healing. We joined in when invited, videoed when asked to, and became part of an interactive process we would have never designed on our own.

Created by clients, Interactive Sandplay Therapy presents itself in various forms. Clients might invite the therapist into their trays, resulting in an EPT style of play. What was played out in the containment of the tray may be seen months later in the playroom. The idea of containment became a fascinating element of this new play modality. The child can see the scope of the work within the safety of the tray's natural boundaries. The interaction of the miniatures lays a path for progression and gives the psyche a guideline for future development. They might take miniatures and create an Interactive Sandplay Therapy on a table or the floor. The evolution occurs when a client invites the therapist into their Sandplay and action, such as a battle, emerges. Other forms of play take place with both the child and the therapist interacting with the miniatures and one another in conjoined play. Adult and child clients alike invite us into the tray by asking us to video their process. This culmination of conjoined play gave birth to Interactive Sandplay Therapy.

## **Lucy: A Child Case Study**

The study of Lucy and her use of Interactive Sandplay Therapy shows her use of miniatures to expand her psyche's worldview and provide containment. She processed her early wounds of abandonment and healed her relationship with her mother. Engaging in Interactive Sandplay Therapy allowed her process to develop both in a shorter time and with a stronger felt sense of security.

Lucy, a four-year-old female, was brought to therapy by her biological mother. Her HeadStart preschool referred her due to disruptive behaviors, including screaming, yelling, and physical aggression. The client's history included a traumatic one of multiple abandonments. Lucy's mother and father had a brief relationship in high school, which resulted in her birth when they were only eighteen. Her parents never kindled their relationship, but Lucy's father co-parented with her mother and maternal grandparents. Lucy's mother spent several years consumed by addiction and a subsequent yearlong recovery process in treatment. A custody agreement was mandated granting joint custody between Lucy's mother and father. Their newly established co-parenting relationship appeared to function adequately for a while, providing ample love and support for little Lucy.

Lucy's father remarried and moved fifteen hundred miles away with his new wife. Without permission, Lucy's father and stepmother took Lucy to their new home, a violation of the court-ordered custody agreement, which is considered kidnapping. Law enforcement apprehended Lucy in a very traumatic event. Lucy's mother and maternal grandparents



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subsequently established a permanent home. Her father communicated with her through occasional phone and video calls.

The kidnapping exacerbated behaviors of aggression, anger, and physical violence. Lucy's feelings of abandonment and lack of attachment worsened. It was apparent in Lucy's early therapy that she did not feel safe or secure with her mother. She masked feelings of anger towards her father's abandonment.

Because Lucy was only four years old at the start of her therapy, we did not introduce her to the Sandplay room. It is customary in our practice to delay introducing the Sandplay room to younger clients until their ego strength is established and their psyche is strong enough to handle the complexity of Sandplay. Lucy was given a tour of the office with her mother and grandmother, and she settled into the playroom where she engaged in weekly EPT sessions for approximately three months. She quickly built a relationship with me (Jamie) feeling safe and secure, progressing into the second stage, fantasy play. Her play focused on animal figurines and puppets as she used the toys to process her feelings of abandonment. She questioned a mother's and sometimes a father's ability to protect their babies. There were often strong, aggressive animals that would scare and threaten the babies. The parents would protect them from the dangerous and life-threatening predatory animals. These animal rescues often involved long, violent physical battles. The parent figures always prevailed, but the theme of predators threatening the babies resulted in post-traumatic repetitive play (Gil, 2017).

In one particular session, the playroom was unavailable for Lucy. As an alternative, I introduced her to the Sandplay room. Lucy instantly fell in love with the miniatures and continued her current EPT stage in the two sand trays. The following week, she asked to return to the Sandplay room, engaging in her own Interactive Sandplay Therapy process. She continued to choose the Sandplay room for several months, occasionally visiting the playroom but always returning to the sand.

It was through Interactive Sandplay Therapy that Lucy was introduced to a larger variety of symbolic toys meeting her therapeutic needs. Her fantasy play was enhanced by the large variety of miniatures. Most of the figurines were smaller than those she used in the playroom, adding to the sense of containment she experienced. Further containment within the two trays provided additional safety and security. Interactive Sandplay Therapy provided her with further symbolic representations and containment she desired, broadening her worldview.

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate Lucy's process and we selected them from video recordings of her sessions. Figure 1 shows Lucy playing with a mother fox (A). Also present is a father fox (B), a baby fox (C), a wolf (D), and a black Pegasus (E). The mother and father foxes surround the baby to protect it from the black Pegasus. The wolf alerts the fox family of impending danger.



**Figure 1**



**Figure 2**



In the next picture (Figure 2), Lucy plays with the black Pegasus. It tries to attack the baby as the mother fox shields it. Lucy has the father fox physically attack the black Pegasus to protect his family.



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## **Kalffian Interpretation**

Lucy uses the red fox to represent her natural instincts and loyalty towards one's Self. Red foxes are known for their cleverness, adaptability, wisdom, and protection. They can be spirit guides in times of need through transformational spaces leading toward wholeness. (Ronnberg & Martin, 2010, p. 278). The mother and father fox mate and take care of their offspring together. The red fox can symbolize fire, igniting deep emotions within (Fox & Fox, 2021).

Lucy chose the howling wolf to call upon its ancestors for guidance and protection in the spiritual world (Thompson, 2023). It awakens the inner instincts and warns against threatening predators and danger, spurring the fox parents into action.

The Pegasus originates in Greek mythology, and she is born from Medusa's blood when she is struck by the hero's sword. Its energy is powerful, with connections to earth, air, and water (Greenburg, 2021); whenever Pegasus' hooves strike the land, a spring forms. The Pegasus of Greek mythology appears white in color. The black color can symbolize power and mystery, possibly drawing out the shadow material within. Lucy's emotions and aggression are awakened through fantasy as the black Pegasus tries to attack the baby fox.

Lucy is protected from the outside into an individuation state to be able to contain her emotions. She feels the protection from the fox family and the wolf's warning to help her manage her emotions and live with them. Her theme is predators attacking and parents protecting. She uses her inner resources to feel secure to manage her threatening emotions.

## **Interactive Sandplay Therapy**

Lucy's process is interactive because she moves the animals around while making sounds and talking for them. In these particular trays, she directed me to be the howling wolf. She made the howling wolf sound, and I mimicked her. I did not make the correct howl, so she instructed me to try again until she was satisfied. She moved the black Pegasus into an attacking position, making its hooves paw in the sand while neighing and saying, "I am going to get you." The fox parents yipped, frequently talking, saying their baby "would be okay." They moved the baby, burying it partially in the sand for more protection. The foxes made a yipping sound and said they would not let anyone hurt their baby. She then put the mother fox in front of the baby, shielding it. The black Pegasus moved towards the baby fox, neighing and pawing its hooves in the sand. The father fox attacked the black Pegasus by jumping on its back, yipping, and growling, saying, "you will not hurt my family."

## **Case Summary**

Lucy was able to process her deep-seated feelings of abandonment and anger while learning to accept them. She gained a sense of security through the fox parents acting as



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protectors. Her Interactive Sandplay Therapy progressed to include the establishment of safe and secure homes. The parents were able to protect their babies and quickly dissipate any threats to the mother-child unity. Her Interactive Sandplay Therapy also progressed, showing established family systems. Lucy's mother reported that their relationship had significantly improved. Lucy no longer acted out with physical aggression, and she could communicate without screaming and yelling. Lucy's teacher gave a glowing report about improved behaviors and interactions in the classroom. Through her experiences in Interactive Sandplay Therapy, Lucy was able to heal, develop ego strength, align her Self, and move toward healthy daily functioning.

## **Maria: An Adult Case Study**

Maria's journey with Interactive Sandplay Therapy allowed her to process childhood trauma and put closure to her painful past. Using miniatures in the sand gave her the insight she needed to clarify distressing emotions. Moving and compacting the tray's contents gave her visual and symbolic freedom to heal and move forward with her life. Interactive Sandplay Therapy provided a profound and transformative effect that was not possible through other therapeutic approaches.

Maria, a 28-year-old bilingual, bicultural female, entered my office with a wisp of freshness and youthful enthusiasm. Not new to therapy, her goal was to figure out her "messed up" relationships. Relationships left her feeling unloved, unappreciated, and financially depleted. Complicated family dynamics lay at the heart of Maria's struggles. She demonized her mother, worshiped her father, and within one year of therapy, realized her reality was not as clear as she thought. Mixed feelings and confusion regarding her parents' behaviors made her curious about the connection to her inadequate relationships.

Maria, the eldest of three children, described her childhood as painful and lonely. She did not receive her mother's love or support like her siblings. Parentified and emotionally burdened with adult responsibilities, she believed her mother was the basis of everything wrong in her life. The burden she carried felt paralyzing.

After a year of psychodynamic therapy and EMDR, she showed interest in Sandplay. After completing three trays, the last one being interactive, she reported feeling a powerful balance within herself. She described it as "putting the grief to rest where it belongs." She gave herself permission to move forward and create the life she dreamed of living. Healing in this way would not have been possible without Interactive Sandplay Therapy. The following trays (Figures 3 & 4) show her process, culminating in an interactive tray (Figure 5) .



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Figure 3 is the view taken from the opposite side from which the client worked, nearest to me (Rose). The "girl running with treasure" is blocked by the apple tree and cannot be seen from the client's view. Maria commented, "the girl is running and has options to go places but doesn't

## Figure 4

*Tray 2: Full tray view, Close-ups of Three Figures (Bathtub held by White and Silver Hands, Pregnant Torso, Volcano)*







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Maria included the white hand in her third tray, which rolled in the egg of new beginnings (Figure 5). A golden chain connects the egg's path to the wave. The wave holds a dolphin, perhaps acting as a psychopomp, and launches it out of the tray.

## Kalffian Interpretation

The dolphin is transitioning her to the freedom she desperately seeks. Maria's path is clearly one of spiritual freedom and release from her childhood trauma.

## Interactive Process

This tray, despite the powerful symbols of her journey, is not complete. She asked me to video her next step. I was unsure of my response to her request. Instantaneously, my thoughts ranged from, "What would Dora Kalff do?" to "I *can't* get into her tray like this!" However, my training and experience with Experiential Play Therapy and Sandplay instinctually ignited my curiosity. It told me to allow the client to have *her journey*, not mine. In *The Handbook of Sandplay Therapy*, Turner (2005) states,

*To understand* in sandplay is not to *know* rationally, but rather to be psychically positioned to provide an adequate container for what transpires. *To understand* sandplay is really about the therapist's preparation and readiness *to stand under and hold* the sandplay process. (p. 319)

Therapists are the containers. Relying on wisdom garnered through extensive training and knowing I was able to contain, I immediately agreed to film her as requested.

She then said, "I want to put handfuls of stuff in there. Is that ok with you or is it too much work for you?" I assured her that her journey was never too much for me. Knowing the client is the expert and setting very few limits, I was open to what might come.

Maria then softly said, "This is weird. I have this urge to take everything and dump it in the tray. This does not feel voluntary." With shaking hands, she began to pull the miniatures toward the center of the tray. Every symbol seen in the tray was used. She piled, pushed, covered them with sand, and packed them down with immense pressure. The symbols continued to integrate with each movement of her hands, shaping, tightening, and making the objects into a formation. Tears began to roll down her face, dripping on her clothing, the tray, and the floor. She was gasping and sobbing as the tray of objects transformed in front of our eyes. The feeling in the room was a mix of grief, sadness, joy, finality, and peace. She stepped back after this Interactive Sandplay to look at her work, to look at me, to dry her tears.



**Figure 6**

*Tray 3 in its Final Form*



### **Interactive Process**

Figure 6 is a photo taken from opposite the client's perspective. Maria maneuvered the sand to cover objects in the tray into this shape that is strikingly like a human heart. Her fingerprints seal the mound with her identity. It is hers. She owns it.

Figure 7 is a side view of the same tray. Note that the white hand, which once rolled the egg of new beginnings, reaches up to Maria. The hand offers up the greenery of new life, into her belly, the Hara energy. Shortly after this tray, Maria set her mind on living for herself. She finished her master's degree, found a job in a big city, and moved within a matter of months.



**Figure 7**  
*Tray 3, Another View*



### **Case Summary**

As a woman now free from the family pain that burdened her, she set forth to create life on her own terms. Without Interactive Sandplay Therapy Maria's experience would not have been as profound. The process allowed her to "bury" it and put finality to her angst. She packaged it in a way that was meaningful to her psyche. This was not a technique I proposed or imagined. It was the result of intensive training in both Kalfjian Sandplay and Experiential Play, as well as hours of consultation and study. My faith and commitment to Maria allowed me to set those



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theories aside, embracing creativity and my capacity to hold more and more. Her journey transformed into what she needed to heal her fractured heart.

## Conclusion

Interactive Sandplay Therapy, as illustrated and used by two very different clients, brought the transformation and relief each needed to move forward. Working on mother issues at different life stages, they created the method necessary for healing. The clients' journeys developed spontaneously as the therapists' natural instincts embraced their freedom to create. Interactive Sandplay Therapy elevates traditional processes. Containers soften when the client is the expert. Held in sacred space, the client's transformation naturally progresses when the trained therapist releases rigid techniques, making room for the miracle of Interactive Sandplay Therapy.

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