



Using Sand Trays Within An Online Arts Based Review of Current Emotional Climate

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Abstract

In this paper, the authors present using sand trays alongside improvised dance, music, art, poetry, and fairytale making to explore the current emotional climate across several countries and cultures during online meetings. This project included creative arts therapy colleagues from New Zealand, China, Switzerland, and the United States. These participants had met together regularly throughout the COVID 19 pandemic among a larger group from more countries to consider their personal experiences using nonverbal expressions to co-create meaningful communication using arts-based interactions on the internet during that global event. The group did not all share a primary common language. In this series of three Zoom meetings, this smaller group addressed the current global emotional climate as the pandemic has lessened. They included sand trays as an expressive form in this series to investigate how this medium could contribute as part of an integrated response within the context of arts-based multi-modality improvisations. The metaphors were reviewed using creative processes of art-based inquiry. Two major themes were identified from the collection of these multimodal expressions. These themes included, 1) the sense of an approaching threat, and 2) the emergence of a long journey of transitions to find hopefulness. The inclusion of sand trays with these episodes of improvisation appeared to open the collaborative metaphors to more collective symbolism.

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This article reviews how sand trays, in combination with other expressive arts



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improvisations, are effective in exploring the current global emotional climate. Participants from the different countries offered an international view over the months from July 2024 through October 2024. These Zoom meetings were a continuation of the Creative Dialogues project (Harvey, et al. 2020ab; 2023). During the COVID 19 pandemic, the Creative Dialogues project developed into an international exploration of individual personal experience of the pandemic using dance, music, poetry, and storytelling improvisation in small groups of participants, using Zoom, from countries within Asia, Europe, Oceania, and North America. Participants often did not share a common primary language. However, group members were able to co-create nonverbal improvisation to communicate their personal emotional responses during the global health crisis in a meaningful way. The current series of online meetings was a continuation of this effort to explore the international emotional climate as it continues to evolve. In this series of meetings, we decided to introduce sand trays as part of an integrated response within our arts-based multi-modality improvisations as this form is a closely related expressive modality.

Creative Dialogues: The Central Question

During these sessions, the participants explored the central question of “What does it feel like to live in the world today?” using metaphors developed through multiple arts-based modalities. A new aspect that the authors considered in this article was how sand trays fit within these metaphors. Observations from the ongoing Creative Dialogues project will be used to illustrate the relevance of a shared co-creative process among participants who do not have a common primary language or culture and who have similar emotional experiences during major global events. The authors will use this background to introduce how sand tray can contribute to such communication.

The Creative Dialogues project developed from Physical Storytelling (PS; Harvey & Kelly, 2016, 2018, 2019, 2020; Kelly, 2006). The main activity of PS involves a small number of dancers who create movement improvisation in response to events that have been presented verbally. These solo, duet, or trio episodes are generated from the dancers’ personal physically based experience and their moment-to-moment physical responses to their dance partners rather than as an attempt to mime or concretely express the verbal story. The goal of such movement is to explore the dynamics associated with interpersonal contexts in a physical sense and to facilitate an understanding of the emotional themes which underlie the more concrete actions presented within a verbal narrative. Such movement is relatively brief and has the goal of creating an image of the physical feeling of the story.

Those watching the dance are more active than is usual. Audience members are asked to engage with their active imagination using spontaneous art, and poetry in response to these dance episodes. After these arts-based improvisations, group members offer verbal reflections of their experiences of these co-creations. Often members improvise imaginary fairytales as part



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of dance/music improvisation to summarize the images from the sessions (Harvey & Kelly, 2018). The combination of the initial verbal story, the dance improvisation and other arts-based responses, alongside the self-reflection are then considered to form a larger complex metaphor that transforms the initial verbal narrative into an expression that can address multiple perspectives and several aspects of personal experiences that have not been considered within the initial verbal narrative.

This integrated arts-based improvisation is used to illustrate a “story under and within the story” (Harvey & Kelly, 2016) by providing an audience a moving screen that can stimulate their active imagination through a process of encouraging group members to project their personal, subjective nonverbal responses onto the physical interactions of the improvised dance. Often such projections and images relate to emotional material and creative responses which have not been apparent in the initial verbal presentation. PS has been used in several contexts: family therapy, clinical supervision of expressive arts therapists, a performance to offer self-reflections for specific groups, and arts-based research.

Arts Based Research

Arts based research and inquiry offer a unique structure in the use of PS to explore complex questions related to the psychosocial and emotional context of relevant issues. Arts based inquiry (McNiff, 1998, 2013, 2016; Hervey, 2000, 2004; Leavy, 2015; Moon, 1998) involves using artistic methods for gathering, analysing, and presenting observations of a central question or point of interest. These authors conclude that arts processes are central to every part of this style of inquiry and are not merely an illustration or an adjunct to other verbal methods such as a supplement to a more traditional qualitative study. Edwards (2016) has proposed that arts-based research processes introduce a key area for development within the field of the creative arts therapies.

When using arts-based inquiry, researchers follow a creative process to investigate areas that are not verbally described easily and are related to the personal and emotional experiences of those involved in the project. Often these complex questions involve multiple perspectives and nonverbal emotional experiences that cannot be answered in any other way (Leavy, 2015). This gathering of alternative expressions is a strength of such projects. In using an arts-based process, researchers often begin with an initial question. Additional questions emerge through the reflections of artistic expressions produced in response to this initial area of interest, often in a nonlinear and surprising manner. The basic assumptions of such research are that important artistic expression can be produced when researchers have a close personal experience with the issues being investigated within the project and that such an expression enhances the participants’ overall awareness of their area of study. Often such projects use multiple art



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modalities to help clarify the metaphors with the aim of achieving an aesthetic relevance or a fit to the questions being considered.

As the arts are based on metaphor, artistic expressions can reveal multiple and even conflicting realities at the same time. According to Leavy, dance can be used to explore an emotional and embodied aspects of experience. By using dance improvisation in PS projects as an initial expression of extending the verbal material, the goal is to develop new metaphors that connect physical and emotional experiences with the verbal reporting of events that have personal as well as larger social significance through active metaphor making using movement.

PS is based on improvisation so that in arts-based inquiry, the movement episode, other art-based expressions, and the fairytales are not known beforehand. Improvisation is seen as the key active ingredient of the research process. The dances, arts-based improvisation, and subsequent audience responses that emerge are the results of a newly expanded understanding of the initial question that develops from the creative process and can be considered as the “data” or observations. Another aspect of this improvisation is that it is assumed that each episode and subsequent audience responses will influence the episodes that follow in an emergent manner. Other arts modalities are often introduced within these new episodes with the goal of introducing additional perspectives. The new questions and themes that develop are a means of building layers of complexity into new understandings of the initial question. The result is assumed to offer a summary of the main purpose of the inquiry. This ending result is initially unknown and is what is discovered through the completion of the process. While the individual episodes have their own unique contribution, the overall project is meant to be considered together.

PS has been used as arts-based research previously to investigate youth suicide in New Zealand (Harvey et al., 2014), and the change process of family-oriented play therapy among very young children who had experienced trauma (Harvey et al., 2015). These projects developed from questions arising in clinical supervision groups. Both of these projects addressed what the authors perceived as gaps of understanding in current mental health assumptions from medical and psychological models that are underlying the practice of research and the use of risk assessments with youth and how agents of change within child and family-oriented therapy become activated. In both of these projects, the arts-based results presented alternatives to the verbal conceptualizations that are typically associated with these areas by reviewing complex expressions of the series of metaphors that developed during these projects. The outcomes were unexpected and developed from the applications of creative processes of the multiple nonverbal modalities used.

The study that investigated youth suicide in New Zealand was conducted by youth mental health workers who had frequent close experience with young people who expresses a significant desire to end their life. The group of investigators began this inquiry to better understand New Zealand’s emotional climate as this country has been consistently rated as one of the “happiest



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countries in the world” in news and tourism reports and yet has such a high level of suicidality within its youth. News reports at the time rated New Zealand as being among the happiest places to live and enjoying personal freedom, positive health and safety, and good education (Forbes, 2013). In contrast, Duff (2012) pointed out that the death rate by suicide for youth in New Zealand has been very high when compared to other developed countries.

To investigate this gap, the workers presented clinical examples as initial verbal stories which led to solo, duet, and trio dance improvisations. Those watching responded by adding poetic words and phrases. The session ended with a participant improvising a fairytale while witnessing two other group members improvise a dance duet. The metaphors from this project suggested that suicidality rather than be an expression of withdrawal from life had a social drive, even if ineffective, to communicate and created a contagion of deep sadness among those involved including families and local communities. As the session moved from one episode to the next, the metaphors developed more clarity and a fit to the emotional complexity associated with the question of suicidality. These observations were used to suggest improvements in the risk identification and management that were currently in place in the mental health service at that time.

The arts-based project that addressed the change process of traumatized young children and their families was conducted by mental health play therapists working with younger children who had experienced significant trauma within their families and expressed self-harm and/or wanting to end their life. During the study period that included cases from 2013 through 2014, national health care oversight was encouraging the use of only verbal oriented evidence-based therapy despite these children’s inability to use verbal expression, their demonstrated high levels of distress, and a clear need for these children and their families to experience some kind of social emotional change in their life. The play therapists recognized the need to understand the complex nature of emotional change within families of children who were traumatized and had limits in using verbal therapy to better help understand this gap of the service recommendation of applying verbal interventions with children who could not engage readily in this form of treatment.

The group entering into the research came from an ongoing play therapy supervision group. The team used a variety of expressive arts and play avenues including, creating group sand trays, improvised art, storytelling/fairytale making, and improvised dance in response to completed case studies that had successful outcomes. The multi-modality metaphors and self-reflection that emerged from these expressions suggested that the strong positive feeling that the children and their caretaking adults co-created alongside their play therapists led to the successful outcomes despite the amount of trauma they had experienced. These observations were quite different from traditional outcome ratings which reflected positive outcomes as only an absence of symptoms at the end of their interventions without noting this positive emotional change of the children and their families at the end of therapy. The authors also mentioned that



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the metaphors generated during the project were created from play expression and as such were much closer to the actual activity the children and their families engaged in during their therapy and contributed to a more congruent description and understanding of their progress. These observations were used to offer a better understanding of using arts-based expression in therapy with younger children that helped initiate shared positive experiences and added a potential avenue of understanding change that had not yet been adequately considered within New Zealand at that time.

Previous International Projects

Arts-based inquiry that uses PS has also been extended to questions related to complex international events (Harvey et al., 2018). In September 2017, a group of people from China and the U.S.A. came together to explore the emotional climate during a time of escalation of political tensions between the East and West. The central question addressed included what it felt like living with this political situation together when considering each other's different perspective. The group acknowledged the tension and gap between their countries and wanted to better understand each other's subjective experience of this time. Several participants did not speak each other's primary language so they also asked each other if they could even understand each other's complex emotional experiences at all.

In this project, participants introduced stories related to their current life experiences and a small group developed dance improvisations as an initial response to the stories. A larger group then used art, poetry, and improvised fairytale making- leading to the development of metaphors that moved beyond the initial story material to express multiple personal and social aspects not apparent in the initial verbal narratives. After reviewing their co-created metaphors, the authors concluded that these participants did develop a deep understanding and empathy of each other's personal emotional experiences and that these experiences were inescapably interrelated with each other despite the political situation.

In another project, Harvey and Kelly (2020) reported on an arts-based inquiry that investigated the unexpected gun related massacre during Muslim worship in Christchurch, New Zealand (New Zealand Herald, 2019). These events had generated controversy related to the limitations of guns, and immigration in many other countries. This news commentary became international and appeared to overshadow the immense tragedy and emotional shock of this event. As the authors of this study were citizens of New Zealand, this level of violence and controversy was unknown and disorienting in their experience of this small and until then-a relatively peaceful country. The initial dance improvisation was set up as a solo dance titled "An unbelievable tragedy awakens sleeping country." The larger group then responded to the solo dance with spontaneous art and poetry. The integration of the solo dance, art, and poetry



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expressed a strong grief and fear about the deaths and how this emotional complexity had changed the emotional climate of the country.

As the COVID 19 pandemic emerged, the authors applied the structure and central elements of PS to begin the Creative Dialogues project using the internet. In this effort, a small group of creative arts therapists from the West joined colleagues from China as the COVID 19 health crisis was beginning in that country to see if we could develop social emotional communication among ourselves about our personal experiences using co-created arts-based collaborative improvisations with each other online. The initial goal was to see if this group could develop understanding and support despite not sharing a common primary language, not knowing each other, and using the online setting which was new to them during the beginning of the health crisis. The group adapted the basic structures of PS to allow for an online format that facilitated improvised nonverbal expression without extensive verbal preplanning to see if meaningful communications could be created.

The results of the initial meeting were surprising as promising outcomes emerged. In a review of the material created during the improvisations and comments that followed, it was clear that emotional connection and empathy developed. These observations were also more complex and often at odds with the current political and public verbal commentary about the pandemic creating another gap with personal experiences and current community understanding (Harvey et al., 2020a).

The project then grew to include international participants as the pandemic spread throughout the world and continued regularly for almost three years. As the new events related to the pandemic developed such as surges in cases, increases in deaths, social restrictions, and protests of health-related rules in different regions of the world, the subjective experiences of our participants' experiences also changed. The metaphors and form of improvisations evolved alongside these changes (Harvey, et al, 2020b). During these continuing sessions, improvised music was added within the dance episodes. The central themes that emerged from sessions completed during the pandemic included the development of personal connection, fear of the unknown, emergence of social conflict, development of resilience and hope, and emergence of spirituality (Harvey, et al. 2023)

Current Creative Dialogues Project

As the global reactions to the COVID 19 pandemic lessened, the authors noted that emotional conflicts within their communities continued despite the freedoms that accompanied the lifting of most health-related social restrictions. Many of these issues presented as complex disagreements around health, financial, and social costs of the pandemic and how to re-organize social life. Opposing points of view developed despite a return to what initially appeared as potential for a return to a feeling of pre-pandemic "normal." The authors decided to investigate



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this post COVID 19 social emotional life using metaphors. We also decided to include sand tray to extend these metaphors to include more symbolism in their nonverbal communication with each other.

Sand Tray

Homeyer and Sweeny (2023) present sand tray therapy as a flexible form that can have many applications and be approached from a variety of theoretical perspectives. In this structure, a participant or group of participants place miniature figures and objects from nature such as leaves or seashells into a container of sand to represent a scene. This scene often begins the process of creating a story by encouraging projections and an active imagination onto the arrangement of figures and objects in the tray. The story can be both a concrete event as well as take on the representation of deep unconscious and mythical meaning through symbolism. Sand trays can be created within groups to explore the underlying meaning of events that share a common focus.

Gil (2023) suggests ways to establish meaningful communication using the emerging images for those involved in using sand trays by having therapists find and identify an entry, or interest point within the arrangements of figures and objects, becoming curious about the presented scene as a metaphor about inner experience, using other expressive forms such as art to respond and extend the subjective experiences suggested within the tray, and develop questions that might amplify any underlying meaning within the created scene. Once the metaphor has been explored more thoroughly, this author suggests that sand trays alongside other arts-based expressions can be co-created among people who have important relationships with each other to develop significant emotional communication. In this way, mutual communication can develop using the metaphors within the tray about their internal subjective experiences. Homeyer and Sweeny (2023) describe how group participation using sand tray expressions can promote spontaneous sharing of profound common themes including those which have mythic qualities when group members can develop interconnections of subjective experience through nonverbal symbolic communications. Creating sand trays can also facilitate important communication among participants from other cultures.

Inclusion of Sand Tray within the Creative Dialogues

The expressive modalities that are used within the Creative Dialogues project share similar processes and goals with those used in sand trays. The metaphors that emerge from co-created dance/music, art, poetic, and fairytale improvisation are based on the projection of internal subjective experience in the same manner that occurs when making sand trays. These activities also share the important goal of developing nonverbal communication. While there are differences between the emphasis of the expression of the physical and emotional experience



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that can occur during dance/music improvisation and more symbolic aspects that can develop of sand trays, these modes of expression can become integrated to create more complex expressions. Sand trays have also been used alongside other modalities to deepen the expressions in ways that are similar to both PS and the Creative Dialogues project. This integration became the goal of using sand trays within the array of other arts-based expressions in these sessions to explore international emotional climate. The inclusion of sand trays in this project was used to create a larger scale of emotional and nonverbal storytelling to express the current climate more completely. The authors will address the contributions of sand tray as the observations are presented.

Procedure

Participants

Eight participants from China, New Zealand, Switzerland, and the U.S.A. joined these sessions. Six were women and two were men. They ranged from early thirties to mid-seventies in age. Two were from China, three were currently in New Zealand, one from Switzerland, and two were from the U.S.A. Each of these members had participated in the earlier part of the project that addressed their personal experience during the pandemic. Each participant signed an informed consent for recording all sessions and to have their arts-based expressions used for research and publication.

Sessions

Three, two hour Zoom meetings were held between July and October 2024 to create metaphors that addressed the questions related to the current global emotional climate. The session process was similar to previous parts of the project and began with each member presenting what was central for them in their part of the world. Improvisational episodes including the use of sand trays followed. The session ended with an improvised fairytale that summarized the material (Harvey & Kelly, 2018). As the participants did not use sand tray regularly, they did not have access to the full spectrum of materials and figurines that are typically used in sand tray therapy. Each group member created their own material with the goal of having a collection of objects and figures that could express a wide range of ideas, emotions, and story topics. Their actual trays were created from boxes and various kinds of plant and kitchen storage containers. One participant created her own figures from clay and used a drawing as a substitute for a tray.



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Observational Data

All the episodes of improvised expression from each of the sessions were considered together, along with the self-reflections that emerged, to be part of the overall metaphors. These metaphorical gestalts were reviewed as part of the art-based inquiry process. Those that expressed similar experiences were considered themes. The themes will be presented using pictures of dance, art, poetry, sand trays improvisations to illustrate these collections of central metaphors. Examples are shown below. The fairytales were reviewed as summary collections and end points of the creative process of each session. The self-reflections offered at the end of the sessions about using sand tray within the session were included to address the contributions of this medium with the other modalities.

Initial Presentations

Each participant verbally presented their perceptions and experiences from their current daily community life related to what they believed was important to them. These reports included a variety of topics such as weather and climate related natural disasters, the emotional impact of war across several parts of the world, the political conflict and instability in many countries, a mismatching and conflicts of social communication in their local communities, and the general withdrawal or lack of funding and political will to support those in need within their communities. All participants noted that political agendas within their countries seemed to be interfering with their professional interest in providing for the needs in education and mental health sectors. Some participants did report more positive experiences they witnessed that included efforts by local communities and within their teaching experiences to fill this gap outside of any formal aid from their governmental organizations.

After these verbal presentations, the group began to respond to the general emotional tone of these verbal narratives by co-creating episodes of improvised dance/music. The whole group then responded to these episodes by creating sand trays, art, poetry, and self-reflections. The participants presented their sand trays on camera during the Zoom recording session in ways they could organize with their home PC or laptop computer. They then described their sand tray alongside their poetic responses. Some of these poetic responses were in a story format. The sessions ended with an improvised fairytale to summarize the images from these responses. These expressions were assumed to provide expressions of important social-emotional experiences that are relevant to the current mood across several countries. Participants then presented reflections of their experiences within the meeting to end the session. The reflections included their use of sand trays.



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Figure 1
The Approaching Threat





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Themes

Two central themes emerged, 1) a sense of approaching threat of danger, and 2) a sense of a complex journey process and transition to reach hopefulness. Three aspects were associated with the sense of threat. These aspects include feelings of vulnerability, a need for protection and personal connection, and the need to warn others of this incoming threat. The journey of transition was presented as having several parts associated on the way to an end point of hopefulness. The places along the journey included a place of refuge, a crossing with no bridge, being confronted with a vast challenge of desert, having to leave home or basic assumptions that have been outgrown to fit new experiences, and having mysterious and possible spiritual forces help in this change process. These themes and aspects will be illustrated using all the modalities. The dance/music episodes will be placed alongside the sand trays that were created in response. Improvised art, poetry and fairytales that were associated with these images are presented as well. Significant self-reflections from the end of the sessions to each of these metaphors will help illustrate how the arts-based process facilitate these unique communications.

The coming threat

The pictures in Figure 1 are from an initial duet of dance/music responses to the verbal narrative. The movers and musicians from this episode created their movement and music spontaneously using their physical sense and by responding to their partners in a moment-by-moment fashion. Their movement had an element of bound constriction that impacted their shapes in such a way that they could not face each other directly and appeared to at the influence of external forces.

The creator of this multi-media creation (Figure 2) wrote this to accompany:

"The broken one will eat all the babies alive."

The creator of this sand tray (Figure 3) wrote this poem about the tray:

"Living in perilous times-vulnerable and surrounded by creatures from another world"

A fairytale was created using the improvisations of two dancers, two tellers, and two musicians that summarized these images of a sense of threat. The fairytale began with the characters of two horseback riders approaching each other during a desert storm with a very dark sky.



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The riders on horses come across the plain-they are afraid to stop not knowing what will happen. The riders keep moving forward. There is a loud sound, and their movement changed-it becomes slower, they are high alert "what is that?"

The riders are doing their best to manage in the wild weather

It is almost eating them up-they keep trying to move forward-taking every step into the unknown- but they are slowly withering away

Waiting wandering waiting and looking they keep looking and waiting

They see something!

They have never seen this before. This creature-they can't believe it-it is a creature they have never seen before. They have only heard of it.

Figure 2

Drawing and Sand Tray Figures Combined as a Response to Dances of "Approaching Threats"





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Figure 3
Sand Tray Response to The Dance Of “Approaching Threats”



One participant’s self-reflection following the session:

I was really looking forward to joining this project because of the new element of the sand tray ---- I think the joining of the sand tray gave me confidence of having connection with people from around the world ---- who I haven't met for some time and now that the Covid is no longer a global thing, I fear that we no longer can connect over a shared cause. The actual meeting quickly proved me wrong. These are people who listen to each other and connect with compassion. We quickly found sharedness in our lives over recent development in our own lives and things around us or in other places of the world but that we care deeply about. At that moment, I feel something like a powerful thorn, or a hidden tumor, calling to be noticed. It was benign in the beginning but now has grown malignant because it had been unnoticed for so long. This theme of something emerging, mysterious, sinister,

potentially dangerous but in progress and changing, appears in different sand trays and captures my story of a known someone feeling betrayed by his organization and feeling dismayed and angry. I think that this theme is shared since different sand trays and the fairytale all capture it. This amazes me since we are a group that has not met in-person and now that we no longer have the Covid context that we share. This reminds me again



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that we all have more in common than different. This does give me much strength to hold this thorn, this tumor.

A sense of vulnerability and need for protection.

Figure 4 shows a dance/music trio with pictures from the beginning, middle and end. In this trio, each dancer follows each other as a series of solos by responding to each other.

The creator of the sand tray in Figure 5 wrote:

Here is a cobra snake. A figurine with friendly animals. A shell to protect that can open and close. I can go inside for protection or come out to find beauty. Can it still protect innocence?

Figure 4

Dance of Vulnerability





Figure 5

Sand tray response to the Dance of Vulnerability



The creator of this sand tray (Figure 6) wrote:

There is much destruction on the low ground. On the high ground, the elephant is giving a warning.



The journey to hopefulness.

Another theme that began to emerge with more clarity in session two and three was based on the metaphor of a journey or a change process towards some kind of hope given the approach of danger. This theme connected the distress of the coming threat and expressions of hope that participants shared in their initial verbal narratives that pointed to series of positive experiences that some of the participants had in their local daily life. One duet began with the dancers in quite different shapes and who then proceeded to find each other in a final stillness.

Figure 6
The Warning of a Coming Threat





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The creator of Figure 8 sand tray wrote:

I made the circles. One looking inward, the other outward. We will be ok if we can all see each other.

Figure 7

Duet Dance following Initial Verbal Presentation

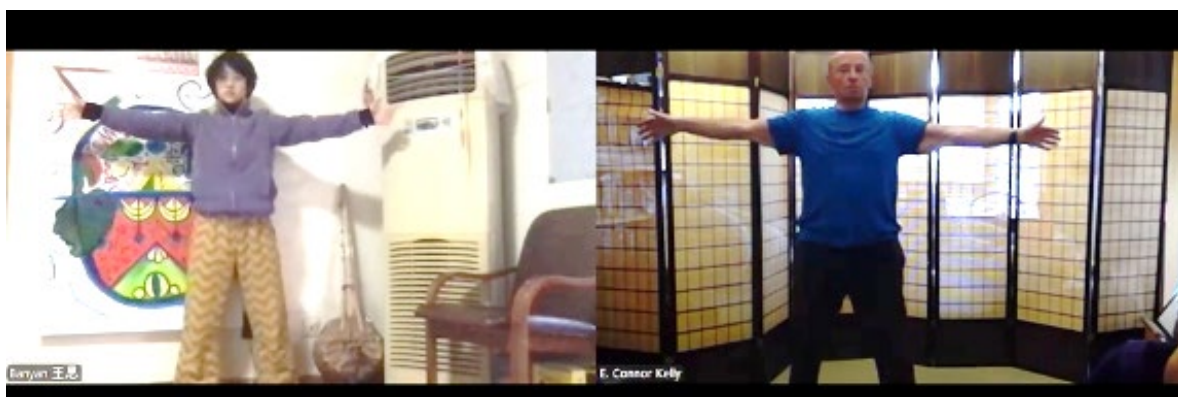




Figure 9

Second Sand Tray in Response to Dance-A-Long Journey



The creator of Figure 9 sand tray wrote this poem:

*Carnage & devastation engulfed my city,
I set out determined to extend an olive branch.
I cautiously pushed through the sinking sand,
And I was relieved that seashells of hope lit the pathway.
Armed with provisions & a shield,
I tread one heavy step at a time,
determined to fight and protect humanity.
I worry I might not be successful,
But nonetheless, I endeavor to try.*



Figure 10
Another Sand Tray of Part of the Journey

The



creator of Figure 10 tray wrote:

There is some lava rock, glass melted from an eruption of Mt. Etna and transformed from the heat and a dragonfly with multiple metamorphosis.

The creator of Figure 11 wrote:

There are creatures on one side of this divide. On the other side there is peace, serenity, and calm. But where is the bridge? A transition needs a bridge. You can't just leap across.



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The creator of Figure 12 authored a poem as part of her response.

*Even though there are chaos or conflicts
There can be a place
Deep inside among us
Across borders and races
Beyond time and space*

Figure 11

Sand Tray of the River Crossing with No Bridge Along the Journey



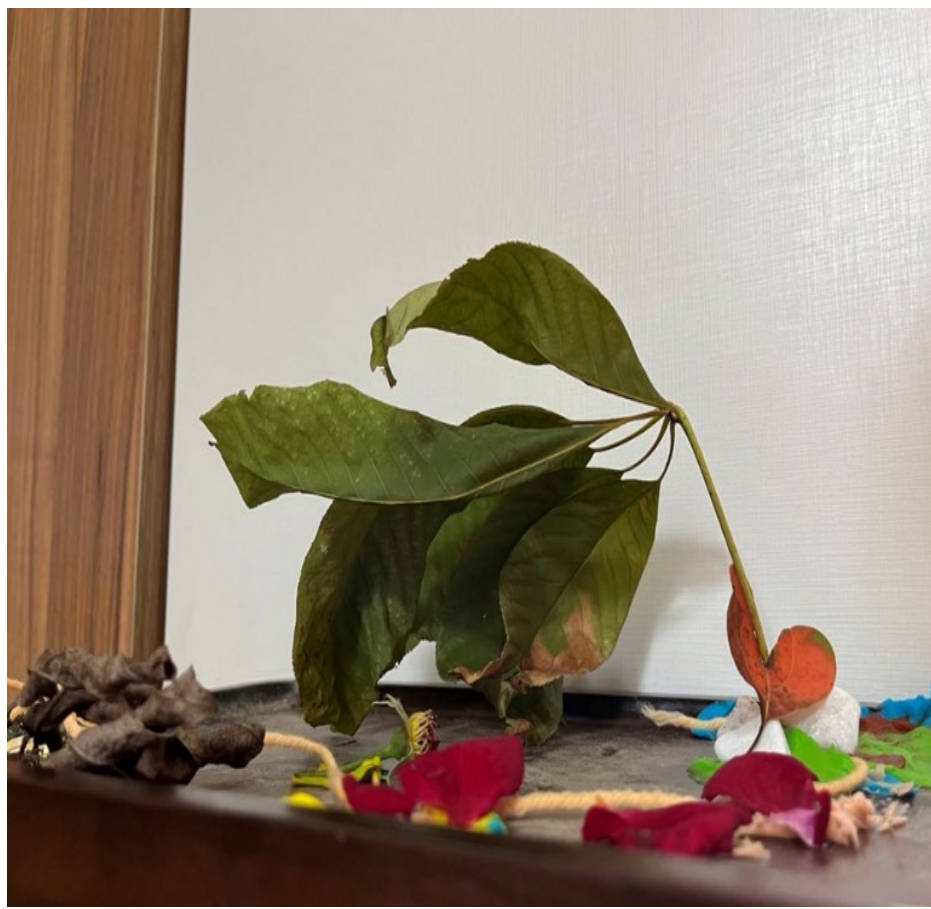


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*To touch the place of our heart
Where we can feel inner peace and love.*

Figure 12
Sand Tray of a Refuge





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Figure 13
Sand Trays of the Buddha Waiting for Humans





Figure 14
Sand Tray of the Key to Unlock a Heart



The creator told a story of these two trays over consecutive sessions. She described her first tray (Figure 13) as a Buddha waiting. Besides the Buddha, only a scorpion, snail, and a ladder to climb in or out of the tray are inside as she did not want to deal with people. She did place a locked heart and a few human figures outside the tray. After viewing this arrangement, she wondered why the Buddha was included as there were no people to help or save. She then created the second tray (Figure 14) in the next session which continued with these images. She described the sand as being an ocean which parted to reveal the key that would open the locked heart. This creator then reported that the key said, "I have always been here."



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Inclusion of the Sand Trays within Multimodal Improvisations

One of the questions the authors had at the start of this project was how the use of sand trays within the combination of several other modalities of expression might contribute within these groups. To help answer this question, participants provided self-reflections about using these sand trays. These reflections were given at the end of each session. The group members all had participated in other ongoing online meetings that explored the communication of their emotional experience. The use of sand trays was new in this current project. The participant comments offered important reflections about those sessions which used sand trays with those sessions that did not in their past experience from the earlier project. The authors also reviewed how sand tray fit within the metaphors that emerged and offered their observations.

The image (in the sand tray) was found like an intuition. I feel that for the sand trays, they are somewhat balanced in their concreteness and abstractness. The sand is malleable, and the objects are already instilled in some meaning. The objects can be their concrete selves or a symbol for something else that has a similar quality.

The tray expressed the atmosphere of the dances.

The dance and music were more openly emotional while the sand tray opened symbolic worlds.

The moving fairy tales (in dance) become visual in the sand trays, and I could see the symbols. Then, the visual fairytales (in the sand trays) began to move (with dance). These images visual and moving images began to merge together.

Then we were moving in a symbolic world with the sand trays as all our ancestors have done forever with symbols and myths

Connections Between the Sand Trays and the Dance Images

Several examples point to the connections between the visual and moving images. These similarities emerged during spontaneous improvisation and were not planned in a directive manner before the expressions developed.

The dancers in the duet presented in Figure 1 show shapes that have a strong inward focus and suggest they are being acted upon by something. In this context, the dance episode suggested the presence of an approaching threat. This approach of danger became more defined in the images and stories from the sand trays that were created following this dance as shown in



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Figures 2 and 3. These sand trays show an approach of a threat and an actual image expressing danger. Both the shapes from the duet and the images from the sand trays combine to express a sense of fearfulness and/or danger.

This fit between the visual and moving figures is also reflected in trio dance as shown in Figures 4. The dancers in this episode end with shapes in which their hand and facial gestures are central. Taken as a whole expression, these gestures suggest both a vulnerability, and a need for protection and connection. The duality of this complexity of emotional experience is central in a sand tray that follows in response in Figure 5. This tray contains a young girl doll with no apparent defense surrounded by shells that protect her from dangerous figures. The sand tray in Figure 6 shows a warning of destruction and danger to come.

A final example from the illustrations presented in this article is shown in Figures 7 and 8. The pictures of the dancers show that they are in a process of change from moving away from one another to moving towards each other to create a moment of stillness in which they are in unison after transforming their relationship during the dance improvisation. This process suggests the end of a journey that is also reflected in a sand tray which shows a balance between two circles facing each other with a balance of an outer and inner positions. This similarity of a unison in stillness and the perfect balance of the two circles has a congruence that is striking. This congruence and attunement of feeling re-appears in the sand trays and fairytales that follow that suggest an ending and possible resolution of conflict and hopefulness. The trays in the Figures 9 through 14 show additional aspects of this change process suggested by the symbols of a long and demanding journey across a desert (Figure 9), the possible metamorphosis of the dragonfly (Figure 10), the necessity of crossing a river to find hope without a bridge (Figure 11), a place of refuge (Figure 12), and symbolic change suggested by a Buddha who waits (Figure 13) and a key emerges from the ocean to unlock a heart (Figure 14).

When group members witnessed these similarities, a process of projection of their inner experiences onto the combination of the dance/music and sand tray improvisation developed as an integrated whole. This projection opened these images to become expressions of emotional and symbolic meaning simultaneously. This meaning is illustrated in the participants verbal comments about each of these combinations of the themes of threat and an emotional journey of hope.

Group Members Poetic Responses Related to an Emotional and Symbolic Journey

The participants added poetry that expressed this joining of their emotional and symbolic responses after a viewing of the dance improvisation and during the creating of the sand trays.

Hermit crabs outgrow their shells and then leave to find something larger. A new home. I have to find a new way in-this is relevant to my life.



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I set out determined to extend an olive branch. I cautiously pushed through the sinking sand, and I was relieved that seashells of hope lit the pathway. Armed with provisions and a shield, I tread one heavy step at a time, determined to fight and protect humanity.

The waiting Buddha was a mystery. The finding of the key unlocks my heart to the possibility of hope.

A Group Member's Reflection on Using Sand Trays in Response to Dance/Music Improvisations.

This participant added a reflection following her completion of the multi-modal arts-based experiences that included sand trays and dance improvisation. This reflection was offered at the end of one of the sessions.

The feeling that I am left with is that I guess there were things in the collective unconscious trying to communicate through these symbols. I strongly feel that it is collective instead of personal... people that know that they are in a bad situation but somehow not trying to get out, to listen, to try another way, to communicate or even yell! People that were let down so many times that became bitter. So, I think the last session really made this hopelessness come to life for me. The sand tray really helped in communicating this layer.

Summary Fairytales

The fairytales that were co-created with the dance and music improvisation provided a summary of the of themes generated from the integration of these several arts-based expressions that included the symbolism of the sand trays. Here are illustrations from two different sessions.

The animals in the canyon are looking and waiting to transition to a new place/They can hear the air around them begin to echo and chime/changing color from air to colored air and bells are everywhere. The animals had to move/had to stretch out of the of the quicksand/had to become something different/It wasn't easy for them to go on this unknown trip/there is something mysterious in the darkness/sometimes they had to move in darkness-they needed action/ to break through/ action that connected the self.

Danger- a negotiation of danger-a journey with several battle scenes. A turning point/ the key toward the place of peace. A transformation within the circles



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Summary and Conclusions

We began this project to answer the questions of what it feels like live in today's post COVID world and how does the use of sand tray contribute to this exploration of the international emotional climate. Prior to beginning these series of sessions, the authors had noted an emerging sense of emotional complexity and conflict in their personal experiences that followed with the return of many social freedoms after health restrictions were lifted. We conducted three Zoom meetings with participants from China, New Zealand, Switzerland, and the U.S.A to explore this unexpected new climate. The participants did not share a primary language. The session began with participants presenting experiences from their current life they felt were important to them. We then co-created episodes of dance/music improvisation to develop expressions of the emotional tone from these verbal narratives at a physical level. These episodes were followed by group members creating art, poetry, sand tray making, and offering reflections to develop more elaborate metaphors that could include complex emotional experiences and multiple perspectives within this international group. The group ended their sessions with improvised fairytale making. Participants were interested in using sand tray within their other arts-based responses and provided verbal reflections at the end of sessions as to how this inclusion of the new modality contributed to their metaphors. The authors assessed the entire creative process using an arts-based inquiry.

Our observations suggest that two central themes emerged from these expressions that can provide at least some answers to the question that related to the present-day emotional climate of "what does it feel like to live today?" These themes included a sense of an approaching threat of significant danger and the emergence of a long emotional journey of transition to find hope through an extended change process. The inclusion of sand trays into these improvisations offered several contributions including the facilitating of more visual clarity of the metaphors that helped define the emotional tone generated by the nonverbal emotional expression of dance and music. The sand trays also introduced symbolism, myth, and themes that could be considered by the group as expressions of collective importance that are often not acknowledged in more verbal reports of these complex questions.

Each of the themes had several aspects. Feelings of vulnerability, a need for protection and connection, and the need for warnings given the destruction that has already occurred were parts of the theme of the sense of approaching danger. The various expressions of approaching danger were remarkable for their seriousness and intensity. The dance images included several aspects of physical expressions of vulnerability and withdrawal. The sand tray related expressions included visual images of an angry face eating babies and larger monsters climbing into the sand tray from outside and surrounding smaller figures who appeared to be at risk. The metaphors associated with the journey pointed to an extended effort that had several places within it



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including a vast desert, a refuge of safety, having to leave old protection to find “new homes,” the need to make transitions without aid of having established bridges to reach an end point of change, and the need to accept the change process of the journey as an unknown mystery to unlock the possibility of hopefulness. The symbolic images of this final transition process included a waiting Buddha and the finding of a key that has always been present but not easily seen in the ocean’s depths.

These observations suggest that despite the personal freedoms that have developed with the lessening of the pandemic that have become part of the current verbal social narratives, the current emotional climate is influenced by a sense of an incoming emotional threat and increase of personal vulnerability. The metaphors also point to a sense that this emotional danger will not pass easily and the transition to hopefulness will require a long road with multiple parts for this change to emerge. Finally, the integration of multiple expressive modalities including sand trays did contribute to the overall metaphors that include physical, emotional, visual, and mythic aspects within the current climate.

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