



WORLD JOURNAL FOR SAND THERAPY PRACTICE

PROMOTING THE ETHICAL PRACTICE OF SAND THERAPY

IN MEMORIAM

Gisela Schubach DeDomenico
3/16/1946– 1/21/2025



The Sand Therapy world has lost one of its greatest innovators and teachers. Gisela Schubach DeDomenico died on January 21, 2025. Gisela studied with Dora Kalff and John Hood Williams, both students of Margaret Lowenfeld. Based on their work, she created the *Sandtray-Worldplay™* method. She was a prolific teacher who left her mark on all who were privileged to learn from her. In remembering her, we will hear from several who loved her, including her son, her students, colleagues, and friends. Let's begin from the perspective of her student and learn how the journal you are now reading is part of her legacy.

From Her Student, Colleague, and Friend, Rita Grayson:

Learning from Gisela was less about embarking on a course of study and more of an initiation into sacred space. Arriving at a training, we were often met first by the scent of sage followed by a heartfelt welcome. We were taught, but mostly we were invited to open and receive. Nothing was an accident and everything had meaning. We understood that the beings in our trays had things to say to us and we would hear them if we could settle, be receptive, and enter a non-judgmental space where everything is welcome. That is a big ask and it takes a vast amount of safety within a sturdy container to even approach that kind of openness. Gisela created that safety. Gisela was that container.



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Her methods were not without controversy. In our field we are often told to keep personal and professional separate. While there are valid reasons for this stance, there are also challenges when it comes to mastering the art of working in the sand. When hands meet sand and eyes meet images, psyche is given a voice. Psyche doesn't distinguish between personal and professional. Gislea understood this. Everything was welcome. The container was big enough to hold all. Gislea crafted an immersive experience that went straight to the right hemisphere. She knew the left hemisphere would catch up days, months, perhaps even years later. Post-test be damned!

Gisela offered to meet with us individually to facilitate our personal work in the sandtray. Again, controversial. These sessions were the source of my greatest learning as well as some of the most profoundly healing moments in my life. It was in these sessions that I came to understand sand therapy as an art not a protocol. We were taught the steps and the structure of a sandtray session in our training. But in the privacy of our individual sessions, I witnessed Gisela bend those protocols in favor of meeting the need of the moment. At first, I was confused, but I came to understand and appreciate the need for the witness to remain open and responsive to whatever is unfolding. Gisela used to talk to us about "entering the experience" with our people, not remaining separate from it. Another big ask - especially when it is your sixth session of the day. Thanks to my time with Gisela, I get it. To shift into left-hemisphere protocols is analogous to jumping out of the pool just when your companion needs your support to keep swimming.

There was the stated agenda for each level of training offered. And then there was the real agenda - to become the biggest container we could, which would enable us to hold the big experiences our people brought with them. Making room means cleaning house. In the beginning of Gisela's six-level training series we got rid of some clutter. By the end we were moving furniture. If I can do it I can trust that the people I serve can do it too. By entering into the process, I came to trust the process. It takes time. Gisela's recommendation was to take one level of training each year. Six levels, six years.

A business person would look at this training model and scoff. A left-hemisphere perspective suggests that training is a hot commodity. Rather than learn to dance with imposter syndrome it can be used to market educational opportunities. With a full toolbox you will never feel like you don't know what you are doing in sessions. Investing six years to add one tool is foolish. And that brings us to 2019.

By that time I had been offering sand therapy trainings for a few years. Based on Gisela's work, I arrived at a similar model which asked for a big, long-term commitment from my students. In my mind there was simply no other way to hone the craft and prepare the container. As a trainer, I also paid attention to what others were offering to sand therapy students. It was unsettling to me, as I perceived a lot of attention being paid to protocols and collecting miniatures and not enough emphasis on the development of the therapist and the sacred nature of the process. It seemed that the reverence for sand therapy work had gone missing. I was not the only one who felt this way. I started hearing from others who studied with Gisela and held the same



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concerns. In July of 2019 a handful of us, all former students of Gisela, started meeting to brainstorm what we could do to increase awareness of the power of sand therapy and the inherent responsibility of the sand therapist to be well-prepared to contain the work. That meeting was the origin of The World Association of Sand Therapy Professionals (WASTP). The seed Gisela planted in each of us grew into an international organization whose mission is to educate and equip mental health professionals to provide an ethical practice of sand therapy to clientele through research support, education, community building, and empirically based standards of practice. WASTP seeks to inspire the growth of an inclusive global community which honors this healing practice. WASTP is responsible for the journal you are reading. This is a part of Gisela's vast legacy, and we are forever grateful.

Obituary Shared by her Son, Adrian

Gisela Schubach DeDomenico, 78, passed away peacefully with her son by her side on January 21, 2025, in Oakland, California.

Gisela was born in West Germany on March 16, 1946, to Wolfgang and Annemarie Schubach. She was raised with her three siblings initially in a home by the Rhine River after the uncertain and dangerous years of World War II. After moving to Frankfurt, she and her siblings attended the gymnasium (school). By invitation of the cardiologist of Dwight D. Eisenhower, her father, a physician, and the family were sponsored to come to the United States. Gisela was 13 when the family settled in Cleveland, Ohio, where she attended high school. She studied ballet at the Washington School of the Ballet in Washington, D.C.

Gisela received a bachelor's degree from American University ('67) and a master's degree from UC Davis ('69) in German literature. She studied biology and biochemistry at San Francisco State University. Gisela received a Master of Science ('80) and a Doctor of Philosophy ('87) in Clinical Psychology from the Pacific Graduate School of Psychology, focusing on child psychotherapy and the preverbal image language of children.

In the 1980s, Gisela studied with the Jungian psychologists Dora Kalff and John Hood Williams, both students of Margaret Lowenfeld's World technique and Sandplay therapy. John was a specialist advisor on her doctoral dissertation, *Lowenfeld World Apparatus: A Methodological Contribution Toward the Study and the Analysis of the Sand Tray Play Process*.

Gisela was the creator of Sandtray-Worldplay™, a phenomenologically-based method of sand tray therapy, rooted in 'lived' experience rather than in 'interpreted or abstracted' experience. She served clients directly and delivered an expansive set of transformational workshops to hundreds of therapists worldwide and, by extension, thousands of their clients with a multidimensional healing therapeutic approach: psychological, spiritual, emotional, musical, and physical. She co-founded the Sandtray Network Journal and published extensive works on psychotherapy and the multidimensional uses of Sandplay-Worldplay™. She lectured, taught at



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seminars and conferences, and conducted workshops for over 35 years, helping provide accessibility to countless individual and communal healing journeys.

Gisela adored tending her garden of specimen plants, respecting natural systems, engaging in spiritual reflection and contemplation, and being outdoors, particularly in California's redwood forests and the Pacific coastline. She collected books and symbolic artifacts from many mystical traditions. She dedicated herself to studying death by attending workshops and conferences, guiding her own experience, and supporting her loved ones through the dying process.

Gisela and her former spouse, Dennis DeDomenico, had a son, Adrian DeDomenico, whom they adored together. Gisela is survived by her son and his wife; her three grandchildren; her sister-in-law, Liga Schubach; and her uncle, Adolf Blum. Gisela is preceded in death by her parents; sister, Ingart; brother, Wolfhart; and brother, Dieter.

Additional Remembrances from Her Students, Colleagues, and Friends

Dikke Hansen and Tina Johnson:

It was 1997 at the International Play Therapy Conference in Kingston, Ontario, Canada. We found ourselves in a large conference room of 100+ people. The room had emptied, but the two of us remained at our table playing with 3 miniature figures – discovering the worlds they had emerged from; the feelings, the wounds, the ancestral history. We were astonished by what we were experiencing. This was our introduction to Gisela Schubach DeDomenico and Sandtray-Worldplay. This was the beginning of a journey that has been informing and transforming our personal and professional lives for nearly thirty years. Later in the week, in an elevator, we met therapists from Cobourg, Ontario who said, “we’re bringing Gisela to Cobourg for her six-year training, will you come?” With two other cohorts, we trekked from Michigan to the shores of Lake Ontario for (actually) seven years each September. The worlds that Gisela invited us to enter deeply both in the sandtray and within the gathered community made us wise, brave, informed, compassionate, healing therapists. For 6 more years we sponsored Gisela to come to Lansing, Michigan. To say her teaching during those one-week trainings was intense, is an understatement. She arrived by 6am, preparing herself and the space. She challenged and taught all day. She met with individuals in the evenings often not finishing until midnight. And always fully present! What a privilege to have spent more than twelve years experiencing Gisela's always deepening, engulfing, profoundly healing work. She came back to Lansing six more years. And we know this story is repeated in Maine, California, Oregon, Kentucky - How many lives have been made whole because of her brilliant teaching to the psychotherapy world? She is the single-most influential person in our personal and professional lives; demonstrating and challenging whole living inwardly and outwardly; instilling confidence to “trust the process”. We bow in honor of her.



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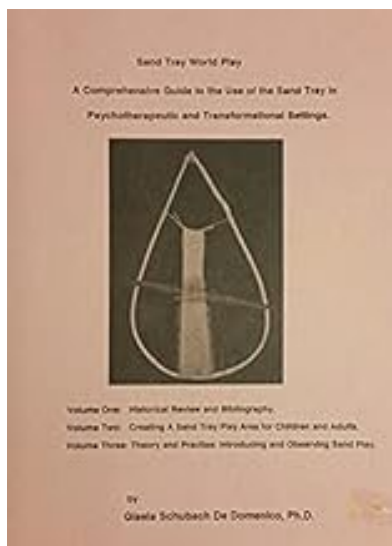
Auguste Elliott:

We came to Gisela and her work from many places, personal and professional. Many were grieving; all were growing. She received us with the openness, the possibility, and the promise of the World. There is a reason she called the tray a World and her work Sandtray-Worldplay™. In work with her our Worlds came to life, and we learned to hold and take responsibility for them. We learned about our capacity to Create, and to Destroy, and the necessity of holding that power in everyday awareness. We learned how to Be With, to experience and to stay with the experience, whatever the challenge, the activator, whatever the gift was of that moment. And as we stayed, the Worlds continued to open. Gisela taught us to access our Ancestors and our Angels, the Elements and the Eyes, the big I and the little I ego. And she walked with each of us, and all of us together, into wherever we needed to go.

Pam Kinder:

Gisela Schubach De Domenico, PhD. was beloved within the psychodynamic community. Gisela's passion for sand tray therapy became a ground-breaking force when she developed Sandtray-Worldplay™. Her work moved beyond the foundational elements of her predecessors and provided accessibility to countless individual and communal personal explorations of inner worlds. Gisela shared her profound understanding and compassion with clients, students, and communities world-wide. The depths of Gisela's vision and wisdom guided numerous journeys, providing ways to transcend and heal. Gisela was the embodiment of experiencing life's inner worlds, while demonstrating the capacity to hold and honor it all. Gisela left an indelible mark on many hearts.

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS



BOOK:

Sand Tray World Play: A Comprehensive Guide to the Use of the sand Tray in Psychotherapeutic and Transformational Settings

1988, Self Published

Out of Print



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Dissertation:

De Domenico, G. S. (1986). *Lowenfeld World Apparatus: A Methodological Contribution Toward the and the Analysis of the Sand Tray Play Process*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Pacific Graduate School of Psychology, Menlo Park, CA. Research on normal children's Sandtray Play.

Book Chapters:

De Domenico, G. S. (1994). Jungian Play Therapy Techniques. In Kevin O'Connor & Charles Schaefer (Eds), *Handbook of Play Therapy*, Vol. II. Wiley.

De Domenico, G. S. (1999). Sandtray-Worldplay within the context of Group Psychotherapy. In L. Homeyer & D. Sweeney, *The Handbook of Group Play Therapy*. Jossey-Bass.

Journal Articles:

Schadler, G., & **De Domenico, G. S.** (2012). Sandtray-Worldplay for people who experience chronic mental illness. *International Journal of Play Therapy*, 21(2), 87–99. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0027192>

ABSTRACT

This article provides an overview of how Sandtray-Worldplay (ST-WP) can augment the treatment of people with severe mental illness. Optimal treatments for clients with mental illness strike a balance between medical and psychological therapies. These treatments take into consideration the environmental, psychobiological, and psychological processes connected with mental health problems. The ST-WP paradigm provides a multidimensional treatment model that is helpful for individuals to increase conscious awareness, address therapeutic issues, and therefore, guide the treatment plan. This article provides a rationale, literature review, methodology, and explores the neuroanatomical factors in ST-WP. In addition, a case study of a client with a history of chronic mental illness demonstrates the use of this model.

De Domenico, G. S. (2002). Weaving together dream, image and relationship: Moving from anger, to fear, to love. *International Journal of Play Therapy*, 11(1), 1.

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Sandtray Network Journal, published by Gisela De Domenico, from 1997 – 2001 is no longer available.

Other Publications Referencing Her Work:

Schadler, G. (2023). Introduction to Sand Therapy through the lens of Sandtray-Worldplay. *World Journal for Sand Therapy Practice*®, 1(8).
<https://doi.org/10.58997/wjstp.v1i8.39>

ABSTRACT

In the Humanistic tradition there have been different forms of Sand Therapy from Sandtray, Sandplay and Sandtray-Worldplay. This article provides a review of Sandtray-Worldplay (ST-WP) as it is introduced to client populations. A detail review of DeDomenico's full explanation of ST-WP is provided and a case study detailing the introduction of Sand Therapy.

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