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PROMOTING THE ETHICAL PRACTICE OF SAND THERAPY

Focus on Miniatures Seashells

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"The sand tray allows the therapist to become a "visitor" to the inner world of the client, and literally see their interpretation of events and relationships without the limiting constraints of vocabulary and culture based assumptions" (Ramsey, 2014, p. 541).

Sandtray therapists intentionally curate miniature collections that have images of various aspects of our natural worlds, experienced worlds, imagined worlds, and even spiritual worlds. In order to do so, miniatures need to be intentionally selected. Gisela De Domenico shared that therapists are not "creating a 'collection of fine art'; instead, a reference library of human experiences that occur in all planes and dimensions" (De Domenico, n.d., p.5).

When teaching sandtray Gisela De Domenico (which I personally experienced), shared that sandtray therapists should have items from the following categories:

1. Multicultural People and Humanoid Life forms: grouped together as females, males, couples, children, and social groups. Show a full range of activities, behaviors, professions, sizes, emotions, attitudes, races, cultures, etc.
2. Animal and animal communities: show individual variation in color and size
3. Plant life, reflecting the lifecycle from seed to barren branches to broken branches
4. Natural objects of all sorts: rocks, both ordinary and precious; polished and natural; woods; seashells; feathers; bones; eggshells; tumble glass; dried flowers; lichen; bromeliads; etc.
5. Glass beads and marbles

6. Environments belonging to different cultures and historical epochs: furniture, houses, monuments, hospitals, schools, fire and police departments, churches, etc.
7. Transportation and communication of all kinds
8. Prehistoric and fantasy creatures of all different sizes and colors
9. Miscellaneous art materials
10. Modern and ancient miniature art sculptures; 20th-century heroes and heroines, villains, and cartoon figures
11. Sand and Water tools
12. Planetary, Earth, and space symbols
13. Food
14. Topographical and geological symbols: caves, tunnels, arches, etc.
15. Reflective surfaces and illuminating objects: mirrors, lights, candles, and torches
16. Ordinary, cultural, and mystical treasures of all kinds, including treasure boxes, dragon treasures, gold coins, national and political icons, etc.
17. Magical figures: magicians, sorceresses, priests, priestesses, ghosts, elementals, nymphs, Gods and Goddesses, including satanic and angelic beings and personalities, etc.
18. Death objects, birth objects, tombs, wombs, incubators; hospitals and recovery centers, war and weapons; blood; (food-dye or red play dough)
19. Fabric of different colors and textures; different colored string; rope; wire
20. Indigenous, religious, sacred, and spiritual images from different cultures and epochs
21. Plastic, pewter, wooden, golden, and colorful images
22. Fences, blocks, stones, street signs, etc.
23. Broken, hurt, and fragmented objects, including various animal-plant body parts
24. Play-Doh or Stick'em for attaching objects together during play.

Items from category four include seashells. These can be found in water and serve as a protective outer layer to protect the animals they house from both environmental factors and predators. These outer layers are composed of carbonate and sometimes layers of protein (Boettiger et al., 2009). The shells grow in size and volume with the sea creature that seeks protection inside them.

The shell is hard but also soft to the touch. A client can use an empty shell to hear the sound of the ocean when held close to an ear, due to the echo chamber that is created.

Therapists from around the world were asked how shells are used in their therapy space. One is an Expressive Arts Therapist and the other a Psychologist/ Play Therapist. Their identified approaches included Schema Therapy/IFS and Jungian therapy. Both worked with children under the age of thirteen and adults aged 19 to 65. They share the following information.

These clinicians indicated that the shell is sometimes utilized by clients to communicate both infancy and the inner child, as well as mother-related traumas. Also, the shell is one of the most profound and most moving symbols—carrying many layers of meaning and touching upon archetypal dimensions of the psyche. It appears not only in the sandbox, but also in drawings, creative visualizations, relaxation practices, and when contemplating natural materials. In itself, the shell is a symbol of the threshold between water and land, between the physical and organic, and the spiritual and unconscious. It bridges the marine and earthly environments, the past and the

present. It is a living form of nature that holds a trace of life, sometimes almost archaeological in nature.

The shell can be a shelter, a nest, a container—a place where a treasure is hidden. It evokes associations with something fragile and delicate, yet incredibly strong in its protective function—like a woman's womb. It envelops, protects, and provides space for growth. In work with children, especially when processing difficult or traumatic experiences, the shell may emerge as a symbol of safe space—a cocoon where transformation can occur. A child may symbolically hide within it or place something important inside—like a chrysalis preparing for metamorphosis.

In this sense, the shell also reflects the role of the therapist and the therapy room itself—as a containing space that enables an inner process of growth. It is also a symbol of memory—holding the trace of life, history, the past. It stores sound—the murmur of waves that children often instinctively try to hear by placing the shell to their ear. This simple yet profoundly meaningful gesture seems to seek the echo of the ocean, a primordial rhythm, or perhaps even a prenatal memory, as if the structure carried not only form, but also the imprint of experience.

According to the *Book of Symbol, Reflections on Archetypal Images* (Ronnberg, 2010), the shell—especially the clam and oyster—is portrayed as a symbol of feminine power, intimacy, gestation, and creativity. Its slightly parted shape may evoke the female body, sensuality, and the hidden power of creation. When closed, it protects and stores energy; when open, it allows for breathing, receiving, revelation, and transformation. It is a yin symbol, an introverted force, ready—at the right moment—to reveal its inner world. In my experience, the shell in Sandplay is precisely such a symbol: of life, memory, protection, transformation, and feminine wisdom. It connects the physical with the spiritual, depth with surface. Sometimes the number of shells used in the tray represents the number of family members. When they appear in worlds in pairs, shells often can become mother and child or even siblings. On other occasions, they can be paired to represent lovers.

One therapist stated that, in addition to shells, she observes children using small stones—exceptionally smooth or slippery ones—and pieces of sea glass. Children used these objects to build watery landscapes, creating representations of rivers, lakes, or ocean shores. Interestingly, both shells, stones, and glass beads are frequently used not only as decorative or natural elements, but also as structural ones.

Children often use them to form boundaries—walls, fences—or to create bridges or transitions between spaces in the tray. For example, they may mark the edge of a river, divide the water from the land, or construct symbolic crossings. These objects help define liminal zones and may reflect processes of separation, containment, or connection.

Natural objects are important to curate for use by builders of all ages. It is therefore vital for all therapists to remember that,

in time, you will learn that it is very exciting to help builders/creators animate their own symbols, learn how to experience deliberately and consciously in the many different dimensions of reality, weave their own dynamic, living story, and then share it with you. (De Domenico, n.d., p.6)

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