

The Integration of Sandtray Therapy and other Expressive Therapies with Psychodrama

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Long ago, when I began my journey toward becoming a psychotherapist, I experienced a magical moment; Carl Jung might have called it synchronicity - when events converge to reveal a portion of our true nature in what may appear to be a chance encounter. In that moment, the power of the arts in the healing process was revealed as I participated my first Expressive Arts group. For me, all of who I was as a fledgling therapist and the years of working out my own issues through the creative process came together.

My 20 plus year journey has included work in Dance/Movement, Sandtray, SoulCollage®, Creative Writing and other Expressive Arts therapies on the road to Board certification in Psychodrama as a Practitioner and Trainer. Now, as I make my way in my new home in California, I find myself again emerged in the power of image and intuition as I delve into Sandtray and reflect on its influence on my work as a Psychodrama director.

My initial love affair with Psychodrama was twofold: personally, Psychodrama brought forth psychic longings in a sometimes gentle and often revelatory way for me that talk therapy never quite resolved- I found myself knowing what was going on for me on an intellectual level, but never quite moving any of that wisdom toward resolution. Psychodrama did this. Professionally I saw all of the work I had accomplished in the art therapies come to service in the warm-up process of Psychodrama.

Sandtray (an expansion of Sandplay) is a Jungian-origin therapy credited largely to the work of Dora Kalff that utilizes miniature objects in the creation of a world in a tray of sand. Clients create a scene - nonverbal communication that explores both their internal and external worlds. Unconscious material comes forward in the same manner as when a client creates a work of art, bringing forward the rich inner life we each live.

As an organic extension of this exploration of inner world, Psychodrama can be in service to a client through healing on deeper levels. Art facilitates the access of repressed material and psychodrama provides the corrective action (Peterson). Much has been written on the intermodal or interdisciplinary nature of the arts and the value of utilizing more than one. Shaun McNiff, the Dean of Lesley University and one of the originators of the Expressive Arts Program there, viewed dramatic enactment as the umbrella for all the creative arts. The combination can often accomplish more than either modality can alone.

Because Sandtray, as all of the Expressive Arts, is a bridge between the internal and external worlds (conscious and subconscious), objects provide emotional distance from unconscious material and allow unprocessed material to emerge in a non-threatening format. Once this material emerges, Psychodrama encourages the opportunity to concretize and explore the nature of these revelations, moving them to resolution.

In Psychodrama, Sandtray seems naturally to be a warm-up to action, but it is also an enactment. There is both an internal psychodrama occurring, as well as a relationship between the artist and their materials. It is up to us as directors to take the internal and external processes of art-making, no matter its format, to the conscious level.

Psychodramatist and Art Therapist Gong Shu, has group members create with watercolors after participating in body-based energy exercises and then takes those paintings into action. My colleague in Florida, Lin Considine and I have often used Sandtrays as a method of choosing a protagonist, or expanding a client's dialogue with their inner world.

Sandtray can also reveal an act hunger for containment or alternately, the need of expression. This can also be explored in action. Other questions to explore through action: What is the mythology, symbology of the tray? What image was chosen to represent the client? What are the other characters important in the tray, and why? What is not represented? Is the arrangement orderly or coherent?

There is richness in these explorations that only add to the power of our work in Psychodrama. Like the life-long fascination Jung had with Alchemy - two elements coming together in an exchange that transforms - we have the opportunity to create something new in bringing any of the expressive arts and psychodrama together. In that union, we just may transform ourselves.

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