Speaking about the Unspeakable

Non-Verbal Methods and Experiences in Therapy with Children

Edited by Dennis McCarthy

Foreword by Priscilla Rodgers

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Last night they came with news of death
not knowing what I would say.

I wanted to say,
"The green wind is running through the fields,
making the grass lie flat."

I wanted to say,
"The apple blossom flakes like ash,
covering the orchard wall."

I wanted to say,
"The fish float belly up in the slow stream,
stepping stones to the dead."

They asked if I would sleep that night,
I said I did not know.

For this loss I could not speak,
the tongue lay idle in a great darkness,
the heart was strangely open,
the moon had gone,
and it was then
when I said, "He is no longer here",
that the night put its arms around me
and all the white stars turned bitter with grief.

David Whyte

Foreword

That which lives and moves human life is at its deepest core unspeakable. And, it would seem, the human imagination has evolved as the organ of communion with the unspeakable, for good and ill. It animates, plays with, disguises, expresses, dreams, falsifies, reveals and, most of all, gives form to what defies form or word. Yet engaging the power of the imagination to recreate a world torn apart is a rare art in these times.

The ancients, living in a dangerous world of presences, spirits, and crisis, responded by ritually telling and retelling, fashioning and refashioning their stories of creation in voice, art, song, and movement. Thus their arts made their world and their myths and created their reality in a way we would recognize today as psychological and emotional therapeutics applied to the human soul in the world. Without this, the human soul is torn from its world and the world itself is torn and dangerously unbalanced. This healing and creating process, so much a part of our heritage, is innate to humankind, but the movement of that process from collective ritual and religion to individual psyches and souls has been treacherous. The healing powers of the imagination have been eclipsed by the more shaded powers of artifice and advertising, model and media.

However, this book bears witness to the fact that imagination indeed lives next to and in league with that which troubles us, and also that it can and must be the heart of healing and renewal. This is an inspiring book. We as readers bear witness to several instances of a child finding his or her way through a traumatized and broken inner world to a place of most intimate and poignant healing by innately following a thread given by the heart and imagination in the presence of a gifted therapist. It would seem that the two-million-year-old man, of whom Jung speaks, is alive and well in even the most wounded child, and can still bring ancient and wise ways to bear. Without romanticizing the time of childhood, or the aliveness of the inner world of children, it is safe to say that the children spoken of in these pages are putting their lives back together and it is profoundly moving to see how very close the way through is for each of them once touched. We always imagine we are so very far away from what we need when we suffer trauma and that the solution is impossible. These children, struggling under often unbearable pain, seem to know in some

also unspeakable way, exactly what they need to make or express in order to "speak" about what has not been able to be said or known. They dive in and bring about a great story of drama and form that is capable of ferrying them to the other side of trauma. When they are finished, they know they can move forward free from paralyzing trouble. Being reminded that we have evolved an imagination capable of this is inspiring.

Art-making of all kinds establishes an inner witness. This is, in part, why the creative process is experienced as healing. The witness is an additional position from which we can see, free from identification with the literal. It is part of what happens naturally when we engage in any art form. While we are making we are watching and witnessing what comes forth and we are bringing it together with what we feel and experience moment to moment. Often, and importantly so, this happens subliminally enough to skirt the judging, limiting, knowing, and fearing qualities of ego.

In this book, what is particularly moving in each case is the quality of witness each therapist brings to the encounter, creating a safe place for witnessing to occur. In so many places the therapists speak of needing to make little or no verbal or active intervention during the essentially non-verbal therapy. As the children create, each process proceeds inside a profound quality of witness and abiding engagement, bypassing the necessity of much, if any, interpretation. In their wisdom, the therapists hold the emotional charges and tensions of the unspoken so the imagination can sustain a symbolic function and bring about healing. We know the imagination can just as well serve to delude and falsify as it can heal. This quality of witness, coupled with the containing and suggestive qualities of the various art media and forms, attracts the imagination toward manifesting healing symbols and experience.

There are unspeakable places in each of us, and perhaps children living within these silences. Though we may not as adults have as unfettered an access to the dimension of the imagination as we may have had as children, we can learn this route to the unspeakable parts of ourselves and walk thus alongside our worded ways to our great benefit. In witnessing these children's lives we can support and sustain the undeniable powers of the imagination to bring about transformative change. We can perhaps be inspired to be fearless and open enough to engage in this rare and endangered art. In so doing we may resuscitate our world, even a little, as she glides along in a dark night amidst the many unspeakable horrors we make together, seeming to have lost her way to see through, to, and by way of the imagination.

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Introduction

Dennis McCarthy

It is this book's premise that life's most pivotal experiences, both good and bad, can only be truly expressed via the language of the imagination. The process of inner exploration, often initiated by these pivotal experiences, is also largely non-verbal at its core. This is especially true for children who do not have the capacity or the need to use words to experience themselves and describe this experience. Children are not yet "in their heads." They live closer to their instincts, their emotions, and their core. Children's natural "language" as such is more multi-dimensional and closer, as a result, to the very heart of life. Consequently it is not a linear language that one can simply learn.

Our intention in these pages is to illustrate, explore, and celebrate the non-verbal and the non-literal experience of children in therapy. The wonderful process of creative transformation that can and often does ensue when therapist and child are playing, whether it be with sand, clay, movement, art, or even spoken language, when used creatively without a simple question-and-answer format, has much to teach us about children and how they best express what has meaning to them. It is the belief of the therapists whose work fills these pages that this non-verbal language is not only the child's primary language but also the only way for them to express and describe their life experiences. The non-verbal allows us to enter a liminal state, one that children live close to, in which things are not static or fixed, and in which great shifts may happen with ease. The non-verbal is in and of itself a means of experiencing a new way of being in one's self, potentially free from the mental concepts that keep us, as adults, stuck, and for this reason also it is deeply therapeutic.

Adults, too, often speak of life's most poignant, disturbing, and exalted moments and experiences via symbols and metaphor rather than in direct language. This approach is less vulnerable to censure, less able to be directed

by what we think and more by what we feel. Someone once said that dreams and the body never lie. The images of dreams and the chronic muscular tensions in our bodies are a more direct link to the underlying causes—and also to the thwarted energy that we need in order to be more fully our selves. As a result, an approach to therapy that utilizes dreams, the body, and/or the active imagination in some form will allow us to penetrate our defenses and access the dormant yet positive energies held therein.

Often another person "speaking" in such a manner about their lives can have a healing effect on us, the listener or witness. In David Whyte's poem on page 8, his experience of loss is first expressed via silence, then metaphor, then tears. This sequence is deeply satisfying to witness as well as to experience. We the listeners are moved along the same, age-old human pathway of loss and the seemingly impossible task of integrating this loss into our lives. How do we go on? Even as young children we have many "how do we go on" experiences, both little and big and often unbeknownst to our parents or the world around us. Life itself and the day-to-day process of living it in all its hugeness presents this potential obstacle of how to process and express what is bigger and wilder and deeper than words. Add to this the many personal traumas children are confronted with, and the almost daily collective traumas that all children must somehow reconcile, and the need to speak rather than remain silent is imperative. Yet how *do* we speak about such things?

The therapists included in this book use a variety of non-verbal methods in their work. They encounter a wide variety of unspeakable experiences from a non-verbal perspective, and the children they deal with feel seen and heard and understood as a result. Each of the therapists was chosen for their years of experience in the field and their belief in the power of the non-verbal as it pertains to their own lives as well as those of their patients. For true therapy only happens in the overlap of the child playing and the therapist playing. A willingness to let go of preconceived ideas and to enter the process "feet first", so to speak, is required by both.

Therapy with children today, at least in much of the United States, often consists of asking children to speak in adult language, or speaking to and/or for the child. Even many play therapists use board games that rely on verbalizing rather than letting children be creative. Although the idea that children are small adults has long been dismissed from psychological and educational training, it seems too often to prevail in the therapeutic treatment of children. This may be due in large part to an inability on the part of many therapists to

understand the language children speak via play, and to devalue it as a result. It is no longer our language, although it once was.

We, too, once felt that myths were closer to our experience of life. We, too, upon picking up a paintbrush or a piece of clay, felt the immediate satisfaction of knowing that these materials held the potential for self-expression, for the articulation of our entire being, and for the joy of exploring of new ways of self-experience. We knew that we could truly speak with this material, especially if our imaginations were given free reign. And we felt seen by the adult who handed us the paints or expressed interest in our drawings. As small children, we jumped and spun and fell to the ground, laughing out loud—and although we did so for fun, we also did so because we had to. Our spirits spoke via this unbridled movement. All the many disappointments and heartaches, too, were felt rather than thought, experienced physically rather than processed cognitively. We struggled with, and mastered, uprightness and mobility via playful movement and not through verbal instruction. If offered a sandbox and numerous small figures to use in it, we, too, would have felt in setting them up that we were speaking. If we brought the scene therein to life we would have felt some of the same energetic stirrings that leaping and falling elicited and satisfied in us, just by knocking down the worlds we had just created or erupting the sand as if the world was exploding, only to reassemble it all again in our version of Genesis.

It is possible to assess the severity of many childhood problems by the ease with which children utilize creative arts materials: how they draw or move or manipulate clay. The immobilizing effects of trauma can be readily seen in how the child molds clay, moves their body, or encounters a sandbox. Perhaps even more important, it is possible to help the child change simply by helping them better articulate via these materials. It is not so much then what they say via these materials but that they are *able* to say via them.

Perhaps it is the fear of regression to a childish place in ourselves that makes so many adults shun this more primary and ultimately meaningful language. Perhaps we are afraid we will lose control by speaking and listening in a non-intellectual modality. But ultimately we, too, benefit when we enter the labyrinth with the child, wandering in the subterranean darkness there as we seek a way through. We, too, come closer to our collective humanity that lies buried beneath the layers of intellect and limited vision with which we have been taught to view our lives.

Children the world over deal with atrocities every day, and not just the cruelties of the playground or the at times brutal mistakes of our families, but the pains of our fellow humans that children hear about and see each day via the news and the internet, or experience simply by being still psychically connected to the rest of humankind. The horrors of Darfur are not lost on them, as they are many of us. The seeming unwillingness on the part of the adults in power to confront issues such as global warming, out of simple greed, is not lost on the child. In all of the many global conflicts occurring even as I write these words, 80 percent of those killed are women and children. This fact is known by children without reading it in the paper, as they retain vestiges of what could best be called a collective psyche, one which links them to the rest of humanity.

The struggle to reconcile these horrors as each child attempts to navigate, as well, the age-old struggle to grow, cannot be expressed and processed through words. Nor are there any words that we as adults can use to comfort them with, or ourselves for that matter. For us, too, the language of the imagination offers the only possibility of articulating the extremes of life, the hopelessness that we too often feel.

I am struck and touched at how willing most parents I work with are to assume full responsibility for their children's problems. If I were to suggest that these problems came in part from the world around them, they would not like it, precisely because they too feel at a loss to change this world. Their own quick tempers or rigid expectations seem easy to solve in comparison. And yet, no matter how we wish we could protect our children from all of the above, we can only help them to express their response to it and find some way of living and thriving in the shadow of it. For me this can only be done through the imagination, and not as an escapist pathway but as a means of struggling to express the inexpressible.

When a child enters our therapy space, bringing with them the problems or symptoms that have caused the world around them to take notice, we have an opportunity to engage with them in their language, in their world, rather than ask them to speak to us in ours. If we can speak their language, or at least offer it to them as a means of speaking, they will entrust us with not only a willingness for expression that may help us to know what is wrong, but also a means of playing together that will have the potential for real transformation. This can't happen except by using their language, with all its almost magical fluidity that loosens rigidity, strengthens and solidifies

weakness, and helps the child's developing ego to continue to do so with grace and integrity.

A very unsocial and seemingly unformed child entered my office last year and refused to look at me, talk to me, or even examine the many objects that I have in my playroom. He knelt by the sand and proceeded to dig. Upon finding some small crystals buried there by another child, he happily exclaimed to me that he had done it. He had discovered them and as a result they belonged to him. He found many more and became happier with each new discovery. He allowed me to hold his treasures and even to advise him the best place to dig. That was all, but that was an important first step. He returned again the following week with an eagerness that surprised his mother. He resumed his digging, continuing to ignore both me and the space, but with a sense of softened musculature, and with a smile on his face. This time his ignoring me felt like the beginnings of a relationship. Allowing him the freedom to be in charge put us in synch with each other. He dug and dug, and when I at one point tentatively introduced a dragon that wanted to vie with him for his treasures, he quickly began to incorporate dragons into his play, pretending at first that I hadn't instigated this, that he had "discovered" them.

Eventually he came to include me in his play, utilize objects from my shelves, and develop the capacity for relating. He did so because I met him where he was: defended against the adult world that had unrealistic expectations of him, and cut off from his peers as well. He seemed, in the words of his teacher, to have no individual identity. But the "I" that emerged as we continued to play together was a very bright and wonderful "I." If I had insisted he speak my adult language, this would not have happened. And as the literal use of language precludes the imagination, there would have been no salvation in it for this child. In his non-verbal digging he had uncovered, and as a result "discovered" himself, with my help and support.

Weeks later, once he had emerged and felt safe and even comfortable enough to be free with himself, he turned to me in the middle of making a sand scene and said, "I really love coming here." This was probably the first actual sentence he had spoken to me, but by the time he uttered it he was already a very different child; social and even outgoing in school, self-possessed and self-confident in his daily life. His words were affirming what had happened, rather than being central to its happening. Much can be said about how and why his simple digging, along with my attentiveness and

not interfering, brought about such a significant change. But that it did, and that our common language was that of play, was true.

The act of self-discovery is central to any therapeutic process. This boy's process is an apt metaphor for all creative therapy. By using our imaginations to dig in the material of self, we find the greater Self, or at least resume our lifelong journey towards finding it. We will need to make many changes to accommodate this Self, but playing makes change not only easier, but by its very nature a necessity. All the expressive materials described in this book are non-static, and thus almost all require a letting go of the known form or defense system in order to use them, at least temporarily. Yet all of them also allow for the experience and expression of solidity, without rigidity. This paradox that creative play possesses in all its variants is at the core of its efficacy.

Perhaps the most important aspect of non-verbal work with children is that it satisfies them deeply, helping them to feel seen and heard without losing any of the mystery of life experience. Any attempt to articulate this mystery through simple everyday speech would greatly diminish its power. Ordinary words feel small, whereas life is seemingly limitless. Children welcome this limitlessness. They relinquish their closeness to it slowly and reluctantly—and this in and of itself causes many childhood problems.

A child once told me with a smile on his face and in a hushed voice, as if letting me in on a big secret: "You know, life is a million times bigger than this, a gazillion times bigger!" He had made a scene in the sandbox that was an attempt to display many worlds layered one upon the other. He wanted me to know that the box had limits but his imagination did not. He found great comfort in this, as many children do. We offer this book then, with its canon of techniques and experiences, as an effort to explore the art of speaking about this "gazillion times bigger" world and the child's experience of it.

Chapter 1

The Hidden Treasure of the Self

Jenny Bates

In this chapter I will be exploring the theme of hidden treasure, using my own perceptions, intuitions, and experiences in sandplay with children, and relevant case material. However, I would like to acknowledge the thinkers and writers in the field who have influenced my way of working with children. These include the work and writings of C.G. Jung, D.W. Winnicott and Dora Kalff, and the ongoing inspiration provided by Dennis McCarthy. Last, as a student and practitioner of Shambhala Buddhist teachings, I have confidence in the basic goodness of all beings, beyond conceptual thought or dualistic thinking, and it is from this ground that I work with children as a play therapist.

In my work as a play therapist with children, sandplay is central and essential to the therapeutic process. Using a sandbox deeper than is customary (eight inches deep, as opposed to three or four) has resulted in all kinds of experiences with digging, burying, and seeking treasure. These experiences have aroused in me an interest in better understanding, via my thoughts and observations, the significance of hidden treasure in the world of children who come to play and use the sand.

The beauty of sandplay with children is that the symbol and its place in the sand scene stands for itself, with interpretation rarely needed by, or to, the child concerned. During the course of therapy and the creation of several sand scenes, and as a result of this symbolic play, the child will manifest changes in behaviors in her world that indicate the transformative effects of sandplay and of working in this non-verbal way. Sandplay and the use of symbolic objects that create the scene or story undoubtedly facilitate the integration of unconscious material with consciously held beliefs and feelings. For example, a child is not usually able to verbalize her sense of fragmentation or loss of self-confidence as a result of her experiences or

upbringing. The symbol, however, does exactly that. I have come to think that the choice to select, hide, bury, and find treasure is symbolic of a child's sense of self, her emerging "me-ness."

It is as if the child is saying, "My sense of me is valuable, special, and needs to be protected. I can hide it from the world. I will decide how to hide it, who protects it and how, and to whom and when it will be revealed." Thus she gains mastery over a mysterious, organic process of healing and development of identity that is necessary for healthy growth.

When a child is engaged in creating a sand scene of symbolic significance, the therapist serves as a witness and container, sharing in the intensity and unfolding of the creation and expression of something almost sacred, one could say. Sometimes it can feel as though we are standing on hallowed ground.

Case study: Amy

Nine-year-old Amy lived in kinship foster care with her great-aunt and uncle and older cousin. She felt deeply sad about the loss of her father through alcoholism, her mother through mental illness, and her older brother who was living separately. She had been with her foster family for four or five years and was doing well, according to her aunt. Amy had occasional visits with her mother and brother. However, it wasn't long before I heard about the difficulties Amy was having with her older cousin in the home, as well as incidents of petty thieving and the struggle to maintain friendships at school.

I was struck initially by an artificiality in the way Amy presented herself. Her first few sand trays were rich and complicated, verging on the chaotic. They involved all kinds of loss, struggle, conflict, burials, and hidden treasure. After four months of continuous weekly sessions in which Amy established all kinds of physical and imaginative games, in addition to sandplay, she created the following scene:

> First she collected a few items of treasure—shiny beads, glass stones—and put them into a small treasure box, itself decorated with jewels and brass trimming. She buried the box in the center of the sand tray as deep as she could and covered it over with sand. On the surface, over the treasure, she placed a church and next to it a small Christian icon. She then selected other figures of saints and holy people and buried them in a circle around the central church. These were accompanied by church-like buildings. White shells and stones were then half-hidden in a careful arrangement around the central church.

Amy was in awe of what she had created. She had entered a hushed and silent space while creating this scene, had worked with focus and concentration unbroken from start to completion, saying very little. What was remarkable about this scene was its order, its arrangement around a central object. In fact we could call it an emerging mandala pattern, itself a symbol for the Self. Amy's foster family were devout Christians, and it seemed that here she was expressing her growing sense of security in this home, with religion providing a grounding in community and spirituality, both an inner and an outer experience. There was also a sense of laying things to rest. In fact she named this scene "The Holy Graveyard" (Figure 1.1). Amy had recently been taken to the grave of her great-grandmother, after whom she was named. So the symbol here combines Amy's inner self, her lineage, and her present family and community into a pictorial representation. This is something that a nine-year-old would find difficult to articulate verbally.

Amy's therapy process has been the struggle to establish a secure yet authentically felt sense of self. If her immediate family were considered such "bad seeds" by her great-aunt and others in the extended family, what did that make her? She had developed an air of sweetness that was exaggerated simply to protect her from the worst possible threat of all, that is, "Be good, or you will be sent to Social Services," from befalling her. However, in the experiences of choosing, hiding, burying, guarding, and finding treasure over and over again, the artificiality faded and Amy came to stand as truly herself within her foster family. Her inner self now successfully integrates both unconscious and conscious aspects, a process that I believe happens directly in sandplay and specifically in treasure-seeking.

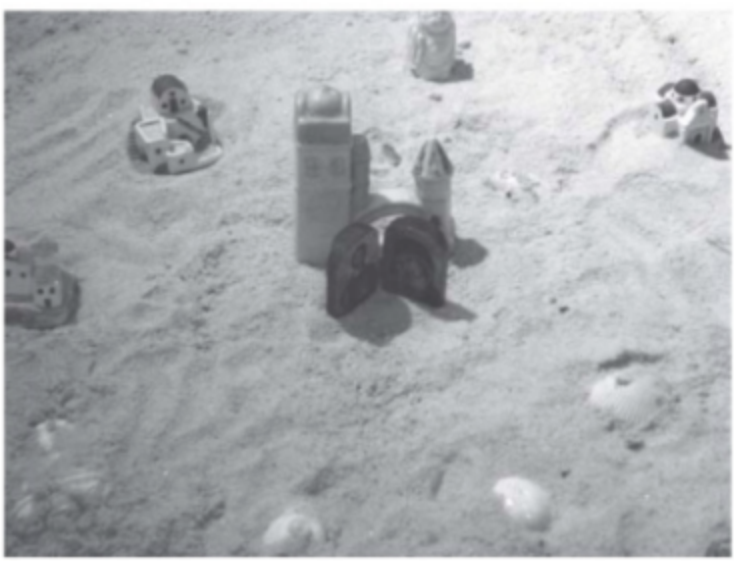

Figure. 1.1 The Holy Graveyard

Sandplay in itself combines elements that are known and unknown. When asked gently why a particular object was chosen, the child most frequently responds with a shrug of the shoulders or possibly "I don't know." The choosing and the placing come from the "I don't know" but the final viewing of the completed scene impacts the conscious mind, often with a "Wow! Did I do that?" type of response. This is all information from which the inner self is constructed. Amy's most recent sand story in this current series involved a treasure chest buried deep in the desert, over which many sandstorms blew. One day a family of tigers came to the treasure site. The baby tiger was chosen to find the treasure, and then the treasure was replaced by an Egyptian mummy that Amy named "T" (short for Tutankhamun). She spoke quietly to T, saying, "You've survived for a long, long time," and then buried him in place of the treasure chest and closed him in. Now that her surviving self is safe and buried, representing a sense of a healthy lineage, her treasure is more readily accessible. She can be herself in her foster family, accepted for whom and what she is. It is healthy to have some aspects of ourselves buried or put away once some light has been shed on them.

Case study: Carla

Carla was an 11-year-old struggling to come to terms with her mother's alcoholism, which had dramatically broken apart her family. Her mother now lived in a separate apartment, while Carla and her younger brother lived with their father in the original family home. One time Carla had called the police when she realized that her mother was driving her and her brother while intoxicated. This had thrust Carla suddenly into a world of adult matters and responsibility. After this, Carla became anxious and hypervigilant about her mother's state and felt a need to take care of her younger brother. I saw Carla for three months in sessions every other week. Carla could talk about how she felt abruptly separated from her carefree childhood, by having to confront her mother's drinking, and how she now felt unsafe around her. She was afraid to be alone at night for fear that her mother would get drunk. Carla was immediately attracted to the sandbox but also delighted in exploring other forms of non-verbal expression, such as messy painting, the doll's house, clay and ball games, all of which served to reduce her anxiety and preoccupation. During the time that her mother gained sobriety in treatment and a measure of reliability, Carla said that she knew she would never be a child again, partly because of what had happened and partly because it really was time for her to be growing up anyway!

Carla herself decided to end sessions when her summer schedule became very demanding, and toward the end of our sessions together she created the following sand scenes in two consecutive sessions.

The first scene Carla named quite early on as "The Artifactual Day" (Figure 1.2). She was recreating a recent school trip to a local archeological site.

> In the sandbox she made several sites, each with differing artifacts chosen from the shelves and marked with a flag. The flags were of differing colors according to a schema that indicated those sites already dug out and those still to be uncovered. The final site was located just off center and was a deep, deep well. Into this she put three treasured articles—a small, heart-shaped clock, a pair of golden slippers, and a small pile of coins. She then closed over the top of the well with a glass tile, a round mirror, and finally a large lotus flower. She marked the site with a large yellow flag. It was different from the others because this site could only be opened by professionals, as opposed to students.

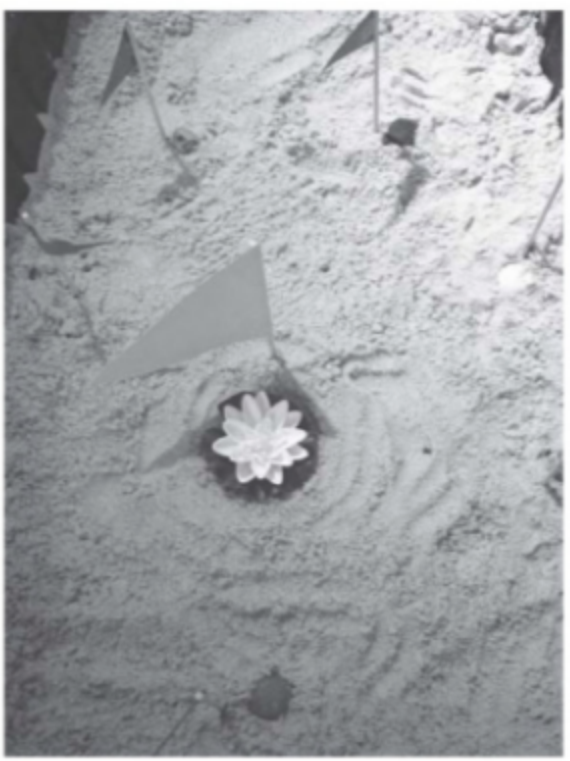

Figure 1.2 The Artifactual Day