Preface

Imagine "Sandtray," the therapies that use sand, water, and miniatures to unleash the power of creative play. Play in a three-dimensional sand "world" may evoke both joy and self-understanding. Knowing ourselves, "a key to psychological survival," functions as a basic protection from life's difficulties and a foundation for resolving them (Holmes, 2001, p. 4). The poet and Buddhist leader Daisaku Ikeda asserts that "Creativity means to push open the heavy, groaning doorway of life itself. . . . For opening the door to your own life is in the end more difficult than opening the door to all the mysteries of the universe" (Ikeda, 2012, p. 7). The Sandtray process presented here offers a powerful method to secure not only survival but also growth for a dynamically contributive life.

Sandtray, a highly personal and inventive process often considered an extension of play or expressive arts treatments for children, also enhances the lives of adults. The stories of real people who move sand, water, and/or miniatures, and reap healing, recovery, and growth—from three-year-old Jada to eighty-three-year-old Mary—demonstrate my approach to Sandtray in this book.

Through the Sandtray process, we discover our deeply held beliefs and tap our distinctive strengths and resources. A *Creator* plays to access the implicit imaging activity of the right hemisphere of the brain that lies out of the reach of everyday consciousness. The right hemisphere serves as the recorder of traumatic events. Successful treatment of trauma needs to include a method to access this part of the mind. The many stories in this book demonstrate that Sandtray provides this means.

In the first chapter, the basic concepts of the Sandtray/Sandplay pioneer Margaret Lowenfeld and the views of this author are explored. The Sandtray apparatus and process are introduced with the story of six-year-old Eddy. Chapter 2 acquaints readers with interpersonal neurobiology and its essential concepts of linear (left brain) and implicit (right brain) functions and describes how and why this information is useful in psychotherapy. The field of interpersonal neurobiology is changing rapidly and its concepts are evolving. Yet, the field is highly instructive for psychotherapists. In the third chapter, the fundamental principles of attachment theory show how the quality of human connection influences treatment. The physical, intellectual, and emotional components of communication are identified, highlighting how Sandtray techniques facilitate integration of our implicit, nonlinear experiences.

Chapter 4 familiarizes readers with how people may form meanings and patterns of experience. A schema of "energetic modes" and "contextual fields" is offered as a framework to assist therapists as they prepare to use the Sandtray methods outlined in this volume. The fifth chapter offers therapists an exercise to increase their awareness of any tendency to judge or interpret. The linear structure of cognitive reference points, called "Sandtray aspects," is introduced. Then, self-care and multicultural concerns are addressed, preparing therapists to engage in the techniques explained in the next four chapters.

Using the terms *Creator* for the maker of the world (client), and *Witness* for the facilitator and guide (psychotherapist), I present the Sandtray *aspects* in chapters 6 through 9. These aspects pinpoint ten observable occurrences within a Sandtray process and form a foundation for session interactions. *Witnesses* can use these aspects to aid *Creators* in learning from the sand world. The novice Sandtray therapist will find information and instruction to initiate the use of these techniques, while the experienced therapist will be able to integrate this new information with ease. Chapter 10 sets forth the Sandtray aspects as they are applied to the moving sand worlds of children, while the final chapter looks at the use of these Sandtray methods with children suffering from complex trauma.

This book has been a decade in the writing, inspired by my clients, colleagues, and workshop participants. Betty Russell, LCSW, BCD, mentored me for the past forty years. Working with her, the idea for this volume twinkled in my mind and continued to mature. Betty did not allow me to wallow in my "comfort zone" without a challenge. Nor did she push me to face my fear and confusion alone. Learning with this master of balance as my social-work mentor has been my heart's treasure. Betty is known in the

greater Sacramento area as a master therapist. She provides CEU workshops and has been in private practice since 1974. Prior to private work, Betty was a supervisor with the Sacramento County Department of Social Welfare and taught MSW students at the School of Social Work, California State University, Sacramento.

I remain ever grateful to Gisela Schubach De Domenico, PhD, of Vision Quest for Symbolic Reality in Oakland, California. My ability to use the Sandtray methods grew exponentially in my eleven years of study with her. Through her workshops, Gisela kept Lowenfeld's theories alive in the United States. Her systemization of Lowenfeld's Sandtray methods and her reflective/directive technique inspired the "Sandtray aspects" presented here. From Gisela I learned the implementation of Lowenfeld's "modes" and the essence of what has evolved into the "contextual fields." Most important, Gisela urged me to document, research, and write about my Sandtray work. Through Gisela's Sandtray teachings and my ongoing study, I am now able to share these effective techniques with others through this book.

Several other people aided me in my ten-year writing journey. Among them are my beloved partner, Thomas Paterson, PhD, who offered innumerable supports, including his surgical editing and call for active verbs; my generous friend Elizabeth Sherbow, PhD, LPC, who ventured through each paragraph with me and elicited my knowledge through wise inquiry; and my long-time friend Donna Parten, MSW, who edited many versions of this text and raised helpful questions.

Throughout this decade of writing, several friends and former and current colleagues read portions of this book, giving useful feedback: Jennifer Campbell, LPC; Deborah Domitrovich, MA; Rosemary Dunn-Dalton, LCSW; Janelle Gerber, MS; Jozeffa Greer, LMFT; Susan and John Hawksley; Heather Lawrence, MSW, RSW; and Judy McDowell Carlson, MS. I am grateful for the literary advice of my dear neighbor Donald Reynolds, PhD. I thank Mary Foret, PhD, for suggesting the use of the terms *Creator* and *Witness* years ago and my friend and Sandtray teacher Jackie Baritell, LMFT, for her detailed review and comments on the last five chapters of this book. For technical assistance in the preparation of this manuscript I am grateful to Dash Antel, Susan Dyssegard, Brian LeBlanc, and Gretchen Thiel.

Had I not faced and overcome the obstacles which emerged from my life in the effort to complete this work, this book would not exist. So, for teaching me the principles of "Never be defeated" and "Do your best" as a young social worker, I am indebted to the Sacramento, California, pioneer women's division members of the Soka Gakkai International-USA, a Buddhist-lay organization.

Readers who wish to view the Sandtray photographs included in this book in a color format may do so at my website: www.roxannerae.com. On the website, additional photographs are available for some vignettes. This site also includes articles I previously published, a biographical statement, and my resume.

With deep respect I offer appreciation to my clients, their families, my supervisees, and my colleagues who have allowed me to use their most intimate work to teach Sandtray. As is customary, I have altered identifying details to protect individuals'confidentiality.

Roxanne Rae MSW, LCSW, BCD
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List of Photographs, Drawings, and Charts

Photographs below are available in color at www.roxannerae.com.

CHAPTER ONE

Sand Play Beginnings

Sand. Wet or dry. Moving, forming, creating, destroying, re-creating. Throughout the world, children are innately drawn to sand. At beaches, rivers, empty lots, backyard sand boxes, wherever children find sand, they dig in and manipulate its grains. Sand play is so common it appears to be an essentially mundane activity of little note, certainly with no place in psychotherapy and self-development. When I first encountered Sandplay therapies, for example, I was in graduate school and seeking to learn and master the most effective social work practices to help people. "Sand" did not seem to have a serious role in that mission. Even though, growing up, I knew about sand firsthand, it seemed far removed from "therapy," and far too simple. Not so. As the pianist Van Cliburn reminds us: "Within simplicity is great, enormous complexity" (Cliburn, 2008). So, it is not surprising that I have taken quite some time to unravel the multiple complexities of sand therapies.

Without noticing, I had been absorbing the properties of sand and water since childhood. My parents took our family to California's Sacramento River Delta to escape the overwhelming heat. While they water-skied with our neighbors, I created kingdoms of sand and river clay on the beach. When I attended grade school, we lived in a working-class housing tract. My mother periodically built brick planters and borders to beautify our yard by using cubic yards of beautiful golden sand for her landscaping. My brother had his collections of soldiers, vehicles, and dinosaurs. I added rocks, leaves, pods, and sticks to the sand pile. For hours we created vast topographies in

the sand, and I remember feeling a bit sad when the sand pile dwindled at the end of my mother's projects.

As an adolescent in the San Francisco Bay Area during the late 1960s, I had opportunities to participate in meditation and the embodied imagery methods of Psychodrama and Gestalt Therapies. As I developed my skills, I found that each employed a form of physiological grounding and body awareness. Such approaches, along with Buddhist philosophy, emphasize the oneness of the universe with body, intellect, emotion, and spirit. After practicing these techniques, I noted a fundamental shift in my personal perspective that allowed me access to the interrelationship between my body, emotions, images, and thoughts. This experience led me to doubt the dualistic view of a fundamental mind/body separation that was presented in some of my college coursework. Later, my graduate studies in medical social work reinforced my understanding and acceptance of the interactive oneness of body, brain/mind, and spirit.

As a young social worker, I was able to view the completed sand worlds of my foster-child clients at the end of their treatment sessions. I consulted with their therapists, who used Sandtray methods. Most of these youths were suffering from abuse, neglect, and severe attachment disruptions. As I watched them improve, my curiosity about Sandtray techniques intensified. I "knew," at a deep level of my being, that making sand worlds helped these shattered young lives to resolve trauma—and to repair. I understood I had much to learn about the rich and mysterious intricacies of Sandtray therapies. Compelled by the pain of my clients, I was unaware, at the time, that this quest would also help me.

Beginning with my formal training as a Sandtray practitioner, I experienced the transformative powers of these methods. Now having had years of experience as both a *Creator* and a *Witness* in the Sandtray process, I learned how this apparatus eases creative freedom and flexibility. These qualities allow this technique to offer greater access to the unspoken, implicit beliefs that form the substratum for our conscious actions.

Since 1975, I have studied and applied expressive arts and play therapies. I am thrilled to find human play is now valued as a biologically based activity for all ages. As psychiatrist Stuart Brown explains: "The ability to play is critical not only to being happy, but also to sustaining social relationships and being a creative, innovative person" (Brown, 2010, p. 6).

I do not view Sandtray as a stand-alone method of treatment. With the exception of adults who come to me specifically requesting a Sandtray consultation, I routinely use Sandtray techniques within the context of both play and verbally based therapies. As with other treatments, a comprehensive

history and assessment are made. Sandtray is not a "magic cure." As with any method of advancement one may seek, Sandtray requires a commitment of time, a willingness to be open to one's inner experience, and active participation.

Nonverbal and less verbal methods of self-exploration are meant to evoke the vague and indescribable elements of life, as well as those already accessible to us. Sandtray offers a versatile way to connect to the nonverbal qualities of our experiences and conceive of a way to bring them into our everyday lives. Early in my therapy practice, I discovered clients increasingly showed less interest in using traditional art therapy techniques once they tried Sandtray. Often they said, "I can't draw, dance, or paint." As early as four years of age many of the children believed they had inadequate artistic skills and were unwilling to try, even in a noneducational setting.

This feedback from my clients gradually led me to expand my capacity to use Sandtray methods. I often worked with severe complex trauma in young children who had no words to express their confusing and painful experiences. The more familiar I became with sand techniques, the more apparent it became to me that this less verbal modality facilitates the integration of physical, intellectual, and emotional experiences promoting a more coherent sense of self. I have consistently found that the intrinsic qualities of Sandtray exponentially increase my clients' abilities to synthesize and communicate ideas, and it does so far more effectively than words alone or other less verbal methods.

From my present perspective as an experienced psychotherapist, events which seemed inconsequential when they occurred are now illuminated as stepping stones to my current approach to this work. When I started formal Sandtray training, I was a relationally based therapist rooted in child development and object-relations theories and well-grounded in systems theory. Under the guidance of my social-work mentor Betty Russell, I sought to combine treatments that encompassed the whole of a person's life and his or her environment. This path led me to work with the psychobiologist Stanley Keleman, who focused on the reciprocal relationship between physical anatomy and development of the self. His concept of "emotional anatomy" illuminates the connection between one's *emotional feelings*, such as anger, frustration, and excitement, and *physiological sensations*, such as muscle tension, skeletal position, and motility (Keleman, 1985). In the late 1980s I began Sandtray studies with the psychotherapist Gisela Schubach De Domenico. Through study with her, I learned the treatment methods of the British child psychiatrist Dr. Margaret Lowenfeld. I was trained to teach De Domenico's approach to Sandtray based on Lowenfeld's work. Although my

approach to Sandtray has evolved over the years, my current thinking and methods remain rooted in Lowenfeld's views.

This book seeks to demonstrate the effectiveness of Sandtray methods for healing, recovery, and growth. I have now practiced and taught Sandtray and other treatment methods for nearly four decades. With close study and the assistance of my mentor, I learned that the therapy sessions where I seemingly achieved fortuitous results with clients actually grew from specific efforts I myself made. This book will explore both the subtleties of this work as well as the overt techniques applied.

The Birth of Sandtray: Lowenfeld's Influence

During the late 1920s, Margaret Lowenfeld explained how children's thinking was different from the linear format of adults. She theorized that physical sensations, emotions, memories, and thoughts are interwoven in children's minds. She called this form of thought "Picture Thinking" (Lowenfeld, 1993, p. 5). After much experimenting with her patients using nonverbal play, Lowenfeld sought "to find a medium which would in itself be instantly attractive to children and which would give them and the observer a 'language,' as it were, through which communication could be established" (Lowenfeld, 1993, p. 281). The Sandtray tools and environment allowed children to express themselves in an intensely personal, visual, and kinesthetic manner. By circumventing the use of words, children did not have to conform to the consensual reality of the adult worldview. Inspired by H. G. Wells's book *Floor Games*, Lowenfeld devised a therapeutic tool that encouraged the use of many senses. This technique facilitates a more complete and focused communication that is unimpaired by the structure of language. Her psychotherapeutic method using sand, water, and miniature items of both the real world and fantasy became known as "Lowenfeld's World Technique" (Lowenfeld, 1993).

Since Lowenfeld's introduction of the sand world at her London children's clinic in 1928, practitioners worldwide have adopted the use of her tools. Sandtray techniques are employed with patients from toddlers to seniors, with couples, with families, and with groups. This *world* formation is so versatile that it has captured the attention of a wide spectrum of psychotherapists with a variety of treatment styles. Sand worlds have also spawned a scholarly literature in journals and books. The Sandtray apparatus is now applied in a number of fundamentally dissimilar physical environments and within a foundation of diverse theoretical frameworks. Lowenfeld conducted her play-based research and treatment primarily with school-aged children, but

adults have found her sand techniques no less useful in self-understanding and in communicating complex concepts.

A Peek at Place and Process

A well-equipped Sandtray apparatus offers many choices to a potential sand world *Creator*. The best introduction to Sandtray is to visit a richly furnished playroom office. Photographs and words must suffice here (see figure 1.1).

More sand boxes and colors of sand offer exponentially greater choices. A wide array of miniatures at hand helps evoke physical, emotional, and intellectual modes of experiencing for participants (items in appendix A). Other than the general safety boundaries of the playroom, one rule established at the start of a Sandtray session is to keep the sand in or over the box. Another instruction is to discuss with the therapist any desires to throw sand or break items so that together both of us may problem-solve how to meet these needs safely. As an introduction to the Sandtray process, consider the following child's story drawn from my experience as a psychotherapist.

Figure 1.1. A peek at place and process

Eddy's Story: Sneak Attack

Eddy, seven years old, grew up in a stable family with a secure sense of attachment. He had been functioning well in school and social activities. He was brought to therapy during a crisis. Eddy and his younger sister had been fondled and directed in sexual contact with each other by their female babysitter, a relative. Although this teenage girl had pressured Eddy to keep their "game" a secret, he refused. His parents immediately reported the abuse to authorities and sought play therapy. Eddy presented himself as a bright and articulate boy. He had dutifully reported the abuse in a matter-of-fact manner. Initially he seemed flooded by these sexual experiences, talking about them often. He expressed embarrassment, but knew that he was not being blamed for the behavior.

By the time he arrived for treatment he had been interviewed multiple times, including on video tape. With the passing of these few weeks Eddy was no longer able to discuss the abuse incident, and seemed to want to forget about it. However, his parents reported that he demonstrated increased anxiety during the day and whimpered in his sleep. His parents were also concerned about the increased frequency of his nightmares.

The spacious playroom was equipped with an art table and materials, games, puppets and dolls, and many other play options. The far end of the room had shelves of well-organized miniatures and a nesting stack of sand trays. There were natural tan, red, black, and white sands to choose from. On an initial brief visit to orient Eddy to treatment, he played with other items and ignored the Sandtray area until the last few moments of his time. He stated he would play in the sand on his next visit.

When Eddy began his first Sandtray he was silent and placed items with deliberate concentration (see figure 1.2). He started by requesting a bin of multicolored "army men," yet chose a tall guard tower and placed it in the sand first. He then added a cannon, gray army men, and a plastic rock formation. Next, he placed two gray soldiers in the tower and said, "They shoot the other ones" and described how these two were striving to be vigilant. I also learned these same two soldiers could "see everything" in the sand world.

Eddy placed more army figures, taking great care as to the positions they faced. He confirmed that this was a war, but that "I don't know what it's about." He was moving the objects and appeared to be acting out complex fighting scenes. At one point he informed me that some of the people "kind of know each other" and that's why it is a battle. He continued detailed play in this manner, adjusting items, adding another cannon, and additional gray army personnel.

As he created in the sand, we continued to engage intermittently in tentative discussions of the world. He began to describe some of the soldiers as "good guys," and some as "bad guys," although he used only gray figures for all of

Figure 1.2. Sneak attack: Eddy's view.

them. Shortly after his identification of two distinct factions, Eddy added an army hospital and told me it was for "both sides." He then made a shift in his stance, becoming more relaxed and active in his body movements, and subsequently more verbal.

Eddy then decided to make the "good guys" and "bad guys" different colors. However, the "bad guys" had to be all the "same kind of green." This change led to a dialogue in which he told me, "It's easier to see who the bad guys are, when they're all the same color." The two gray soldiers on guard in the tower were then approached by green "bad guys." A couple of these soldiers violated the tower's territory and were placed on the back side of the tower, between it and the sand tray wall. There is one soldier who "sneaks up on them" from the same side as the battle. Eddy says, "No one knows she's there." She is very sneaky and the soldiers in the tower do not see her until she is at the top of the ladder. Referring to the two figures in the tower, he then said, "They are looking the other way. They are in danger."

This war continued in detail with various overt and sneak attacks. Both sides suffered losses, received reinforcements, and even the "good guys" made mistakes. Then one cannon directly threatened a "good" soldier. This soldier perceived his danger. We discussed this man's perspective of his choices, and Eddy moved him to safety.

As the conflict continued, Eddy counted down to me the number of "bad guys" who were left fighting. With only four "bad guys" remaining, one of the "good guys" was "shot so hard" that he landed with his head upside down in the sand. Then, a fellow fighter perched himself on top of this fallen comrade. From there, he shot his big gun, annihilating the last of the "bad guys."

Within the context of this sand world, I could be with Eddy as he explored a variety of experiences that he could not talk about at that time. Working with images in this way quickly helped Eddy sort out who was "good" and "bad" and he began to discern how to identify the differences. He also explored the uncomfortable experiences of being "in danger" and having people near who "violate territory" and are "sneaky." Through the two soldiers in the tower he portrayed his distinct sense of separateness, or being different (as a result of this abuse). He was only able to speak about these feelings later in treatment. However, he did explore them in my presence where we could acknowledge them together, forming a foundation for communications about the abuse. The conflict between people who at the first were alike in color, and "kind of know each other," may have reflected Eddy's awareness that because the perpetrator of the abuse was a distant but previously trusted relative, a major rift was occurring throughout the extended family. Information on the depth of the family's conflict emerged sometime

later in a session with his parents. Eddy's example shows only a glimpse of his initial treatment process.

Of note in this story is that Eddy came to play in the sand and created this world spontaneously. He was not prompted with "Show me what happened in the Sandtray," or "Show me what the bad lady did to you that night." Eddy was never told in any way that he needed to focus on his abuse experience. Eddy's world emerged from his life when he was given free reign to make anything he desired with the tools at hand. The techniques I will discuss in this volume focus on this creation of free and spontaneous sand worlds.

Our reading of these case stories is like viewing a frame or two of a lifelong movie. We are indebted to the Sandtray *Creators* and their parents who have been willing to share their intimate lives with us all. Learning from them, we may gain a deeper understanding of the Sandtray process, and have an opportunity to become more effective and compassionate psychotherapists.

In this chapter I have provided a brief introduction to Sandtray and my personal approach to psychotherapy. I have demonstrated the use of the Sandtray process by exploring a traumatic event in the life of a young boy. His case also illustrates how to begin to form a mutual language with a *Creator* based on the sand world. Next, I will set forth some principles from the theory of interpersonal neurobiology that form a foundation for how and why this Sandtray process is effective, once again presenting vignettes from actual clinical case studies.