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Alchemy, sandtray and art psychotherapy: Sifting sands

KAREN HUCKVALE

Abstract

To an art psychotherapist working with sandtray the material itself—the sand—may be central. Traditional sandtray largely sees the sand as a backdrop to the narratives created by the objects, as ‘ground’ rather than ‘figure’, the stage on which the action happens rather than the action itself. The paper starts from a specific ‘child-led’ innovative process of sieving sand and amplifies this with mythological and symbolic material to clarify how profound issues may unfold through attention to the drama: what is *done*, as well as the stories told *about* what is done. Sandtray is easily represented as though it is a ‘diagrammatic’ process. In this paper physicality, embodiment and enactment in relation to the material are re-emphasised, developing an art psychotherapy perspective on sand itself as an art material. The place of performance art as part of art therapy practice is briefly considered. Clinical vignettes are illuminated by parallels from Jungian psychotherapy and one of its central metaphors: alchemy. The ‘alchemical’ processes of dissolving, separating and purifying prime material—the sand—are explored as key psychotherapy processes. The accompanying images arose out of the therapist’s reflective practice about the case.

Keywords: *Art psychotherapy, sandtray, alchemy, Jung, imagination, problem solving*

The sandtray world had ended in chaos. All the figures were in a Sleeping Beauty style suspended animation. This almost forever sleep with little possibility of a rescuing hero had been established at the end of the previous session. Steph and I surveyed the catastrophe a week later. I agreed with her observation that it did look ‘a bit of a mess’ and that ‘no one had come to save “them” yet’. Steph said, ‘Let’s clear up’. I checked this was from genuine desire rather than a sense of obligation. At 11 years old she was overly responsible yet, after six months of therapy, was comfortable and familiar with having real choice in the art room.

She placed the princess and the Minotaur back on their shelf, admonishing the Minotaur for snoring. A castle, two police cars and a tree were easily gathered up and returned to their places. The legion of buried dinosaurs, mermaids and spiders were unearthed from the sand with the aid of the big kitchen sieve and restored to their boxes. Then all that remained was the ‘empty’ sandtray permeated by the blizzard of glitter Steph had strewn to send ‘everyone’ to sleep.

Steph had tugged at her hair with one hand, running her fingers through the sand with the other. I’d wondered if we were finished. She drove the sieve into the mixture, lifted it high, watching as the sparkling sand poured through. There was a moment when larger flakes of glitter and bigger, black grains of sand were precariously held in the broad mesh for a second. Steph repeated the movement, then asked me to help: to hold a sheet

of paper beneath the sieve so these last flakes and grains could be saved and kept separate. Repeatedly she filled the sieve and held it almost motionless, not speaking and barely breathing; she indicated with her eyes the moment I should insert the flat paper into the flow. After 30 or more repetitions of scoop, sieve and save we had a gritty, glittery mass in a clear plastic jug. In a problem solving way I wondered to myself about getting a sieve with a finer mesh. . . .

Reflecting on her recent beach holiday, Steph reasoned that sand sinks in water but that glitter might float. It was a fair hypothesis, so she filled the jug with water. Most of the glitter formed a buoyant crust but about 10% sank with the sand. Covering the draining board with paper towels she spooned the sodden glittery crust out to dry.

We looked through the clear sides of the jug. Swirling the sludge in water, Steph noticed that, when in suspension, the sand sank faster than the glitter. With vigorous stirring there was a point when nearly all the glitter was whirling around the top half of the jug while the sand was moving more slowly at the bottom.

She lined the sieve with paper towels, added more water to the sparkly sludge, stirred furiously, then slopped half the water into the sieve. It worked! Most of the glitter was caught in the paper towel. The remaining sand was spooned out to dry on more paper towels.

At the end of the session the table was covered in glittery wet paper towels, the draining board with sludgy sandy ones. The sandtray looked as

full of glitter as it had at the start. Steph surveyed her handiwork and said, 'That's good, it works, we can finish it next week'.

This session in a Child and Adolescent Mental Health outpatient setting marked a turning point in therapy. Several previous sessions had involved story making in the sandtray. A beautiful princess—variously orphaned, abandoned or imprisoned—lived alone in her castle. She wanted to be happy but was 'attacked' by ordinary, ever-present spiders and terrifying dinosaurs. Help and support came from mermaids who, like Princess Ariel (Clements & Musker, 1989), struggled to understand people but had the capacity to be lifesavers, and the police who had been powerful rescuers in Steph's real world. Yet the princess really wanted her family, friends and a prince. Her only visitor, the Minotaur, was like Beauty's Beast: sympathetic, attractive, unpredictable and scary. Sending everyone to sleep, leaving the sandtray unresolved and in a 'mess' meant Steph trusted the therapist to look after 'everything' until the following week, and not be overwhelmed by all the hopes, fears and emotional mess.

At home and school Steph tended towards over compliance interspersed by outbursts of great distress and destructiveness. She attended art therapy willingly, choosing to slowly experiment with the art room materials while chatting about everyday concerns. Steph spoke little of her history which involved neglect, abuse and traumatic physical assault. Instead she methodically and quietly checked out the therapist's reliability and consistency. A vigilant and observant child, she pushed boundaries carefully in one direction and then pushed again from a different place. Six months into therapy a good enough, warm, trusting relationship had developed; overtly leaving the therapist with her 'mess' was new. Returning to the sandtray after a week, the decision to 'clear up the mess' was an active process and not dutiful.

The sandtray contained about 25 litres of sand. It took at least 30 scoops to sieve one litre of sand. As 'clean' sand went straight back into the 'messy' tray the effort was huge. This was an energetic physical process which *mattered* to Steph.

As a verb, 'to matter' means 'to be of importance or consequence'. Yet as a noun, 'matter' describes the primary material from which physical existence is derived (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*). The word is derived from the Latin, *materia*, meaning wood, and this

in turn traces back to *māter*, meaning mother. Thus 'matter' can be considered the mother substance.

The sieving seemed a Herculean task. Mindful that the tray would eventually need to be cleaned out, the therapist bought a finer mesh sieve.

Psyche and the seeds

Mythology and fairytales supply universal metaphors for human dilemmas and struggles. Their stories give clues to the psychological heart of characteristic predicaments and possible routes to their resolution. Steph had spoken about the problems faced by Princess Aurora (Sleeping Beauty), Belle (Beauty and the Beast), Snow White and Cinderella. All these 'Disney princesses' are girls from 'difficult' family situations with fostering, adoption and self-esteem issues.

- In Greek mythology Psyche was a mortal princess. She was accidentally introduced to, then separated from, her immortal husband Eros by Aphrodite, the goddess of love and Eros's mother. In order to be reunited with him, Psyche had to face Aphrodite who was vengeful and hostile towards her for being beautiful and for having married her son against her wishes. (A seemingly eternal dilemma for some brides and their mothers-in-law.) To test Psyche's love and commitment to Eros, Aphrodite set her four tasks.

Steph was struggling to identify who she was and who were her 'true' attachments. She had three families and three 'mothers'—birth, adoptive and foster—who each, in different ways, tested her love and commitment. There was a great deal of matter.

- *Sorting the seeds* was Psyche's first task. Aphrodite took her to a huge jumbled pile of seeds: poppy, lentils, corn, barley, and chick peas. Aphrodite told Psyche to sort each kind of seed into its own pile before nightfall. The physical task seemed impossible until an army of ants helped. The ants sorted the pile grain by grain into seed-specific heaps and achieved the task in time.

Steph had a jumbled pile of feelings, undifferentiated like the seeds. She was emotionally pulled in three directions and *had* to sort and understand her feelings. She had been let down, rejected and physically hurt by people she had trusted and who had professed to love her.

Jean Bolen explores how each of Aphrodite's tasks has symbolic significance and in completing each task Psyche developed skills she didn't have before. In order to begin at all, Psyche had to sort her conflicted, uncertain feelings and competing loyalties. This is always complicated when intense loving attachments—'Aphrodite issues'—are involved. When we 'sort the seeds' we are required to:

...look honestly within, sift through feelings, values and motives and separate what is truly important from what is insignificant. (Bolen, 1985, p. 259)

Steph needed to sift through her ambivalent, contradictory experiences of, and feelings about, each of her three families. There were positives and negatives attached to each.

Learning to stay with confusing situations and not act until clarity emerges requires us to trust 'the ants'. The ants in the myth are comparable to an intuitive process which we don't have conscious control over, like the problem solving potential of dreams. And paradoxically, as Bolen also suggests, clarity also comes from attempting logical assessment and prioritisation of the many elements involved. The art therapy process allows such seemingly irrational intuitive approaches and rational cognitive or analytical methods to comfortably work together.

The *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* defines intuition as 'immediate apprehension by the mind without the intervention of reasoning' and includes *considering* and *contemplating*, yet neither are inherently irrational processes. Rational thought tends to discriminate, converge and focus on organising information whereas an intuitive approach diverges, seeking patterns and a more complex, holistic perception. What is termed intuitive is often *unconscious competence* (Huckvale & Learmonth, 2009) where a reservoir of knowledge is distilled and rapidly deployed without conscious thinking. Our sense of other people's approachability is, for example, often described as intuitive yet by studying 'body language' our observations can be deconstructed and consciously understood. For the therapist, articulating our unconscious competence as *reflective competence* enables us to work with complex emotional patterns rather than simply focusing on the more easily defined elements. As Koestler noted, 'the chemical analysis of bricks and mortar will tell you next to nothing about the architecture of a building' (Koestler, 1967, p. 23). The skill of reflective competence, critical for the therapist,

only develops with clinical and theoretical experience.

Meeting Steph in reception the next week, her opening words were, 'Can we do the sand and glitter?'

Her social worker smiled, saying, 'I don't understand what you're doing—and that's fine—but she's been on and on about wanting to do this glitter thing ever since I picked her up'.

Steph jogged to the art room, calling, 'Come on' at me walking behind. She burst into the room, ran to the sandtray and started where she had left off. She noticed the new sieve. It held much less sand—being a tea strainer—but was more effective at separating glitter from sand. Steph tried it, instantly dismissing it as no good. The watery component of sorting was, evidently, critical.

After half an hour of intensive sieving, I mentioned knowing a story about 'a princess who had a lot of sorting to do'. 'Tell me,' Steph said. I gave the outline and she wanted more. We talked about Psyche's troubles. The story resonated with Steph; she wanted to know who wrote it.

This session, and the following two, were spent in concentrated action; sieving, soaking and separating out the sand and glitter. She asked about 'the princess' repeatedly. Later I printed out a version of the myth which she took away enthusiastically.

At intervals I double checked the sieving was an active choice rather than any kind of being 'good' or in some way attempting to 'please' me. She was emphatic about continuing.

Alchemy

Whilst Jung and alchemical studies are marginalised in contemporary art therapy literature, they were a formative element in British art therapy. The therapist was introduced to Jung's work at school and became preoccupied with *The Psychology of the Transference* (Jung, 1969) whilst in personal therapy. Reading Joy Schaverien's Jungian influenced chapter, 'The scapegoat and talisman: Transference in art therapy' (Dalley et al., 1987) catalysed her decision to train as an art therapist. Schaverien's perspective on transference is helpfully developed in terms of Jung's alchemical metaphor in *The Revealing Image* (Schaverien, 1992). The therapist osmosed much alchemical Jungian material over years of listening to lectures by Michael Edwards (Edwards, 2010).



Figure 1. Calcinatio.

In exploring the psychological processes involved in becoming one's most complete Self—individuating—Jung identified and elucidated many parallels between the physical work of the traditional alchemist and the psychological work of therapy.

Alchemy was a series of chemical experiments in a laboratory working to turn base metal into actual gold, and also a psychological process. In both cases the process involves active physical work to transmute ordinary, basic material into a highly precious and valuable one. The quest for unity or wholeness is central and a goal of the alchemical procedure is healing self-knowledge. In Jung's view the motivation to start, the material brought to the beginning, the will to pursue the often dispiriting progress is fundamental and the alchemist's psyche becomes projected into the work (Edwards, 2010). This parallels the isomorphic power recently described by Springham (2008) where, when working creatively, the emotional meaning of an action can have such intensity that physical actions cease to be done 'as if' and become, to all intents and purposes, real.

Alchemy starts from *prima materia*, the prime material—the matter—which, in due course, is turned to 'gold'. The 'matter' in Steph's sandtray was gritty and infused with glitter so physical 'gold' was already discernable. By working to physically extract it, there was the possibility of discovering psychological gold too. In this process Steph became, metaphorically, an alchemist with the therapist as *soror mystica*, mystic sister or assistant.

In therapeutic terms the *prima materia* is also the 'presenting problem': when we want to know

what's wrong, we ask, 'What's the matter?' Steph's history was full of complex attachment issues. Her extended birth, adoptive and foster families were all active and present in her life. At this time her circumstances had stabilised with a new shape of family. The potential for having found emotional 'gold' existed in this situation but nothing was certain. Steph was coping and was confused, vulnerable, vigilant and emotionally volatile.

The prima materia has the quality of ubiquity: it can be found always and everywhere, which is to say that projection can take place always and everywhere. (Jung, 1993, p. 323)

Art psychotherapy works actively with physical and creative 'chaos' as analogous to emotional 'chaos'. Rehearsing the ability to survive, tolerate and clear up a physical mess can be symbolically equivalent to the real world coping with emotional mess. The art room is a microcosm of the 'real world', the macrocosm. 'As above, so below' is the alchemical phrase.

Where change is needed, the art process is so often effective because it allows for experiments with 'the smallest difference that makes a difference' (Bateson, 1988, p. 250). As the psyche tends to generalise, we can usefully explore, practice and rehearse actions and feelings through image making and therapeutic relationship then transfer the experience to the wider world. Sadly this capacity to generalise can make us neurotic (e.g. 'a dog bit me once therefore all dogs are frightening').

The alchemist painstakingly collects the *prima materia*, physical and psychological, placing it in a vessel. Traditionally this is a spherical glass flask,

with a flattened base and a long neck. The vessel and contents are heated in a furnace within the laboratory. Here there was a rounded, clear plastic measuring jug with a very pronounced lip and no furnace. The art room, however, made a splendid laboratory.

The therapeutic relationship is also a vessel which allows for raw psychological material to be introduced, processed, transformed and disposed of. The therapeutic hour acts as a furnace and the therapy room really *is* a laboratory. (Laboratory is from Latin: *laborare* meaning 'toil' as in 'labour': a place to work.)

Alchemy, like psychotherapy, is a quest into our personal unknown. In life, alchemy, and old maps, the unknown regions come with the warning, 'Here there be dragons'. To grow and to be more wholly oneself, to individuate, demands we: venture into the unknown dark; meet with our inner dragons; find some way of overcoming our fear of them; forge an active alliance and develop a functional working relationship with them. In essence we are either 'consumed' by the dragon, enduring perilous adventures, emerging transformed having learned how to come to terms with life in the dark. Or we actively face, overcome and kill the dragon, physically 'consume' part of it and by taking the dark into ourselves, we are transformed.

Steph was facing her fears. She had been attacked, neglected and left in the dark by 'family'. Who now was trustworthy? Would she be abandoned again? Who had her best interests at heart? Was it safe to make new attachments? Would new attachments preclude old ones? Was she physically safe?

Jeremy Holmes helpfully identifies the main aims of psychotherapy as:

- Autobiographical competence: knowing and being able to tell our personal story, how we got to be where and who we are now.
- Affective processing: having the emotional range to deal with how we feel about that story. (Holmes, 1993, p. 146)

Steph was preoccupied with her story but it was too big, close, complicated and painful to actively think about. How could she make sense of it when her feelings were so contradictory? There were a lot of people she loved and hated simultaneously. Sieving sand in the quiet of the art room was manageable sorting.

Art provides a way into stories. An image effectively holds multiple meanings and ambivalences. A single painting may encapsulate some of the big themes of our life but generally it holds a small and relatively manageable fractal. Yet, *pars pro toto*, the part can—and does—stand for the whole. By working on the fragments we come to understand the bigger picture. Sieving the whole sandtray was a huge task yet it stood for a much larger one.

The alchemical process is an art work, a story and a dramatic enactment as much as a scientific experiment. Culturally these were not separate entities when alchemy was most practised. Alchemy developed before the Enlightenment and Descartes. The concept of gravity was 'invented' or discovered by an alchemist: Isaac Newton. Alchemy is a language of paradox; it defies logic, doesn't translate into words, is hard to pin down and often incomprehensible. As George Braque said of art, 'there's only one thing



Figure 2. Solutio.

that matters: that which can not be explained' (quoted in Price, 1989, p. 12). Apocryphally the best way to understand alchemy is said to be to cut off one's head and stick it back on, the other way around, using honey!

Less drastically, seven key alchemical stages are described in an accessible, if rigorous, primer: *Mercurius*, a novel by Patrick Harpur (1990).

CALCINATION: Our prima materia or *massa confusa*, our confused mass, is prepared for beginning. Psychologically this equates to the process where we are gradually overcome by life events and seek therapy. Alchemically matter is burned into a white powder during *calcinatio* and this has been likened to the sand in the sandtray (Bradway & McCoard, 1997, p. 7).

SOLUTION: Our prima materia is submerged in water. We immerse ourselves in the unconscious, go with the flow and don't try to impose rational thought. This process can feel like drowning, like death.

SEPARATION: For the most part, a conscious process where we review the formerly hidden material which emerges from our unconscious and decide what to discard and what to reintegrate.

CONJUNCTION: Psychologically, this is the empowerment of our true selves; we are able to clearly discern what needs to be done to achieve lasting enlightenment

PUTREFACTION: A stinking fermentation, where the old self rots and decays away. Something has to die, to end, for new life to begin.

CONGELATION: Congealing. The new self begins to solidify.

SUBLIMATION: Coagulation where the spirit and soul join with the body.

There are many other alchemical stages, frequently different between writers, all named in Latin. The shorthand for the whole process is *solve et coagula*—'dissolve and coagulate'—and like therapy it is a cyclical and iterative process. It is hard work, 'seventy times seven for each process' said the alchemists (Somers, 2004, p. 28). Steph was enacting *Solutio* and *Separatio* with sand and glitter.

Imaginatio

Imagination was literally vital to medieval alchemists; the 'real and literal power to create images', as opposed to mere 'phantasy'. The act of imagining is an intentioned physical activity bringing about change, mastery over, and meaning to, that change. Further actual, physical

changes bring about the capacity for further imaginings and so the cycle continues.

In this way the alchemist related himself not only to the unconscious but directly to the very substance which he hoped to transform through the power of imagination. (Jung, 1993, p. 278)

The role of imagination is critical to individuation.

For a story to truly hold the child's attention, it must entertain him and arouse his curiosity. But to enrich his life, it must stimulate his imagination; help him to develop his intellect and to clarify his emotions; be attuned to his anxieties and aspirations; give full recognition to his difficulties, while at the same time suggesting solutions to the problems which perturb him. In short it must at one and the same time relate to all aspects of his personality. (Bettelheim, 1991, p. 5)

Imagination is a survival skill, not a luxury. Imagination is fundamental to mentation: the capacity to think about our own, and other creatures', thought processes. The ability to develop a theory of mind and be able to attribute mental states—feelings, beliefs, intents, desires etc.—to oneself and others, understanding that others have beliefs and intentions different from our own is impossible without imagination. Without theory of mind and imagination, we cannot 'do' empathy and relatedness, risk assessment or problem solving.

- **Empathy and relatedness** requires us to see the world—or fragments of it—from someone else's viewpoint, conjuring up the possible thoughts and emotions they might be experiencing then respond appropriately. Doing this requires reflection on how we have felt and been responded to when in similar states. We may attempt to replicate the response if positive, avoiding if negative. Empathising and relating requires reflection on our previous experience of the person, or of people in their position and how they might react. We weigh up what has been a useful response in the past. Empathy requires a synthesis of our emotional history and rapid imaginative configuration of possible responses and their subsequent consequences. This is not a completely innate process but one we develop as small children.

Steph sometimes suggested roles were swapped. She would direct the therapist to sieve, soak and separate sand and glitter whilst she 'helped'. 'Helping' gave her opportunity to intensively watch *her process*, thinking about it from another perspective. She organised the therapist's

actions, thus gaining a sense of ‘control’ over the process. She asked many questions: *Are you bored? Will it take a long time? Is it a waste of time? Has anyone else ever done this before?* Steph explicitly wanted the therapist to experience the process, understand it, articulate aspects of how it felt, then reflect with her on what was shared experience and what was different. It was an articulate form of attunement. We were able ‘to “be with” (each other) in the sense of sharing likely inner experiences on an almost continuous basis. This is . . . feeling-connectedness, of being in attunement with another’ (Stern, 1985, p. 157).

- **Risk assessment** demands we ‘see’ into the future and around the corner; anticipating the potential consequences of current actions, inactions and behaviours. Like empathy, this imagining calls on our ability to anticipate what might happen next on the basis of our remembering what happened before. It also demands we think imaginatively about the broader context: what *else* might be of significance?

Sieving the sandtray was a huge task. There were two major risks in the process: that we would achieve the task and ‘things’ would be different; or that we would achieve the task and ‘things’ wouldn’t be different. In the real world ‘things’ were complicated with protracted child protection, fostering and adoption issues, plus the ongoing legal and physical health issues ensuing from the assault. It was hard to tell what would be a conclusively positive outcome as many positives involved reciprocal losses. By consciously focusing on the real, lengthy but finite, task of sieving, the here and now risk was small. Yet it provided Steph with opportunity to sift through her feelings.

- **Problem solving** demands that we believe we can have an impact on our environment: we can have an effect. Only if we can imagine the desirability of a state without the problem can we begin to imagine a solution. *If we solved our last problem by kicking, we may imagine the consequences of kicking for this problem* Maybe our problem is like one where immersion in water solved it. We imagine trying immersion again—or not! Perhaps a previous problem was solved in the presence of a particular item or person and it’s worth replicating the situation. Depending on our circumstances we may decide it’s worth fetching teddy, phoning a plumber or making a votive offering.

Table 1 outlines some reciprocal relationships between specific art making processes and generalisable problem solving skills.

Whilst coming for therapy was explicitly in response to ‘problems’, Steph did not talk much about her history. Problem solving was not her *conscious* focus. Picture making was not a priority either. Meeting in the art room was valued because it was an uncontaminated space, problem free and interesting to ‘play’ in. ‘Children do not see art making as separate from play’ (Learmonth, 2009.) The sessions were strangely useful for ‘thinking about the things’ which were ‘played’ with. Meaning is not consciously made: it happens; it manifests. It resembles a buried seed emerging from our unconscious.

Sowing the seeds

Sorting seeds takes time, with or without help from ‘the ants’. Metaphorically a seed can be an idea or a thought. Seeds may be sown purposefully or scattered hopefully but we cannot make big decisions about seeds until we see what

Table 1. Problem solving skills.

How to:	Art making embodies:	Example:
Make good judgements about qualitative relationships?	Decision-making by taking an overview of the whole rather than rigidly following very specific rules.	If we strictly apply the rules of perspective the picture may just look wrong.
Not panic when things go wrong, keep open minded and gather more information?	Exploration of multiple perspectives. Art problems can have more than one solution.	If a picture isn’t ‘working’ we may solve the problem by changing composition, proportion, media, scale . . .
Understand subtlety?	Exploration of how small differences can have large effects.	A tiny drop of black paint in white paint creates grey.
Keep a variety of different problems in perspective?	Paying attention to details as well as keeping an overview of the whole image.	We alternate between working up close on an image and stepping back to ‘look’ at it.
Learn that in complex problem solving, issues are seldom fixed?	Recognition that we may have to willingly surrender to a myriad of unanticipated possibilities as the work unfolds.	A dribble of paint may be ‘a mistake’ and it may be the start of a perfect tree we hadn’t thought of.

Source: Developed from Eisner (2002).

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Figure 3. Separatio.

has grown. There are many seeds buried in 'our ground', in our psyche, which we know nothing about. Seeds sprout quickly or so slowly we thought they were dead. A pair of tiny leaves appear and we cannot tell whether they're something we planted or not; whether they're a nettle, deadly nightshade, a bean or an oak tree. Any attempt to sort early seedlings will be random because we don't know what we are dealing with. Only when growth is established can one plant—one meaning or idea—be distinguished from another. Once we understand what has grown, we have some chance of reasoned decision making about what to nurture and what to grub up.

Many meanings are fragile, like the seeds of orchids or cacti. Others are slow to develop, like oaks. Planting seeds in sheltered places gives almost *all* a better start. Enhancing optimal conditions for growth still requires sorting what's unwanted, what can go outside quickly, what needs hardening off. A few plants/ideas will always be vulnerable, needing a sheltered 'greenhouse', or therapy space, to thrive.

While Steph needed the therapy space to grow and sort her 'seeds', the therapist needed supervision to reflect on what was actually growing. Several years previously the therapist had taken a short, intensive, sandtray therapy course prompted by a particular client's needs. Developing competence in the new medium was essential for the success of that work. The training had extended the therapist's practice and she was now supervised by that sandtray tutor: a drama therapist with extensive knowledge and experience in Jungian sandtray therapy. Supervision enabled the therapist to see how the

art therapist's predisposition to the image can sometimes be a disadvantage. It can narrow the understanding of what is an 'image'. From a drama therapy perspective, an 'action' can be an image. Here seeing the performance of sieving as an 'image' enabled reflection on the symbolism of that image: the sand is not being played with inarticulately, the sand *is* the symbol. The sieving, like sand in an hourglass, is an initiatory process measuring time running out as something reaches an end or dies. Wet sludgy quicksand can be treacherous, trapping and destroying the 'gold'. Shifting sands are uncertain, just as emotions are ambivalent. Sand, on the beach between land and water, occupies a liminal place: the threshold, a transitional space, neither one thing nor the other.

Amplificatio

Steph *deliberately* added more glitter to the sandtray at the end of her third session of sieving in order to have 'enough' material to sieve out again the following week. She made more matter, creating the need for more time to sieve, sort and reflect on it. She added glitter to the sandtray on several subsequent occasions expressly to sieve it out again. The 'task' was the process.

Amplificatio is always appropriate when dealing with some obscure experience ... It must be enlarged and expanded by being set in a psychological context in order to understand it at all ... (it) must be amplified to the point of intelligibility. (Jung, 1993, p. 289)

Amplification is partly like the scientific process of growing cultures in petri dishes: we always need

enough material to work with. More importantly, it describes a concentration, distillation and focusing of the issues and the process. For Steph the methodical, repetitive task was reassuring in its familiarity as she was developing some real control over her feelings; genuine emotional regulation. Sorting and ordering, whether actually or metaphorically, is a way of making sense and understanding.

Steph's emotional muddle had been huge. Sorting and ordering her feelings took ages. The physical process of sieving, separating the 'gold' from the gritty sand, formed a practical and metaphorical 'image' from which Steph could begin to understand her story and its meaning. Eighteen months later, Steph reflected on the sieving process occurring when she was 'a little girl'. She had grown physically, emotionally and psychologically since embarking the task of sorting out the sandtray. Her wounds, physical and psychological, mostly healed. Scars would remain but were fading. Steph was more spontaneous, confidently ambivalent about her feelings and no longer in the exhausting emotional state which Coleridge summarised as where 'suppression prepares for overflow' (Holmes, 1988, p. 284). She had settled with her chosen 'family' in a 'normal' hormonally adolescent way, making decisions about contact with her other 'families' in an assured and thoughtful way. Her approach to school work became increasingly steady and she generally achieved good enough grades. The period of sieving supported Steph through the transition from a 'little girl' into a confident young woman.

The collective

Glitter in the sandtray became part of the art room culture. The therapist often sieved whenever there was a spare moment, partly so the sandtray remained functional—although fastidiousness is pointless as 'mess' is therapeutically useful—and because the sieving acted as a kind of reflective self-supervision. She deliberately misquoted from an old Punch cartoon to colleagues, 'Sometimes I sieves and thinks and sometimes I just sieves'.¹

Six other young people spent time sieving. One, motivated by a desire to have her own small tray with clean sand, subsequently saturated her sandtray with water several times spending weeks monitoring the time taken to dry out. A boy frequently sieved as a transitional activity whilst deciding what to do next. Sieving apparently provides us with an active doing, a visible performance as well as a separating, sorting and ordering process. The performance element gives permission for unconscious, in-the-moment time where we can be busy, meaningfully engaged and 'in process' without needing or expecting any defined outcome.

Conclusion: *solve et coagula*

The 'art' of art therapy has traditionally engaged with conventional art processes and materials: paint, clay, etc. Contemporary art practice embraces more innovative forms such as performance, body art, installation and animation. This broadening of arts practice may, increasingly, be reflected in a broadening of art therapy practice.



Figure 4. Sublimatio.

In this case the therapist was participant observer, witness, audience and assistant to an art performance rather than solely witness to the creation of an art (therapy) object.

Meaning is emergent rather than imposed in art therapy. In this case the 'performance' had mythic and archetypal associations. The therapist's resonance and amplification of the process through mythic and alchemical metaphors contributed to both the child's and the therapist's meaning-making processes without there being an 'art object' as such, although there was a great deal of 'art work'.

Spending so much time clearing up what was a physical 'mess' could be seen as irrational from a management perspective. In a culture increasingly driven by performance indicators and targets, the 'sensible' route with 'contaminated' sand would be to throw it away, buy new sand, forbid glitter in the tray and 'get on' with the work. With a situation as complex as Steph's, the process of consciously understanding what was 'the matter' wasn't possible until time had been spent physically exploring it, sieving it, and getting to know how it felt.

'Art', 'play' and 'story' are adult—and professional—differentiations. A child will fluidly work with many different modes as 'play'. Working sensitively and effectively with a child-led process will naturally lead art therapists into closely related domains and to different levels of 'participation' in the process. It may be hard to formally differentiate art, drama and play therapies in practice, and cross-discipline supervision is invaluable. Sandtray is a practical way to animate and explore narratives in art and imagery while conversely providing a way *into* images from a narrative or drama. Etymologically drama is what is *done* whereas art is what is *made*. Here the art work was explicitly 'a doing': a performance art. Artist Marina Abramović, who endlessly cleaned bones in her 'Balkan Baroque', has observed that, 'performance is a mental and physical construction in which we step in front of the public in an exact time and an exact space' (Abramović, 2009). Here Steph's 'public' was the therapist. Working in this way involving play, art, performance and drama brings client and therapist to a place of liminality: a betwixt and between space characterised by ambiguity, where the work moves across the threshold linking these different worlds and experiences. Working with transformation demands exploration of the liminal—whether to the edges of practice, theory or role—if something which did not previously exist is to be created.

The drawings

There were no tangible images in this phase of the work with Steph. Yet the performance of sieving provoked strong imagery. In thinking and writing about the work, I kept returning to the 17th century alchemical illustrations of the Philosophia reformata by J.D. Mylius (Klossowski de Rola, 1973). The illustrations in the text are, with apologies, partly my homage to Mylius. They are also a personal demonstration of what all art psychotherapists know: image making is a way of processing and developing understanding. Image making is part of my reflective practice as a therapist and making an 'artist's response' is a regular feature of my work as a practising artist.

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Note

- ¹ Correct quotation: 'Sometimes I sits and thinks and then again I just sits' (King, 1906).

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