

## The Interactive Communal Sandtray Experience to Process and Heal 9/11

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On September 11, 2001 we were in crisis, even if we didn't feel it because of shock! Therapists became crisis counselors. It didn't matter whether we had experience, training, or inclination, it was thrust upon us. All of us were victims touched by the same events that affected our clients. I wondered, how many times will this happen in my lifetime? Never again, I hoped. Yet, here it was and I pondered how I was going to help my clients.

Since I wasn't able to be in the one place I wanted to be, home with family and friends, I felt I was in the next best place, attending a Level II Sandtray-Worldplay (ST-WP) workshop in Oakland, California with Dr. Gisela Schubach De Domenico. We were four days into the workshop when tragedy occurred. After some talk about our disbelief of what we had witnessed on television (one workshop participant actually knew nothing about the attack at noon when she arrived), we descended into the workspace. We individually processed the events by each creating a sandtray. Five of us, including Gisela, worked in silence for what seemed to be quite a long time. By the end of the day, five Worlds had been created. On the first day, we only had enough time to journey with two of the Worlds' creators, and I was not one of them. Yet, even without verbally processing and sharing my journey, I still felt much better on my way back to the hotel. I had had the opportunity to create a World that reflected my internal state; I had been surrounded by four silent witnesses, and I had been given the gift of witnessing the journey of two colleagues. This experience in the playroom and the experience of talking to family and friends throughout the day let me know that it was family and possibly more importantly community that was to be a key to our collective healing. I was not yet sure about how I could create this opportunity for my clients.

On the second day, our fifth day of the workshop, we continued sharing our Worlds and discussing the events happening in the outer world. I had had such an incredibly moving and spiritual experience with the sand, that I began to wonder about how to encourage my clients to face September 11. I sensed the method was to be something like what I had experienced at the workshop: a communal sandtray experience. The key to the deep healing we had all felt at the workshop was in the power of community using the sand together during this national and world-wide crisis. I wanted to also create a communal healing experience for my clients, even though I would not be able to save and display all the Worlds that everyone would create. I don't have enough sandtrays, space, and symbol collection to satisfy such a demand. I also wanted to create an experience for my clients that was as fluid as the unfolding events, since

I knew this crisis and its after-effects would be with us for a long time.

I decided to start a single communal sandtray for my clients upon my return to the office. Even though I had never ventured using the sandtray in this way before, my initial idea was to start a World and allow each client to add their images or structures. However, Gisela clarified how essential it is that each client be given full reign over the communal World and be free to create, add, move and remove, or play with the objects. Each creator is offered the flexibility and freedom to make his or her own unique journey by working with all elements of the communal sandtray in whatever way he/she chooses. Even though this approach was new to me, I was willing to give it a try in order to encourage my clients to process, mourn and heal the events of September 11.

After thanking everyone at the workshop for their support, sharing, and healing, I set off towards home. During the long drive home my mind raced, first with worries and fears about what would come in the weeks and months after the attacks and second with concerns about how to create this communal sandtray play at my office. I wondered what kind of sand to use, the typical beige play sand, or black sand? I imagined using white sand, but had none on hand. Then, I remembered a colleague had shared some silky smooth black sand from a beach in Northern California. What better way to begin the healing, I mused, than with the "real thing" direct from Mother Earth. With the sand issue resolved, my thoughts drifted to what tray I would use. Would it be one of the two wood trays, one of the two white plastic trays (20x24), or one of the two newly acquired blue trays? I decided to use a new blue sandtray (20x24) purchased at the workshop.

Having made these preliminary decisions, I gazed out the window. It was a crystal clear night with what looked like every star in the Universe visible, guiding me home. This view immediately took my thoughts back to the World that I had created during the workshop.



**Bigger than all of us**

While experiencing and verbally sharing my World with the others, I sensed that my World was telling me that this one event of destruction was small in

comparison to the vast and infinite Universe that we live in. My World also reminded me that the Universe is filled with positive forces. Although I felt that the events of September 11 and its aftermath would continue to strike all of us as horrifying, I was reassured by the presence of the good and positive energy within me, within each and every one of us, within this World, and within this Universe. I learned that good dwarfs evil and the close-minded acts of a few human beings towards other human beings.

As I arrived home exhausted from processing and tired from the long drive, I was relieved to see my girlfriend and dogs. I was also excited to have a plan of action for helping my clients process September 11. On September 13, my first day back in the practice, I felt rushed as there were many things to do before seeing my first client. The most important task was to start the communal sand tray myself. I felt a need to be a part of this healing process. This time, I was in the same boat with my clients and sensed that it was important for me to share the journey in the communal tray. I felt that this step of initiating the play in the World and contributing directly to the continued healing process would help me receive clients more openly.

The communal World was born with several crystals placed in the center of the tray, "the Scream," six tea light candles placed in the corners and in the center, pieces of paper with the words "angry" and "scared" written on them, and a copy of the passenger lists from the four commercial flights I had cut out of the newspaper. Unfortunately, I did not photograph my own beginning of this communal experience. As I lit the candles in time for the first clients to arrive, I was eager to see where this journey would take us.

### **The First Week: September 13-18**

#### **The First Journey in the Communal Tray:**

My first clients were two sisters, ages 10 and 13. I invited their mother to join us as well. They walked into the office to the candle lit communal tray. This was the first time they had seen candles aglow in a World. I explained that I had created this tray for my client community because this was a way for us to share our experiences about what was happening in our country. As I did with all of my clients, I explained the departure from our usual sandplay process. I told them in this communal sand tray, they could change the World however they saw fit. They could also take as many pictures as they wanted to with my digital camera.

Next, I invited them to stand in front of the collection of symbolic figures and choose whatever objects they were drawn to even if they didn't know why. I told them that they might discover the meaning of their selection further into the journey.

The three did not hesitate. Silently, they each worked in unison. Their final World was striking. The World I had started had been transformed into what the nation

was calling Ground Zero, the site of the attack and collapsed World Trade Center Towers.

The ten-year-old depicted the moment of impact and collapse. At first she just placed a jet plane next to a slinky, but eventually she animated the scene by



#### **Ten-year-old Girl: Moment of impact and collapse**

shoving the plane into the slinky. When she shared this moment of impact and collapse during the first experiencing phase, all four of us felt it deeply in our souls.



#### **The beginning of the communal journey**

Their final World included rescue workers, fire trucks and a police car, army figures, medical figures, orange cones, the Statue of Liberty, a globe, acorns, a religious icon turned upside down, and a slumped over man.

When I asked what their World was telling them, the 13-year-old shared that she feared that this meant the United States was going to war. Mother shared her sadness about the likely reality of the United States going to war and her confusion about what this really meant. While I witnessed their journey, I knew the next client would take this World, focused on Ground Zero and the imminence of war and change it to reflect her view of the tragedy.

#### **The Second Journey in the Communal Tray:**

The communal sandtray World was next experienced by a 42-year-old single woman. She spoke at length about the killing and destruction, emphasizing the

