

## Birth Imagery in Sandplay©

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**Abstract:** None available.

**Full Text:** Headnote ABSTRACT: This article, after introducing the sandplay© method developed by Dora Kalff, explores the images seen in the work of sandplay© clients that may depict birth and/or prenatal experiences. In contrast to other modalities that employ sand trays, the Kalfian method relies on the power of the medium; sand, water, a collection of miniatures, and a tray of specific dimensions, to evoke a process within the client that is not dependent upon interpretation for healing. Case study examples are used to amplify some of the symbols that portray natalistic themes. KEY WORDS: Sandplay, birth imagery, natalism. INTRODUCTION Sandplay©, as developed by Dora Kalff, emphasizes the importance of a free and protected space in which an individual can explore the depths of being. In this free and protected space, the power of the sand and water to evoke birth imagery can be awe inspiring. The best way to introduce Sandplay© is in Dora Kalff's own words from the introduction to her book, Sandplay. Sandplay is the method I use in therapy both with children and with adults in order to gain access to the contents of the unconscious. As the name suggests, it consists in playing in a specially proportioned sandbox (approximately 19.5 x28.5 x2.75 inches; floor and sides painted with water-resistant bright-blue paint). Boxes of dry and moist sand are provided. Clients also have at their disposal a number of small figures with which they give formal realization to their internal worlds. The figures from which they can choose should represent as complete as possible a cross-section of all inanimate and animate beings which we encounter in the external world as well as in the inner imaginative world: trees, plants, stones, marbles, mosaics, wild and domesticated animals, ordinary women and men pursuing various activities, soldiers, fairytale figures, religious figures from diverse cultural spheres, houses, fountains, bridges, ships, vehicles, etc. (Kalff, 1980). THE SANDPLAY© PROCESS For therapists trained in the Kalfian tradition, awareness and presence are key elements. The therapist is witness to the client's process, holding the work silently while the sand and water perform their alchemy with the psyche of the client. Interpretation is left for later, when the process has been integrated. Too early an interpretation has been compared to pulling up a plant to see how it is growing; the process can be fatally interrupted. For adult clients, this may mean waiting a year or more after a series of tra3's have been completed. With younger clients, a shorter interval may be possible. It is important to keep this in mind as we explore birth imagery, not being too quick to draw conclusions from the symbols discussed. These precautions being stated, it is possible, and even advisable, for the therapist to explore, within themselves, possibilities along the way, simply holding these possible realities for the client as they stand the test of time. In the process of witnessing, notes are made regarding the order of selection of objects, emotional affect of both the client and self, and any accompanying dialog. Photographs of the client's work are taken after the client has departed. The therapist always takes the final trays of each session apart and replaces the figures on the shelves. It is important that the client retain each finished tray as an internal image between sessions. Witnessing or participating in the dismantling of the tray could disrupt this important aspect of the process. Often symbols will have a specific meaning for the client that is not what might be expected. This personal level of meaning has been, in my experience, the most relevant to the client's process. However, familiarity with the archetypal and cultural levels of meaning embodied in the objects is essential for the therapist in exploring possibilities. This will be the focus of the bulk of this paper, as natalistic symbols are, for the most part, archetypal, with cultural overlays. EXPLORING THE SYMBOLS Working with sandplay© imagery is very similar to working with dream imagery. The symbols have many potential levels of meaning. Just as a single dream can be analyzed from many perspectives (Freud, 1900/1965; Jung, 1974; Van

de Castle, 1994), sandplay© symbols can have meaning on many levels (Bradway, 2001), all of which may have value for the client. To further clarify this concept of multiple levels, the most obvious level can be what is called "day residue," or objects that have relevance in the client's current life experience. Beyond that there may be elements of the client's personal history, symbols that are particularly relevant in the client's culture, as well as archetypal and natalistic symbols that have more universal meaning. Sometimes one symbol can have meaning on all of these levels. There may also be direct links between these levels. For example, a natalistic symbol of the umbilical cord might be a snake for a client who developed a close, playful relationship with the cord in utero and currently has a fondness for snakes. This same symbol might have a very different meaning for a client who currently is very fearful of snakes, although this might also be associated with the umbilical cord. As we sit with a client and hold their reality, as brought forth in the tray, our work is deepened by the inclusion of the pre and perinatal dimension. Natalistic symbols are the basis for many of the mythological symbols. For example, the tree as a symbol of life is common to most cultures. When one views inter-uterine photographs of the placenta and cord, it very clearly resembles a tree with its many branches and trunk (cord). This, very literally, was our source of life in the womb, our life sustaining connection with the nurturing mother. The sand itself is symbolically connected with the uterine lining and water is similarly associated with our original home in the amniotic sea, adding to the importance of including this perspective in our awareness of what is revealed of the client's inner life in the sand tray. The very materials of sandplay evoke natalistic connections at a deep, unconscious level. Much unconscious material consists of pre-verbal experiences (memories), chief among these is our prenatal and birth experiences. Research in the field of pre- and perinatal psychology has produced volumes of material (i.e. Chamberlain, 1998; Karr-Morse and Wiley, 1997; Verny, 1981) connecting prenatal and birth experiences with unconscious decisions and "life scripts." Our language contains many references that may reflect this experience. Some examples: "I'm stuck, I just can't seem to get moving," "I feel as if I'm banging my head against the wall," "The light at the end of the tunnel." Natalistic symbols in dreams, myth, and fairy tales have been widely investigated. The following brief list has been assembled from the works of Nandor Fodor (1949), Michael Irving (1989), R. D. Laing (1976), Elizabeth Noble (1993), and Otto Rank (1929). Womb symbols may include: basket, bathtub, box, cave, circle, hollow tree, house, luggage, oven, sanctuary, tomb, vessels, and vehicles. Possible umbilical symbols include: Caduceus, dragon, rope, and snake. Placental symbols may include, in addition to the tree: cross and vines. The amniotic fluid most often is represented by water and flooding. The amniotic sac (caul) is often represented by drapery, crown, hat, and veils. The birth canal may be represented by concentric circles, crown (particularly of thorns), door, labyrinths, passageways, sun, symmetrical arcs, and tunnels. This is certainly not an exhaustive list, but is a good beginning in thinking about natalistic symbols. As with any symbols, the context will be important, and each situation will bring its own interpretive challenges. It is also important to remember that the personal, historical prenatal and birth experience may be only one level of experience being expressed in the tray. Birth imagery is often seen as symbolic of new beginnings at other points in life or major life transitions. THE MOUND Not mentioned above, but seen often in my experience as related to prenatal and birth symbols is the mounding of sand in the tray, resembling a pregnant belly. One might think this was not from the client's perspective, but it seems to occur often enough to be more deeply considered. Perhaps, it represents an observer level of awareness. I have most often seen this early in work with a client, especially after some dialog about prenatal and/or birth experience. Example #1: This most striking example comes from a case in which I was working with a colleague, who was seeing a 6-year-old boy, while I interviewed his mother in another room. During the interview with the mother, she revealed that the boy's conception had taken place as a result of a one-night-stand and she didn't discover that she was pregnant until the 4th month of the pregnancy. At that point, she called the father and met with him. Upon learning the news, he first questioned the possibility that he was the father, then proceeded to punch her in the abdomen. Later, when conferring with my colleague and viewing the sandtray created by the boy, I observed the mounding of sand against one side of the tray, with a deep indentation about one third of the way in

from the left side of the tray. My colleague reported that the boy had punched the mound aggressively after he completed the tray and was preparing to leave the room. Having learned from William Emerson (personal communication in training session) that one way of "reading" the tray for prenatal experience is to assume the beginning of the pregnancy may be represented on the left side of the tray, then progressing through the pregnancy from left to right in the tray, with the right side depicting birth. Although this theory has not been widely researched, this particular "co-incidence" of the boy's action and his mother story seems very significant.

Example #2 The client in this case is a 9-year-old boy, whose biological father was absent from his life from before birth to just after age 7. The mother reported that she planned the pregnancy and had an agreement with the father that he was not going to be involved in the child's life. The boy has repeatedly created a large mound in the center of the tray, using a clay volcano as the base for this mound and creating the outer appearance of a volcano by dripping red candle wax on the sand mound. A red votive candle is usually placed at the peak of the mound. As this process is ongoing, the possibility that he is attempting to come to terms with the unusual nature of his conception and gestation will be held in silent contemplation while the boy continues his work on the surface level to integrate the reality of his biological father becoming a part of his life.

LAKE Creating a large lake in the center of the tray - as opposed to going up with a mound - seems to depict the womb experience from the inside. Water may or may not be added after the creation of the "lake." The blue bottom of the tray clearly identifies the creation as a lake as the sand is cleared away. In my experience, it is the shape and size of the lake that seems to be most relevant.

Example #1: A seven-year-old girl, after viewing the video<sup>1</sup> we had made of her as her dad responded to questions about her gestation and birth, created a large lake in the center of the tray, then requested that it be filled with water. She then added furniture to the lake, saying, "I'm making a watery home."

Example #2: A three-year-old boy who spends a good portion of his session playing with tunnels frequently preceeds his tunnel play with the creation of a lake. His birth was very rapid and his work seems focused on slowing things down. He particularly enjoys playing peak-a-boo at the end of the tunnel, thus slowing down his exit.

UNICORN Having just recently become aware of the Unicorn's symbolic function as a purifier of water (Mayer, 1982), I revisited the work of clients I remembered as using a Unicorn in or near a lake. One in particular stands out:

Example #1: A six-year-old girl whose mother began exhibiting symptoms of schizophrenia during her pregnancy with the girl consistently had a Unicorn near or in the lakes she created.

CONCLUSION Reclaiming the first nine months of our life story is a deeply spiritual pursuit that can have profound consequences for our embodied life. Birth is a major life transition and may set the pattern for all subsequent transitions. As such, one might expect to see natalistic symbols at times when a client is making a major life transition. These symbols may have a literal connection to the client's own prenatal and birth experience, or/as well as be a metaphorical statement about a current "rebirth" taking place. In either instance, this is a profound part of the client's journey and requires our deepest attention and awareness.

Footnote 1 This video was produced using the technique of video reflection coupled with a birth interview, in which the client is videoed close-up while the parent responds to detailed questions about the conception, gestation, and birth of the client.

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