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## Through a Dark Forest to a Bright Land”: The Formation of a Self-pearl in Sandplay Therapy

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### Abstract

The title of this article contains the words of an eight year old sand player, called Shelley. The irritants that begin her journey of transformation are the divorce of her parents and the changes in family structure which ensue. Her safe world is broken open and her ego is forced to look for security and guidance within herself. Exploring a selection of photos from her thirty-seven sandplay sessions, we learn about the creativity of Shelley’s psyche as she finds her way in the uncharted waters of her unconscious.

### Introduction

The theme for the Fifth National Conference of the Canadian Association for Sandplay Therapy was “The Pearl and the Sand”. In the call for proposals, the importance of this theme to sandplay was explored:

“The natural pearl is a jewel created by irritation of a grain of sand against the flesh of a living organism, the oyster. The oyster transforms the sand into something completely new and precious... The presence of pain or discomfort in human life often provides a stimulant to seek change. Through Sandplay Therapy, the irritant may be acknowledged, explored and transformed into something meaningful and satisfying.”(Call for Proposals, CAST 2009 Conference).

The title of this article contains the words of an eight year old sand player, called Shelley. The irritants that begin her journey of transformation are the divorce of her parents and the changes in family structure which ensue. Her safe world is broken open and her ego is forced to look for security and guidance within herself. Exploring a selection of photos from her

### Editor’s Note

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thirty-seven sandplay sessions, we learn about the creativity of Shelley’s psyche as she finds her way in the uncharted waters of her unconscious. There she encounters a confusion of fears and darkness mixed with sexuality and the sacred. She meets a mean old witch who is slowly transformed into a wise woman and is able to feed and guide the children who are brave enough to find her in the dark forest. Shelley’s process ends with the integration of the wise woman and the sacred into a sandplay picture centered on a large tree, the symbol of a strong ego-self axis. Over a period of two years, Shelley transforms the irritant of family history and instability to create her own pearl, a Self -jewel which will strengthen and guide her as she grows up in her imperfect world.

### Family History

Shelley lives at home with her Mom and two brothers, who are nine and eleven. The children spend Wednesday nights every week and alternate weekends at their father’s house. The family owned a dog named Daisy who travelled with the children between the homes; Daisy died toward the end of Shelley’s process. There are cats at both homes. Animals are very important to Shelley.

The mother describes the marriage as ending slowly; over a period of two years there were many verbal arguments. The father moved out one month before Shelley began sandplay therapy. Shelley’s brother closer to her in age began sandplay two weeks before her and she wanted to try what he was doing. Her relationship with this brother is very close and initially their appointments were on the same day to make scheduling easier for the Mom. Shelley’s mixed feelings around this sharing of sandplay are reflected in Shelley’s sandpictures. She was glad to be sharing therapy since they were in the family situation together. On the other hand she presented a feeling of being caught between a responsibility for the issues of siblings and parents, and a desire to be free to work on herself. Appointments were later arranged on different days and as she began to separate her sense of self from her family’s issues, her representation of her brothers faded from her sandpictures.

As Shelley’s process evolved it became clear that there were issues beyond the immediate family. Shelley’s mother shared with me that she had been

sexually abused by her father. As a result, Shelley was never left alone with her grandfather. On Shelley's father's side the great-grandfather had also sexually abused his daughter, Shelley's paternal grandmother. The father's childhood was deeply coloured by cultural superstition and the history of incest. When Shelley's father misbehaved as a child, his mother called upon "the black dog with red eyes" to punish him. The Feminine seemed to be perceived by Shelley's father as dark and untrustworthy.

### **Presenting Issues**

In the initial interview with Shelley's mother she reported that Shelley was afraid of everything, including being alone in a room. Shelley insisted on having someone accompany her every time she went upstairs at home. Shelley's mother wanted her to come for sandplay to help her adjust to the divorce. Mom reported that Shelley was handling the divorce "well", but that she often felt sad, and cried a lot at bedtime. She was somewhat anxious about school before the divorce and this had increased. She still played with friends after school and went to gymnastics twice a week.

Shelley's father brought her to only two of her sessions, and did not come to the door or seek out information about her process. Her mother described Shelley's relationship with the father as care-giving on Shelley's part. She brought him cups of tea and kept his house tidy. This gave her tremendous pleasure, which she talked about in her sessions. They were emotionally close and the mother described Shelley as "Daddy's little girl." The mother also stated that in Shelley's eyes her father could do no wrong. Shelley generalised this care-giving relationship with her father to her whole family and represented this felt responsibility in the pictures she made in the sand.

### **Treatment Approach and Evolution**

The treatment approach used with Shelley was exclusively Sandplay therapy. Although Shelley created over 37 sandpictures, and floorpictures, only those highlighting the stages of her process will be discussed. That process can be roughly divided into six stages as follows:

- 1) Expressing the aftermath of the disruption of her family
- 2) Beginning to sort out the issues she can claim as her own, from those of her parents and her brothers.

- 3) Coming to terms with the permanence of the divorce and allowing her own personal work to begin as a result of this acceptance

- 4) Strengthening the ego and re-constellating the Self while also separating from old family problems, specifically dealing with her father relationship and the history of sexual abuse in her family.

- 5) Descending into the shadow and the Feminine and engaging in their transformative presence in her life

- 6) Integrating the Feminine and the new ego-Self relationship into her life

In a brief case report such as this, detailed analysis of figurines and themes is not possible. The most important themes and figures will be touched on in light of the above six phases and their contributions to Shelley's process of healing and transformation.

### **1) Expressing the aftermath of the disruption of her family**

Before Shelley began creating her sandpictures I explained that I would write down her story as she was playing. As the weeks went by Shelley delighted in this ritual, and would sometimes say, before beginning her play, "you can start writing down my story now." Early in the first session (figure 1), she chose the secretary desk and placed it directly in front of me where I sat at the near edge of the picture (it is the brown piece between the bath tub and the bed in the near left corner). This seemed to show how eager she was to have her story witnessed, and to receive support as she worked on her healing. Issues of transference may be represented in Sandplay therapy in this way, through the use of figures.

For six sessions Shelley arranged furniture and figures. In figure 1 she seemed to say that she couldn't tell what was inside the house and what was outside. She was confused by her father's new separate home and his sudden absence. She showed this by not clearly creating a boundary between outside things such as bulrushes and cars, and inside things such as furniture. These are the primary issues Shelley will resolve through her process: If her family has changed, how has it changed and is she going to be ok with the changes? Which problems are her own and which are her parents'? Why is her centre empty? As Dora Kalff (2003) said: "Frequently the initial picture gives information about the situation. Hidden in the symbols it may contain the path to the goal of the realization of the Self" (p. 9).



**Figure 1**

In this picture Shelley used baby figures, showing how vulnerable she was feeling. The three babies were in bed together (near left corner), the place Shelley went when she was feeling sad. They may represent Shelley and her two brothers all sharing this new and difficult family arrangement. Playing with the baby creatures having baths, Shelley dumped the wastewater in the centre. Perhaps Shelley felt the issues of family were taking up space in her own centre, the place she needed to develop her Self.

In figure 1 there is a narrow space (more visible on the right and left sides) between each figure and the wall of the sandtray. This gap seems to create an insulating buffer. Shelley's energy is focused on protection at her outside edges rather than exploration of her center. She provided herself with more protection by placing an umbrella over a small part of the bathtub. Perhaps it shielded the inhabitants of the tub from too much consciousness about what was happening in the family, or controlled to some extent the amount of consciousness she could deal with.

The bulrushes (far right corner) have an important containment function in her development. As her family changes Shelley will encounter feelings and experiences that are beyond her understanding. Parts of her Self will be safe in the rushes guarded by the little blue rabbits while she first deals with what is going on around her, just as Moses was safe in the basket of rushes while the empire around him sought his death. The bulrushes represent Shelley's personal grail where she is able to work with and keep safe what she needs to establish: her Self. The presence of these elements in a picture with an empty centre suggest that Shelley will be successful in her process.

At home Shelley's mother does the care giving. In this sandpicture Shelley played as the young girl in the bed in the far left corner arranged food, medicine and baths for the three young ones. However, the young girl may also have represented the

appearance of a self-regulating function. Shelley repeatedly demonstrated an ability to provide herself with what she needed to meet the challenges of her sandplay process. In this first sandpicture she has gave herself a pantry full of food and a basket to take the food with her (both far edge), a first aid kit of medicine (not visible in front of the secretary desk) and cars to take her where she needs to go. Shelley also found a feeling of containment, the safe, protected space offered by sandplay therapy. She expressed that feeling in the bulrushes and the secretary desk where everything can be organized.

**2) Beginning to sort out the issues which she can claim as her own, from those of her parents and her brothers.**

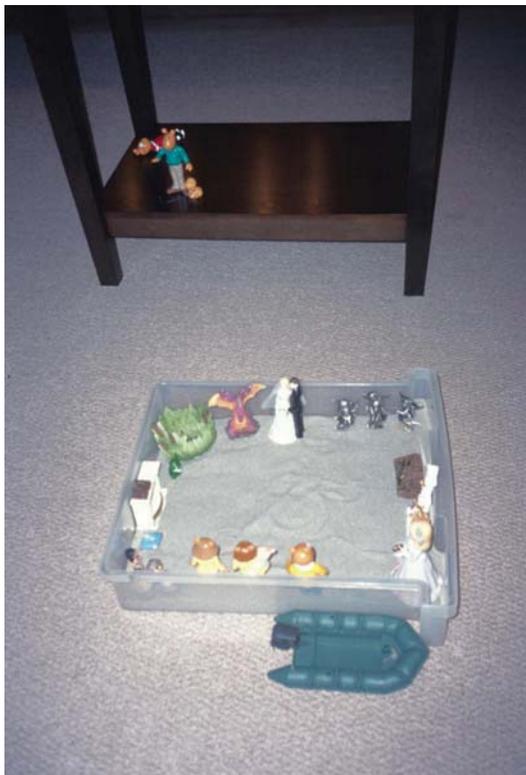
Shelley arrived for her third sandplay session (figure 2) with her own figures from the Arthur television show. These were the first to be placed in the centre, lined up almost as if they were germinated seed from the bathwater



**Figure 2**

dumped in figure 1. During the session, she switched to larger "Arthur" figures from the therapist's collection, so creating for herself a way to work with neutral symbols, away from what she brought with her from home. One of these issues from home concerned the need for some separateness from her brother's therapy. She was aware of her brother's process, because he had been coming to sandplay too. His session was immediately before hers, and she knew that the covered tray in the room was his. As mentioned earlier, the connection between these two was very deep and longstanding. She placed the Arthur figure in the bathtub and filled it deep with water. Shelley's relationship with her brother is explored again, more deeply in her next sandpicture.

There was no television in the therapist's figure collection, so Shelley used a blue hospital monitor (to the right of centre on the far edge). This created the double meaning that while she monitored the outside world she was also connected to her need for healing. She seemed to realise that this confusion of her own healing and the state of the world was a problem. Her closeness to her brother's process was part of that problem. She responded by creating the "Beauty Box," (figure 3) a container in which she sorted and created a sense of Self separate from all that was going on in her family. Shelley took figures she had used in the large sandtray and transferred them to a smaller plastic tray on the floor. In doing this she had begun the process of sorting out her life.



**Figure 3**

The first figure transferred into the Beauty Box was the bulrush ring in the far left corner. This figure has the role of safeguarding pre-Self images for Shelley until she is ready to integrate them. Placing it again in the far left corner of the new tray, she developed the picture around it. All the figures were placed tightly against the edges; she had no need for an insulating layer in the Beauty Box. Shelley had come to the realisation that Dad was unreliable; he was not moved into the Beauty Box, but stayed behind on the shelf under the large sandpicture she created first. The

other Arthur figures: a boy, girl and woman, all dressed in yellow, arrived in the beauty box by traveling over water in the boat at the near edge, where they stand in the center. The woman proceeded to have a conversation in Shelley's words with the figure of a girl holding an "8" standing in the near right corner, about her need for a groom. Shelley was eight years old too and as she let go of her tight relationship with her Dad, she seemed to be searching for the other half of a union, an animus figure.

The journey to the Beauty Box was by boat over water. This is the beginning of a series of sandpictures suggesting the alchemical state of solutio: the structures in Shelley's life were beginning to dissolve. The three figures that made this journey across water are dressed in yellow. Hillman (1989) discusses the complex meaning of yellow as the transition between white and red. It represents the necessary rotting, or disillusionment, which must accompany leaving the pure but disembodied white state. Shelley left behind the house in the sandtray, as well as the figures on the shelf below it. She left behind the family of figures she brought from home, and expressed her disillusionment in her own words "I don't want to play with toys anymore." The woman, boy and girl who arrived in the Beauty Box dressed in yellow, are in a state of readiness to work with the contents of this new picture.



**Figure 4**

In Shelley's fourth sandpicture (figure 4) we see that she has created a similar home to her first picture, but with some tools of self protection. She constructed a fence and small garden to protect the home and the fence is closed off with a gate so she can control what comes inside and goes outside, a form of self-regulation. She added a mailbox beside the gate giving her a way to send and receive information from those not "inside" the home anymore, perhaps her Dad. Having just defined some boundaries and established an outside with controlled access by a gate, Shelley

finds herself in the bathtub (the therapeutic container) with someone else! This is the first of three sessions where she used the baby bear to represent herself. Shelley was very aware of the sandtray full of water that was used by her brother just before her session and she was expressing her dislike of being close to his watery work. The fact that the children were seen in back-to-back appointments made it more difficult to create a truly safe and separate containment for each of the children. The expression, “an elephant in the room,” means the obvious issue that no one is addressing or willing to talk about. Perhaps Shelley felt this way about her brother’s issues, so she chose the elephant figure for her brother. After this session I discussed with Shelley’s mother her need for space and arranged for the appointments to be on different days. I also encouraged them to create separate spaces at home by closing their bedroom doors, and being clear about using each other’s toys. When these measures were taken, Shelley no longer expressed the concern of being in the same tub or bed together. During this session Shelley created a second picture in the small plastic sandtray again (figure 5). She entitled it “Magic Place”. This time however, every figure was chosen fresh from the therapist’s shelves, nothing was transferred from the first picture in the large tray. In combination with the fence, gate



**Figure 5**

Shelley had a clearer idea of what was outside her family. She was also developing and mailbox in figure 4, this use of all new figures seemed to be an indication that ways of controlling what moved in and out of her space. The constellation of her Self was beginning to occur with elements different from her family, unique to her.

In the “Beauty Box” (figure 3) the bulrushes were placed in the far left corner, but here they are in the near right. The movement, from left to right, and far to near, may symbolize a shift in Shelley’s focus, bringing this grail into her consciousness where it can

receive more energy for transformation. In the new location, Shelley seems more focused on what is inside the bulrushes; a mother dog beside the puppy-Self to regulate and protect it. To this therapist there seemed a sense of command in the fairy’s wand (in the centre) as she pointed directly at the two dogs in the bulrushes. Perhaps, after sorting through the “Beauty Box” and the “Magic Place,” the fairy might say, “THIS, is what I can work with as I create my Self, this is where I feel potential.” The fairy in the center of this picture seems to indicate where Shelley will find an answer to her feeling of emptiness, the Void that is filled with possibility.

### **3) Coming to terms with the permanence of the divorce and allowing her personal work to begin as a result of this acceptance**

The following two sandpictures were made one week apart. Shelley was driven to the first appointment by both her parents. They were together to get a car to the mechanic, but it is fairly clear from figure 6 that she had some hope of their reconciliation. The fence is gone, and the mom and dad are placed in bed together (Mom represented by the blue and green “Mulan” figure and Dad by the “Tarzan” figure). Interestingly, one of the figures she chose for herself was a little bear, the same colour as Tarzan and lying between them in bed. However, she was also represented as



**Figure 6**

one of the frogs in the far left corner of the tray (there are three frogs, and she is the youngest of three siblings). These frogs resemble the mother figure in colour. We see that Shelly has represented herself twice: first as a bear, and second as a frog. In this symbolism, Shelley seemed to experience herself as split between Mom and Dad. The frog-self can use its

ability to live in two environments and showed acceptance of the new family structure of two homes. It is a symbol of a new Self that is capable of adjusting to this new reality. In figure 7 from the next session, the mother is now represented by a Jane figure, the actual partner of Tarzan (in bed in the near left corner). During her play with the figures in this session, Shelley repeatedly interchanged the Jane and the Mulan figures to represent the Mom. Mulan is a young woman from a



Figure 7

Disney movie who embodies fierce independence. Shelley seemed to be experimenting with two possible images for her Mom; the Tarzan dependant Jane, or the independent Mulan. As she allowed herself to see her mother as caught in a split in relation to her husband, Shelley was able to see the conflict between her role as 'Daddy's girl' and her true, increasingly independent Self. This dissolving of old relationships was also represented in Shelley saying that the house in figure 7 was a tree house surrounded by water, and only accessible by boat. She finished figure 7 by firmly returning the fence and the gate to the picture, and moving the little bear, the one who resembles the dad, into the lily pad (in the near left corner beside the bed). In doing this she removed herself from the marital relationship (bed) and put herself in a place which resembles the bulrushes: a place of Self-transformation.

**4) Strengthening the ego and re-constellating the Self while also separating from old family problems, specifically dealing with her father relationship and the history of sexual abuse in her family.**

The following sandpicture (figure 8) was created nine weeks after therapy began. Shelley had

shifted from inside a house (figures 1, 2, 4, 6 and 7) to outside in a fishing village with two homes.



Figure 8

Shelley has also moved from a tree house surrounded by water, to land with a shore (the near edge). She has found solid ground from which she can access the water. She uses boats to navigate the waters of her emotions and to help her cope with her state of solution as familiar structures dissolve around her. In her play she assembles the tools needed to go fishing: boats, baskets, poles. Fishing is a symbolic process of bringing up the contents of the unconscious to feed the ego and strengthen its relationship with the Self (Jung, 1959).

She is now able to begin benefiting from the waters, by pulling up fish from the unconscious. In his Aion lectures, E. Edinger (1996) discusses Jung's interpretation of a client's "Big Fish Dream":

The voice of the Self is speaking... It makes a pronouncement of transpersonal wisdom. The first statement is that "the patient ones in the innermost realm are given the fish, the food of the deep." The "patient ones" would be, I think, those who are able to make a relation to the unconscious. It does indeed require patience to establish such a connection. When the connection is established, a feeding process occurs. The food of the deep becomes available to the ego. ( p. 120)

So we see that in figure 8 Shelley moves beyond the psychological healing process as it relates to divorce and prepares for a personal process of individuation.

The two homes in this picture are ceramic and therefore somewhat fragile, and were placed one in the near right corner, the other centered in the back, there is also a log house in the far right corner. Shelley is representing concretely the reality of her family and her own weekly journeys between two houses. The

tepee in the far left is a “praying place”. Beside the tepee is the bulrush with mother dog still protecting the puppy/Self images from the world outside. There is a second infant image in this picture, the empty baby carriage beside the house in the near right. Shelley has left a fishing pole in the carriage, perhaps indicating that more fishing (strengthening of the ego) will have to occur before the Self can be reborn.

In the back right corner of figure 8 is an old log house. Shelley told me that the Grandpa live there, and that a black bird came and got its head stuck in the chimney. Shelley made a point of rescuing the bird and throwing the Grandpa figure face down in the sand. The bird is black, indicating that it has come from the shadow. The black bird also flew to the Dad figure in this picture and spoke to him but “the dad is just staring at the bird, then he goes to sleep”. Although Shelley works for weeks with these secrets brought by the black bird, this was the first appearance of feelings of anger towards both the Grandfather and the father. The fact that the visit of the bird puts the Dad to sleep seems to indicate that Shelley feels that her Dad’s fears take him away to his unconscious (sleep), and make him unavailable for her. Shelley seemed to be realising, as she began her journey of Self discovery that her Dad will not be able to come with her. Interestingly, the boat which she calls her father’s (the orange raft) has no oars. Shelley’s own relationship with the black bird, who brings messages from the shadow is clear in the close up picture below (figure 9). This figure was reconstructed at the end of her session. She said that the black bird was the girl’s friend, and you can see in the picture how intently she listens to its message.



**Figure 9**

Figure 10 represents Shelley’s fifteenth sandpicture; she entitled this one “Townsville”. After setting up the town, Shelley wanted me to play with her and

said: “So, the black bird is my friend. I was going over to the cookie shop, you are the Boss guy and you’re nice to me. I go to the shop and sit down in this chair over here, the troll guy comes; he’s surprised I have manners...They all think I’m so mean...Then I go see the Boss and take him the cookies he needed and asked if I can have some fish. On my way home the kids next door tease me saying “She’s stealing fish, she’s so mean.” They tell on me to the Boss; he says she wasn’t stealing; she was given the fish because she did work for me. It was going to be Christmas soon... Everyone thought I had a beautiful house (near right corner), but that I’m mean inside...The bird brings a message to you (the Boss)... Christmas is coming and Santa will bring what everyone needs and specially to the girl who lives alone.”



**Figure 10**

Shelley gathered the villagers to the center and said: “The Boss brings fish for everyone”. The Boss is the white haired figure with a black fish basket beside it, standing to the left of the sleigh in the centre. She placed the baby Jesus figure in the sleigh, and said they did that “because he was the only baby in the town...The other family, who made fun of me, don’t want to bring anything [to the gathering], they’re jealous because I have a baby.”

Shelley created “Townsville” as a town of eleven cottages and houses. The city is a feminine symbol of positive psychic organization (Walker, 1988, p. 98). Placement of the baby figurine in the middle of her sandpicture indicated that her sense of Self was now central, and she had begun the process of becoming a separate individual. This process, though very positive made her feel lonely and isolated. Wanting to work by candlelight (there is a lit candle in the far left, and she asked to have the lights turned off) represents her awareness that this is a big step. She feels the sacredness of the work, and also that she’s not

ready to expose these feelings to the bright light of consciousness yet. This sense of self-protection is represented in the spaces left between the outer ring of figures and the central grouping. In this picture she chose the woman figure (the third figure to the right from the red haired troll) as herself, and she is teased by the neighbours and misunderstood. In previous sessions she had chosen the little girl from this collection of figures to represent herself. Shelley has matured to become the woman who has the only baby in town. This baby is Jesus, the divine child and he is brought into the village center. The fact that Shelley's Self has been born is literally central to the process of this picture. The villagers stand around the Christ-child and bring offerings. It is of interest to note that Shelley's family has no religious affiliation, and Shelley had never been to a church. The Boss has brought fish for everyone, and the woman (Shelley) brings a silver chest containing a silver chalice (not visible, in front of the woman figure). These two silver figures are used only in this picture. As symbols of the search for the Holy Grail, they foreshadow Shelley's upcoming ten months of playing on the floor with shadow elements and her relationship to the Feminine, and resonate back to the bulrushes holding the pre-Self images in her early sandpictures. Interestingly they are both silver containers, a colour and function associated with the Feminine. These silver figures are in contrast to the gold sleigh that holds the baby Jesus. Gold represents consciousness, and the sleigh the vehicle which will take her into it. The silver suggests the Feminine and unconscious journey Shelley is preparing for and the gold, the consciousness which will carry her through that process. The baby Jesus is coloured both silver and gold, and embodies that union of opposites. This gathering of the villagers is not only about the birth of the divine child, it is about sending Shelley off on her journey of the next ten months equipped with all she will need.

It is not a coincidence that the Boss is able to give fish to the girl, and stands up to the neighbours about her worthiness. In *Aion*, Jung (1959) explores all aspects of the fish as symbol, and its relationship to Christ as a symbol of the Self. Fish coming from the unconscious make possible a transformation of consciousness. Shelley has projected the therapist's role onto the Boss and knows that the process of therapy is supplying her with the unconscious food she needs to develop her own newly born divine child. The Boss is very clear that Shelley is deserving of the fish, and makes it known to those who are jealous of her. But why is Shelley so preoccupied with this question of meanness? She began this session singing a song she

made up: "if God was one of us would he be mean to everybody?" Certainly her anger explodes sometimes in the context of her family, and she does things that are mean to her mother and brothers. Her exploration of her own shadow material allows her to pose a question that seems bigger than that. In saying, "if God was one of us", does she imply that God would be enmeshed in our unconscious living and as a result would be mean? Or, on a more mystical level, is she confused by her own choice of the baby Jesus as a symbol for her Self? Some of this question may be resolved by the message of the black bird, her helper in her individuation process. Black bird tells the Boss that it is going to be Christmas soon, and everyone will get what they need. Shelley is receiving special gifts for the journey she is on. The bird seems to be telling Shelley that her sense of having God within her is exactly what she needs. The bird calls this Christmas, the birth of Christ/the Self. Jung (1959) connects these concepts by saying:

The alchemical fish symbolism leads direct to the... self. We now have a new symbol in place of the fish: a psychological concept of human wholeness. In as much or in as little as the fish is Christ does the self mean God. It is something that corresponds, an inner experience, an assimilation of Christ into the psychic matrix, a new realization of the divine Son... This, compared with the mute and unconscious fish, marks a distinct increase in conscious development. (p. 183)

After this sandpicture the fish was no longer used as a symbol. Shelley turned towards the healing of her relationship with the Feminine, and the strengthening of her ego in relation to her feminine-Self.

### **5) Descending into the shadow and the Feminine and engaging in their transformative presence in her life**

Shelley literally descended in the next stage of her process. She abandoned the sandtray and worked exclusively on the floor for ten months. The first task she set out to accomplish was to build a house out of a box. "I'm building my own house where nobody will tell me what to do, not even you." On the first day she used the small Mexican family figurines (in figure 8) to inhabit the house. They served as transitional objects from the work in the sandtray to her new work on the floor.

Shelley seemed to be focusing on her inner world, trying to determine the relationship of her new-found Self (reborn as a Divine Child in figure 10) to the complex world of her family and all its

generational issues. She spent most of one session explaining her father's family tree. It almost seemed that she was testing the strength of her new sense of Self. She said that this time it would be different. The house on the floor would be the place where she learned to do things her own way, not to be told by others. In her article "The Double Birth," A. Navone (1998) discusses the use of a house outside the sandtray:

The choice of the house outside the sandbox could indicate... [a] need to find points of reference at the ego level... The house could also represent that "secure base" that the child needs in order to experiment with the regressions experienced in the course of the therapy with a function that is analogous to the one assumed by the mother during the exploratory movements of the child. (p. 30)

Shelley needed to resolve questions about the Feminine as devouring and fearful, or nurturing and safe. In order to venture into this territory she constructed her own grown-up place and used it as a home base throughout her remaining sessions.

In her second session using the constructed house on the floor (figure 11), Shelley replaced the small family figures with a woman she named Madeline (behind tree on the right). She added on to the original house with a second box. The old woman lived in the house and was feared by the parents of the children who lived nearby. "People think she's mean, and evil and creepy," but the children talked about her and were drawn to visit her, even though they had been told she was dangerous. In "The Realization of the Shadow," von Franz (1964) says:



**Figure 11**

When Jung called one aspect of the unconscious personality the shadow, he was referring to a relatively well-defined factor. But sometimes everything that is unknown to the ego is mixed up with the shadow, including

even the most valuable and highest forces... If the shadow figure contains valuable, vital forces, they ought to be assimilated into actual experience and not repressed. It is up to the ego to give up its pride and priggishness and to live out something that seems to be dark, but actually may not be. This can require a sacrifice just as heroic as the conquest of passion, but in an opposite sense. Divining in advance whether our dark partner symbolizes a shortcoming that we should overcome or a meaningful bit of life that we should accept—this is one of the most difficult problems that we encounter on the way to individuation. (pp. 173-6)

The small doll Shelley chose as Madeline was dressed in a folk costume similar to the traditional dress of her father's homeland. Clothed in the dark fears of her father, Shelley had hidden her own wise woman. Shelley asked me to "be" Madeline, to move the figure and be the voice that spoke to the children when they visited. Madeline offered them tea just as I offered Shelley tea when she came for her appointments and Madeline listened to the children speak about what it was like for them at home with their brothers and sisters. In asking me to be Madeline, Shelley transferred her experience of therapy to the old woman. Madeline listened to the children and during that process they decided themselves whether she was dangerous or not. Shelley had developed a new level of consciousness about her process. She was aware that she had a story to tell. By asking me to play the old woman, she was now consciously asking me to listen to it.

The name Shelley chose for the old woman was Madeline. This is a French version of Magdalene, and refers to Mary Magdalene. It is interesting to note that Mary was denounced by the church as a prostitute, and rejected by the disciple Peter because of the power that resulted from her close relationship with Jesus. The fact that this shadow side is now represented by the human figure Madeline indicates that Shelley's discomfort with the feminine is becoming conscious. What a perfect symbol for Shelley's own sense of the Feminine, which has been cloaked in superstition and doubt all her life.

In most sessions using Madeline's house, Shelley also used a large dollhouse as the place the nearby children lived with their parents. A dark forest was always located between the houses. "You have to go through a dark forest and then you come to a bright land," said Shelley of the path the children had to take

to find the old lady in the house. The dark forest is a common symbol in fairytales for the place of the shadow. The heroic quest usually involves a descent into a dark place to discover and reconcile the shadow before returning to the world victorious. In Shelley's story the shadow is not just her own, but also belongs to the families of her father and mother. There had already been a dark house in figure 8 associated with her mother's father and his abuse of her. There was also the darkness of her father's superstitions. In one of the floor sessions, Shelley had the dad of the children say: "You DON'T go in those woods; something might hurt you, that lady might hurt you." And later the dad said, "I really wish she'd move, so the children can freely explore nature." The children, however, were very focused on the old woman. Like the fairytales about children going into the woods, they were drawn to her, but what they found when they came out of the dark forest was a bright land, a land of nurturing (the old lady gave them food and drink) and consciousness.

The children decided that they wanted to bring their mother to meet Madeline because they wanted the old lady to be able to come and visit their big house. After convincing the mother to come with them she said to Madeline: "My children were right; you're very nice and your forest will be a bright forest now, and the children can play in it and come and see you...I was so mistaken!" Just as the children seemed driven to go to the old woman, they were also driven to find reconciliation. They knew what was needed was to open up communication between the two houses. Perhaps the houses represent her Self (found in the dark forest of the unconscious) and her ego (a mediator between her Self and her family life). The forest pathway that was cleared became a way for the ego and the Self to communicate. Shelley had broken through superstitious attitudes towards the Feminine, and opened the pathway through the forest, which was now bright. She could begin to bring the Feminine element of her Self into her daily life. Her ego had succeeded in suspending its fearful judgment long enough to retrieve and restore the Feminine as precious.

#### **6) Integrating the Feminine and the new ego-Self relationship into her life**

Figure 12 was created after ten months of playing out issues on the floor. Shelley recreated the house of Madeline within a garden, and placed it centrally towards the near edge. Her sacred garden was now inside her sandpicture, and therefore inside herself. Symbolically, she had overcome the need to

dissociate the material of her floorplay; she was ready to integrate it.



**Figure 12**

In the very center of the house are the mother sheep dog and one puppy. This mother sheepdog has guarded throughout the process since figure 5 where the pre-Self images were contained by the bulrushes. The other two puppies, perhaps Shelley's brothers, are also here but separated in the smaller less central part of the house. Dog instinct and dogged perseverance in the process of individuation have guided Shelley's Self and ego to their home, a new relationship. Although she told me that the sheepdog represented Daisy, Shelley seems to have embodied the dog's wisdom and guidance into her own sense of who she is.

While the house and garden occupy about two-thirds of the sand, the far one third, beyond the fence is empty. This is reminiscent of the earliest pictures where Shelley struggled with the issue of who was inside the family and who was outside. In a sense she was resolving a related issue. Having spent ten months away from the sand and the tray, she eased her way back by creating a firm boundary for her inner world and leaving the outside (as represented by the outside of the fence) empty. This emptiness represents her own sense of not knowing how it will be to integrate the new relationship between her ego and her Self, with the outside world. She placed nothing outside the gate because she had not moved out there yet herself.

In figure 13, the same sandpicture taken from the opposite side, Madeline is holding a guitar at the left of the house. There is a piano in the house (front centre in



**Figure 13**

figure 12). Music is a creative function, which springs from Shelley's sense of Self. Shelley also referred to happy times with her mother's musical friends. She is claiming for herself something she has observed and valued in the lives of others. In Shelley's experience, friends who make music also value plants, and Madeline's house is now in the midst of a large garden full of tools including a shed, wheelbarrow, watering can and rake. The same creative function that is bringing in music is bringing a desire to work the soil. She seems to know that although her sandplay process is coming to a close, she will want the tools and spirit of gardening and music to take with her as she goes out into her life with an ability to exercise all the wonderful material she has gathered on her journey.

The black bird has reappeared on the roof of Madeline's house (figure 12 right of centre on roof) and reminds us of the time it was perched on the wall and spoke so intensely to the girl in picture 8. It seems that the bird has come home too. It is as if it has been whispering to Shelley all along of this safe and rich place she would find within herself at the end of her work.

Figure 14 is Shelley's final Sandplay picture. One year and two months before this little town was created, Shelley had created "Townsville" where the black bird declared that it would soon be Christmas and the girl would receive everything she needed. In figure 14 it seems finally to be Christmas. The snowy house in the far right corner confirms this feeling. In the center is the largest tree in the collection, a snowy conifer tree. It is a strong symbol of the Tree of Life and the ego-Self axis. The tree has its roots in the earth, representing the location of the Self in the unconscious. Its trunk holds its branches reaching in all directions, a symbol of connection with the material world and representative of the ego's domain. As symbolized by this Tree of Life, the ego is in balance with the Self and

related through the establishment of the ego-Self axis. The tree has been placed in exactly the spot of the mother dog and puppy in the previous picture. The Self and the ego have become one in this symbol of the tree. The presence of the hand pump amplifies this representation of Shelley's Self and ego working together in the world.



**Figure 14**

We can often see symbols of the archetypes, e.g., the Tree of Life, that are models in the collective unconscious, and we can also see symbols from the personal unconscious, e.g., the water pump. In a sense, the pump is connected with the source of pure, clean water in the depths and through the action of the hands and intention (ego) the water is brought up to serve us, to quench our thirst, in a sense to provide something essential. It requires the action of the hands which are so important in the sandplay process.

figure in the far right quadrant resonates back to figure 7: the log house of the grandfather, and family secrets. When used in combination with the autumn tree, they give us the feeling that some things in Shelley's life remain dark. She cannot change her grandfather or the fact that he abused her mother. She is never safe to be alone with him. This log house is, however, much smaller than the one in figure 7 indicating that this issue is relatively small. The same small house appeared in figure 10 in almost the same location but with a lamp placed beside it. At that time she needed the gentle light of the lamp and the candle as she prepared for her work with the shadow. Now she is able to include the house in her town, it is an accepted part of her life.

Another important resonance in this sandpicture is the small fireman outside the square house, centered on the right side of the tray. The square is a symbol for the ego. It seems that Shelley has by nature a fiery instinct but she doesn't have to

lose control of it as she has done in the past and become mean. Although there are many things about her life that can still make her angry, the fireman represents self-regulation when things get too hot.

The far left corner has two buildings: a church and hall. From early in her process Shelley placed the place of prayer (the tepee) in this far left corner. Shelley now has structures of governing and spirituality in her town, representing clarity of psychic organization. She no longer needs to transfer this responsibility to the therapist, represented by the Boss of Townsville in figure 10.

The house, which is centred at the near edge, represents Madeline's house with its open façade and the small white chair from the centre of figure 12. Shelley has brought Madeline's house from the forest and integrated it into the town. She has taken all she discovered from her journey through the forest and brought it into her psyche in a way that is structured and accessible. Shelley placed the little house in front of herself as she worked; clearly this was where she saw herself. The fairy who lived in this house (in pink skirt to the left of the house) closely resembles, though is much smaller than, the fairy used in figure 5, the "Magic Place". There, she is pointing her wand with intent, and seemingly speaks to the dogs of the transformation they must go through during Shelley's process. The Feminine lives in Madeleine's house embodied in the symbol of a fairy. Fairies also dwell with the fireman in the square house of the ego, and alone in the snowy house in the far right corner. Shelley seeks the integration of her daily life with the magic, sacred Feminine that she experienced with Madeline in the forest.

Shelley called this sandpicture "a little town". Like its predecessor, "Townsville" it has eleven houses, with the addition of a church and a town hall. Five of the houses from Townsville are in this town; the other six have been replaced with much larger houses. The small cottage and lamp in the near left of figure 10 have been combined to form a lighthouse. This lighthouse occupies the position of the boats in picture 7 and reminds us that Shelley may be doing more fishing, and will need this lighthouse to guide her voyages out on the deep waters. The house in the near right has a tiny man and woman standing on the balcony, and may represent her father's house. He has a girlfriend now and Shelley doesn't particularly like her. The woman is placed with her back to us. The house in the far right corner may be her mother's house, a magical house where her mother is represented by a fairy.

As a positive feminine symbol, this "little town" represents Shelley's arrival at a place where she is comfortable with herself and her surroundings. Being little, there is nothing inflated or unrealistic about it, it is where she is and it is what she needs. She has created a place to live that is centred in her own deep connection to her Self, and all the rich material she has retrieved and discovered on her journey through the dark forest.

"In the symbology of the psyche, the city stands for the regularized center of a person's life, which can often be reached only after long travels, when a high degree of emotional maturity has been attained and the gate to the spiritual centre of one's life can be traversed." (Biedermann, 1992, p. 72)

At the end of this final session Shelley says that it begins to rain. In ancient civilizations rain was a symbol of new growth and fertility.

Hildegard of Bingen likened rain to the vital energy of the soul, which makes the body flourish and

"keeps it from drying out, as the rain moistens the earth. For when the rainfall is moderate and not excessive, the earth brings forth new life...From the soul there emanates certain forces to vitalize the body, just as rainwater with its moisture vitalizes the earth." (Biedermann, 1992, p. 277)

When a new tree has been planted in the city center, rain is a perfect gift to ensure that the tree will establish its roots and thrive.

## Theoretical Framework

Three aspects of Dora Kalff's work are particularly applicable to this case. Kalff (2003) explains the importance of the first sandpicture as holding clues to the way the sandplay process will unfold: "the path to the goal of Self-realisation" (p. 9). The primary elements of Shelley's first six sandpictures are the emptiness of the centre, and the struggle to clarify what is inside and what is outside her family. The developmental stages that Kalff defined are not followed in sequence; neither is each stage represented at length. Sometimes they appear in only one picture. However, knowledge of Kalff's stages did inform the interpretation of several key pictures. An example of this would be her use of

fences to define territory, and to help her deal with the division in her family. Once Shelley came to accept the divorce, she moved on to new themes and no longer used fences in this way. The fence was used differently in the second to last sandpicture, to ease her process of moving back into the sandtray. In the final sandpicture there were no fences. Shelley seemed to have completed the movement from the stage of conflict to that of socialization. Finally, Kalff's emphasis on the manifestation of the Self being the most important aspect of the sandplay process was certainly demonstrated in Shelley's work.

The work of Estelle Weinrib (2004) on the "Distinction between Psychological Healing and the Expansion of Ego Consciousness" helps to clarify how Shelley's sandplay evolved:

In my view, psychological healing and expansion of consciousness, though related, are not identical. Healing implies first that there has been a wounding and possible impairment of natural organic function, and second that the wound has been remedied and natural functioning restored. (pp. 19-20)

In her process Shelley did both healing and transformative work. In my opinion, she did not need to go back to early "bad" mother experiences because there seemed to be no deep wounding of this kind in her childhood. She did however have a need to separate from her identity as caregiver and Daddy's little girl before she could establish her own clear sense of Self. She also found herself deep in generational issues that she had to come to terms with before she could integrate her own sense of the Feminine. Happily, Shelley did not have so much healing work to do that she could not get to the transformative work and in the end she emerged with a synthesis of both psychological healing and expanded ego consciousness.

he processes of individuation and development of the Self as outlined by Jung also provided a roadmap as we followed Shelley on her journey. Once she resolved the duality in her family she began working with the shadow. In Shelley's case, she moved first into the shadow of an old log house where she found both sexuality and sexual abuse confused together. She struggled with her father complex and decided he was incapable of supporting her, and negotiated with herself about an emerging animus. Later, after she placed an image of the divine child in the centre of her sandpicture, she launched into a new journey. This journey was into a dark forest where she encountered a wise old woman. Shelley's sense of

need for the Feminine was very clear in this segment of her process; her reconnection with the Feminine became literally the home needed for her new sense of Self.

The work of C.G. Jung was also used in understanding Shelley's use of the symbol of the fish. Fish were central to two of the sandpictures presented in this paper. This symbol was used to express drawing up the unconscious material she needed to feed to her ego in order to transform its relationship to her Self into one of consciousness.

Finally, in the work of Jung the symbol of the pearl is discussed as representing the process of the constellation of the Self in his work "Psychology of the Child Archetype". The Child Archetype represents "the process of individuation" and "the treasure hard to attain" (Jung, 1990 p. 159-160). Although in Shelley's Sandplay Therapy, she did not chose the pearl specifically as a figurine, her whole process resonates with the image of the pearl as representing the process of finding the invaluable jewel of the Self in the journey towards individuation.

## Conclusion

Shelley journeyed through a total of eighteen sandpictures, nineteen sessions of floor play and nearly two years of therapy. Initially she focused on the division in her family caused by the divorce. She then began to separate out which issues were her parents' and which were her own. As she gained some independence she also began to feel the conflict that her close identification with her father had created. She used a smaller sandtray to sort out pre-Self images and find what would become the focus of her ego-Self work: the ring of bulrushes and a mother and baby dog.

In the next series of sandpictures the work focused on both the personal and the collective shadow. The black bird arrived in the pictures and showed Shelley how the contents of the old log house made her feel, and spoke to her of another place, another house where she could be truly at home. In the next sandpicture the baby Jesus, symbolic of the Child Archetype, was placed in the center of Townsville. Shelley was fed with the fish of the unconscious, and she prepared to embark on her journey to the dark forest.

Shelley spent many sessions playing on the floor with the work of the shadow/dark forest in order to find a bright place. Her new connection with the Feminine helped establish communication between her

Self and her ego. Her next task would be the integration of that shadow work back into the sand. Shelley accomplished this by creating Madeline's house in the midst of a beautiful garden. Finally, she was ready to integrate that house into a village with a large Christmas tree at the centre, a symbol of the relationship she had developed between her ego and her Self. As the black bird foretold it was finally Christmas, and Shelley had received everything she needed. With her connection to the Feminine intact, Shelley's Self and ego were integrated into the collective village, and their communication with one another felt as natural to Shelley as a tree drawing up water and nutrients from the earth. Abundance seemed to fall over the picture as she announced that a gentle rain began.

In an interview with Shelley's Mom near the end of her sandplay process, she reported that Shelley was feeling much less anxious about school. Although she still preferred company at home she was now able to go upstairs alone. More significant to the mother was a feeling that Shelley was "more connected to her life" and that within Shelley there was a "sense that all's well... [that] things are as they should be."

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