

# Sandplay: conflict and creativity embodied in the sand

Patrícia Dias Gimenez\*



## Abstract

In this article, the author aims to reflect on the clinical practice of the analyst who works with images, focusing mainly on sandplay, “play in the sand”, technique created by Dora Kalff in Switzerland and originally brought to Brazil by Fatima Salome Gambini.

Having a chronicle by Rubem Alves (a Brazilian writer) as starting point, the author defends the possibility and the need to broaden our horizon as therapists. She emphasizes the importance of doing the exercise of “playful eyes” by Jungian therapists – a term used by Rubem Alves in his chronicle. She highlights that one needs to make an effort to achieve a broad look, instead of remaining limited to the need of the immediate symbol interpretation. For this, the analysts should invest in developing their imaginative capacity and must earn an imaginative freedom in order to enable the creative contact of the patient with his/her unconscious images embodied in sand.

The author argues that the Jungian therapist who works with images, through sandplay, clay, painting or dreams, experience a never-ending process of becoming a therapist. They are never complete, so, they are in a constant training process, always learning from the images. ■

## Keywords

Sandplay,  
image,  
symbol,  
imaginative  
capacity.

\* Jungian analyst and SBPA/IAAP member. Master in social psychology from the Psychology Institute at the University of São Paulo. She is specialized in sandplay and has been working for 23 years in her own clinic.

E-mail: <patgimenez@uol.com.br>.

## Sandplay: conflict and creativity embodied in the sand



I will start my analysis by sharing with you a an excerpt that inspires me a lot:

The complicated art of seeing<sup>1</sup>

She came, lay down on the couch and said, “I think I’m going crazy.” I remained silent waiting for her to reveal the signs of her madness. “Cooking is one of my pleasures. I go to the kitchen, cut the onions, tomatoes, peppers. It is a joy!

However, a few days ago, I went to the kitchen to do what I had done hundreds of times: to cut onions. Trivial act, no surprises. But once the onion was cut, I looked at it and I was startled. I realized I had never actually seen an onion. Those perfectly set of rings, light reflecting on them: for me, it seemed to be a rose at the stained glass window of a gothic cathedral.

Suddenly, the onion, from an object to be eaten, became a work of art to be seen! What’s worse is that the same happened when I cut the tomatoes, peppers... Now all I see astounds me.”

She paused, waiting for my diagnosis. I stood up, went to the bookcase and there picked “Odes Elementales<sup>2</sup>” by Pablo Neruda. I sought for “Ode

to the Onion” and said: “This eye disorder that has befallen on you is common among poets. Observe what Neruda said of an onion, just like the one that caused your amazement:

‘Water rose with crystal scales’ (apud ALVES, 2004). No, you’re not crazy.

You have earned the eyes of a poet... Poets teach us to see.”

Seeing is very complicated. This is strange because, of all the senses, the eyes are the easiest ones for the scientific understanding. Their physical shape is identical to the optical physics of a camera: the object on the outside is reflected on the inside. But there is something in the vision that does not belong to physics.

William Blake knew it and he stated: “The tree that a wise man sees is not the same tree seen by the fool” (apud ALVES, 2004). I know this from experience. When I see a flowering Ipe tree, I feel like Moses before the burning bush: an epiphany of the sacredness.

But a woman who lived near my house proclaimed the death of an Ipe tree that bloomed in front of her house because it has made the ground dirty and it meant a hard work for her broom. Her eyes did not see the beauty. They only saw the trash.

Adélia Prado<sup>3</sup> once said: “God occasionally takes poetry away from me. I look at a stone and see a stone.” (apud ALVES, 2004). Drummond saw a stone and did not see a stone<sup>4</sup>. The stone he saw turned into a poem. There are many people with perfect eyesight who see nothing. “It is not enough not to be blind to see the trees and flowers. It is not enough to open the window to see the fields and rivers,” (apud ALVES, 2004) wrote Alberto Caeiro, Fernando Pessoa’s heteronym. Vision capability is not natural. It needs to be learned.

Nietzsche knew this and he said that the first task in education is teaching how to see. Zen Buddhism agrees, and all their spirituality is a

search for the experience called “satori”, the opening of the “third eye”. I do not know if Cummings was inspired by the Zen Buddhism, but the fact is that he wrote:

“Now the ears of my ears are awoken and now the eyes of my eyes are opened”(apud ALVES, 2004).

[...] The difference is in where the eyes are kept. If the eyes are in the toolbox, they are only tools we use for their practical functioning.

With them we see objects, light signals, street names – and adjust our action. The seeing is subordinated to the doing. This is necessary. But it is too poor.

Eyes do not reach orgasm [...], but when the eyes are in the toy box, they turn into pleasure organs: they play with what they see, they look for the pleasure of looking, they want to make love with the world.

The eyes that live in the toolbox are the eyes of adults. The eyes that live in the toy box belong to children. In order to have playful eyes, we need to have children as our teachers. [...]. (RUBEM ALVES)

From my standpoint, the eyes of a therapist who works with sandplay need to constantly visit the toy box, so they need to afford themselves to play in order to enable the play in the sand. The analyst must practice “psycheating”<sup>5</sup>, a term coined by Rafael López-Pedraza in his seminar “On Eros and Psyche” (2010), which brings the idea of generating psychic movement, imagining, stirring psychic waters ...

I started working with sandplay shortly after graduation, in 1993. My supervisor, (now colleague at SBPA<sup>6</sup>) Rodney Taboada kept insisting that I should contact Fatima Salome Gambini, a Brazilian analyst who has deepened in sandplay and also had experienced a long analytical process acquiring countless exchanges and sharings with Dora Kalff, the creator of the technique.

It took me some time to look for Fatima. Before that, I explored this material on my own, based on books I had bought in San Francisco (there was

still nothing published in Portuguese at the time), on the conversations with Antonio Carlos Garcia, my analyst (who had once worked with the “sand box”) and also on studies with a college classmate who was also interested in sandplay. At the time, we used the term sandbox.

I dove into the books, bought an assortment of miniatures and began to treat children, my first patients. From the beginning, in the clinic, I set out to work with image. I cannot conceive a totally verbal work although from time to time I have patients who challenge me to experience only verbal processes. But even when it is seldom used, I find substantial to encourage contact with image through sandplay, clay, watercolor, crayon, color pencils, whatever! In fact, I seek the material the patient feels most connected with. I think it is a rich process to seek for images; that brings me the feeling of going straight to the source.



Of course, when working with dreams, we are also dealing with image and drinking straight from the water spring. But they are different processes and, in my view, complementary ones. Acknowledging the importance of remembering my dream, to catch up at dawn, writing it down (or drawing, painting, sculpting inspired by the dream) requires an active attitude of my consciousness. It is an exercise of welcoming the image.

In sandplay as well as in painting, we experience the practice of cropping the image while awoken, going actively in a complementary direction to the dream, in a search of contact with the source, the unconsciousness. It is a seek to establish this bridge, this transcendent function. I know nothing about engineering, but in bridges I see that the construction process materializes itself from the two ends about to be connected somewhere in between! This seems like a good picture of the work in Jungian analysis with dreams and sandplay.

Jung's biography and his search on these two directions is, to me, the great example of this process of a two-way investment: on one side, welcoming the spontaneous production by the unconsciousness while I collect my dreams, and, on the other side, looking for these images as I exercise my conscience to dive in such unconscious images, bringing their treasures to a solid ground, to a consciousness land. Jung lived all of this intensely, not only in the mind but literally working with body and soul, so devotedly sculpting, painting a lot and investing in his inner altar described in the precious *Red Book*.

It was through treating a child that I felt inspired to work with sand and miniatures. Before that, since my encounter with Anna Barros, my first Jungian therapist, I had already revived the contact with brushes, paints, clay, crayons, which I had been fortunate to experience throughout my childhood and adolescence. So when I started in my own office, soon as I had graduated, it was inevitable to bring in those materials and use them with my first tiny patients. But the child who encouraged me to make contact with sandplay was not interested in any artistic material. And she got very interested in sandplay. From the beginning, I could see the richness of those elements, the ease way in which children plunged the images in the sand and the stories that inspired them. Children were my teachers in sandplay as I started in my career.

Only after I met Fatima I could experience a long journey with her. This meeting led to pro-

found changes in my life and in my work.

What dramatically changed for me in that meeting with the Fatima's sands was to find out the sand as core thing in the sandplay process... And the freedom to play, such an important issue nowadays, when we are, on the one hand discovering the importance of playing in childhood through the neurosciences; and on the other hand, seeing education to prevent children from it, forcing them to face an early start in their intellectual development at the expense of play. In these approximately 20 years working with sand, I already feel the difference in the way children play: I do not know if what hinders them the most is the excessive early intellectual stimulation, the influence of iPads, iPhones and things like that or the lack of space/time for a free play. This is very sad to see and I think that it is directly related to ADD diagnoses and depression in childhood and adolescence.

A major theme that requires a deeper dive...

Back to sand, when I met Fatima I was starting to develop my master's thesis on the use of sandplay and dreams in professional choice processes. This learning from her and the sand was very valuable, and I will be forever grateful to life and to her for this meeting. Fatima taught me in practice, in my process, and she was not the "nice" type to me: she confronted, challenged me to identify my form of expression and reflection, both in life and in practice with sandplay. I could have her by my side all along the master's course, during my training at SBPA, my pregnancies and births, the completion of my master's degree, as well as on the first paper I ventured to present at the first Latin American Congress.

I am thankful because I never had during this support, in this space for reflection that I experienced with her, her wish to direct or control my way of experience sandplay. My way of living sandplay is different from the one she found for herself, as well as it should be for each therapists, who must find their own way to experience it in order to be authentic. Fatima was a very introverted person. She used to feel very comfortable in her



tiny room filled with miniatures and relatively comfortable in small groups. But she did not like to feel exposed, to speak in public. It was inside her office that she spoke with the authority of someone who had lived a deep dive in the sands as well as in the Brazilian culture and psyche. And she was extremely generous in this free and protected space she created. I am truly grateful.

But since 2005 I could not count on her company to dive into sand anymore... She has plunged in another direction. At first, it was very painful to find myself lonesome, but I gradually realized that it was the time for me to follow my path, have other encounters and take ownership of my experience so I would be able to exchange, teach, learn...

Now I realize that it has been two years living through sandplay on my own, ten years in her company and 11, alone again. I now experience with my patients what I used to have with Fatima; what she gave me dives into their processes in the sand, in their images embodied in the sand – the chance to experience their conflicts in the sand and through a continuous creation, finding creative paths in their lives.

In this lonely journey, one of the aspects that most inspires me is the perception of a tendency to “harden the views” in psychology. In fact, I perceive this since my training at the psychology college. I work with several psychology undergraduates and with recently graduated psychologists; in therapy, supervision or study groups. In them, I notice the same process I faced – a “harden view”: trained to identify what the image reveals in relation to pathology, we exercise a partial look, which does not observe the whole and which often does not connect the image created and the individual who has created the image. This *pathos* we learn in college is not the *pathos* which Hillman refers as a possibility to deal with the soul. It is not the *pathos* that can generate psychic movement. It is rather, the *pathos* that paralyzes, petrifies the soul. It is our heritage from the medicine focused on the pathogenesis, on the pursuit of the “pathogenic

agent” that we absorb in training as psychologists; not in salutogenesis, which we work with our healing forces, the potential for individuation that exists in our body, soul and spirit. In college we do not usually learn to rely on these forces of creation, in the ability to reinvent ourselves, in the psyche and its eternal circular search, experiencing life-death-life. We paralyze in the death polarity for fear of it, for being so afraid of making mistakes and seeking for an accurate diagnosis.

“Playing” with the image is not permitted or trained at college. Looking at an image and first seeking the norm, the average according to statistics, does not make sense for me today, but it was how I learned and how the psychologist’s view is often taught and trained. I feel like we are always stuck in the paradigm of science and its methods based on standard and not on the individual, neither on the process of individuation. We are still haunted by the fear of being considered mystical and thus, devalued. The “black sludge mysticism” that haunted both Freud and Jung, still haunts us.

While writing my master thesis on sandplay for the University of São Paulo, I often went into confrontation with my advisor, who thought it was inappropriate to use the term “play” in an academic text. I could not understand why the term “play” could not be suitable if I was talking about a technique inspired by the play of children. Why must play not be taken seriously?

So now I dedicate to exercising my playful eyes through the images that constellate in the sand, watercolor, clay, fairy tales and myths that inspire me. This requires, above all, the conquest of an internal space for exploration. I need to allow myself to it and to understand that no one can give me that endorsement. I must win it in my search, in my experience. I need not be attached to what is considered right from the point of view of the one who stands outside. I must connect to the other who lies within me, so I can actually connect to the other who lies before me. And in turn, help them to connect to the other who

lives within them. I must not be tempted to set strict parameters to watch and understand an image. I must not be afraid of making mistakes, of experiencing... This is the starting point of play!

In this sense, the commitment in the sandplay learning process is the same ethical commitment that leads me to be a therapist, it is the ethical commitment to my individuation process and to my patients, supervised professionals or students individuation processes. Our paths are different; each of us has our own. I cannot merely teach sandplay, I must experience the contact with the psychic images, I must “psycheate” and help those who are living their own processes by my side to trust their contact with their images, to “psycheate” too. Trust, for me, is the key word: In Portuguese, “*confiar*”, or *con (with) + fiar (to weave) = to weave together*, creating a single thread inside me, the thread that connects me to what is greater than my conscience, but unveils through it, that should be able to conceive, welcome, nurture and send out to the world.

This exercising of playful eyes and not guiding me solely for the intellectual and instrumental learning of sandplay has been related to the study of anthroposophy, a philosophy grounded by Rudolf Steiner, a Jung contemporary who has inspired the creation of various fields of knowledge such as the Waldorf pedagogy, anthroposophical medicine, biodynamic agriculture, the living economy etc.

Steiner was an expert on Goethe’s work and created the proposition of Goethean observation, inspired by the descriptions of Goethe’s work on his practice of nature observation. In anthroposophy, this exercise of observing in a phenomenological way, not judgmentally, as we watch a plant or a child within the school context, a fairy tale or a work of art, is a meditative exercise, which aims to expand capacity to see in order to expand thinking, feeling and willing.

In recent years I have taken several courses and made experiences based on the phenomenological observation proposed by Steiner and I increasingly perceive the richness in this exercise

for my work with images in the clinic. Summing up and taking the risk of describing this proposition in an exceedingly simplistic manner, (because as an exercise, it is way too simple, but depending on the involvement one has with it, the experience may be profound), I would like to present the four steps of the way I have been experiencing in sandplay. For this, let us, together, observe a scene in the sand.



This description is an adaptation of my phenomenological observations of fairy tales, creations in the sand and plants to sandplay. It is my poetic license what I would like to share with you now.

In a first step of this practice, we propose to identify, in the scene, the aspects related to the earth element. What does that mean? Let us use our sense (in Jungian terms), let us detail the elements in the scene without appealing to terms that might lead us to judgment and comparison. It doesn’t matter if the scene is chaotic or organized, beautiful or ugly, as this is a value judgment. We naturally think in that way, but at this point we need to release such parameters and regard the scene as unique in itself. With this, we seek to establish the basis of our observation, to describe the land on which and from which the scene unfolds, the bed on which our river will flow. We can draw either this whole scene or

some detail of the scene that drags our attention.

In a second step, we propose to scrutinize the water element, and now our feeling will be our guide for watching the scene. What is the flow revealed here? How do we feel its flow? Have we managed to identify whether it begins at some point? What is the “seed” from which the scene sprouts? What is its source and in which direction does it flow? Can I, in this moment, look back

experiencing this step, realize that there are many gaps in my memory on how the scene was made; then I must accept this fact without being judgmental: maybe I was a bit distant from the creation of the scene to let my patient more relaxed, maybe I had my attention turned in another direction while creation was happening, maybe I was not feeling at ease... These are some possibilities of observation to be considered with respect and not criticism.

In a third stage, I look through the prism of the air element, with my thinking ability. I must make a tough effort to go opposite to the flow, which requires a lot of my thought, of my memory. I have to trust in my memory. I start from the end of the session, with the scene ready, and go backwards through its construction process. I look back to the creation of the scene. The previous exercise has prepared me for this one: I seek for restoration of the source, of the origin of the scene, to what might be the gesture of the scene. I may even experience a gesture inspired by the scene in my body, in a drawing or in a scene in the sand. Countering the flow, I seek to be alert to images, sensations and feelings to which the scene drags me. Going against the current, I am aware if I can “fish any fish”, any new snack. That is when I dive also into the symbolism of some elements of the scene. If I happen to not be familiar with anything, now is when I do research. At this point, I’m able to have a more accurate understanding of the symbolism, to filter what nourishes my observation and dismiss what does not.

And then I get to the fourth step of this practice: the fire element will now be my guide, my intuition will guide me. It is time for me to be silent, I need to be silent. After the effort is made, I must stop, soothe my mind, breathe and wait for something to manifest itself: an image, a sensation, a feeling... anything. I hope for the scene to be conjured before me. Sometimes I do this exercise before bedtime and ask for a dream which can help me understand something I have not been able to identify in the scene. I take the matter to sleeptime – as they say in anthroposophy.



at my memory of the session when the scene was set (I do not particularly like to take notes of the scene, I stick just to my observation). How did the assembly of the scene start? How was the sand (wet or dry)? Did he/she feel the need to touch the sand? Or it was chosen just from looking at it, from a certain distance? In face of the miniatures, how were they chosen? How was the scene assembled: was he/she standing, among the miniatures, sitting before me bringing the sand to work from there? Did he/she assemble the scene since the beginning of the session, during the session or only at the very end, when he/she realized that the session was ending? Did he/she use all the miniatures selected or were any of them left out? There are many memories to be revisited and experienced, but the essential thing at this point is how is it that I “feel” how the construction of the scene happened, from beginning to end? I may also, while



By exercising my observation before bedtime, as a meditation exercise, I'm effectively "conducting the inspiring image to the sleep" and asking my unconscious for inspiration, thus seeking to actively inspire my dreams.



Only four steps, but it is an arduous and profound path if approached with discipline and devotion. Of course I am not able to dedicate so much energy to all the scenes of all the patients, but I try to promote that practice with some of them. It grants me a dip in the scene. I need and I can see how it touches me, where it is familiar to me, where I can empathize with it or where it is totally strange to me and gets me detached. I can identify what is mine in this observation and what belongs to the patient. What happens in that interspace: what is *mine*, what is *theirs*, what is *ours*.

Fatima was an amazing observer of scenes... she told me she used to spend hours alone watching a scene. She would come back to her office late at night and stay there for a while, watching the actual scene, which she did not put down once she had many sand tables and that allowed her to keep them for a while. We usually work with only two sand tables and that permits us just to keep a wet one and a dry one. That is all. This is the advice that she once gave me: to avoid remaining in contact with the live scene for too long because it causes us a great disturb both

physic and psychic. But she herself did that.

Today, as I was bent over this practice of Goethean observation, I realized that she might also have been seeking something similar to what I seek now. She was probably trying to understand, perceive, feel and intuit what the scene disclosed. What I also consider interesting in this exercise is the fact that it allows me to dive deep, but not at once, not just in one day, there is no need to have energy drained. I can go smoothly I may watch a scene for a whole month spending a week exercising one of these steps at a time, thereby obtaining a slow alchemical process, experiencing steps with calm and dedication. But for that I have to work on my anxiety and believe that little is much, which is quite difficult these days.

Here once more I recall therapist Rafael Lopez-Pedraza (2010) who, as previously mentioned, approaches the need for us to be always on hold for the cultivation of the soul. The soul of the therapist who works with images must be forged, and that requires waiting, the attentive patience of alchemists in the alchemical opus. For this, one must be careful not to fall into the trap of mediocrity, the "exclusion of what it could distort the true initiation" must happen – reveals López-Pedraza (2010, p.38) when speaking about the therapist's work. He points out in his text that if we do not pay attention to the true waiting, we may experience, in psychotherapy, what he calls "psychopathic mimetics", which happens when we take the mediocre route of slogans and recipes for living" (LÓPEZ-PEDRAZA, 2010, p.38). Observing an image in the sacred work of the analysis that seeks "to make the soul", we need to cultivate the waiting. First in ourselves and, if that is possible or when it gets possible, we can experience with our patient that expectation for the image to be revealed after a continuous effort. It shall not magically unveil. An ongoing effort is necessary; this cultivation is essential.

Another major issue for me in this practice of playful eyes has been photography. It has been some time since I acquired the habit of asking patients to photograph their scenes once they



are finished, before they are photographed by me. For me, this is the end of the session. After they leave, I remain with the scene untouched and then comes my time for shooting. I must point out that I do not have the habit of commenting

I want to reach a broader thinking, a caressing one. I want them to become more reliant and gradually loosen up. But at the end of the session, I ask them to photograph the scene: as many times as they feel necessary, from the angles they see it fits better. This may seem unimportant, but I have realized that this simple action allows me to perceive the patient's viewpoint to their scene through the photos they take. In fact, some are surprised by this request at first... They take a few photos, act timidly. But little by little they loosen up and this becomes a primary practice of watching their production in a playful and free way. I will show you some experiences of this kind. Then, when I share with them the sequence of scenes, exercising our observation at the end of a brief process such as a professional choice for instance, or at the end of a therapy, it will be very profitable to realize what *they* have favored in their shooting, and what *I* have photographed in each scene; then, together, we shall gather *our* impressions.



on a scene at the end of a session. This is not a rule, it is my way of experiencing sandplay, because I think that what matters the most in the practice is the perspective that through it, helps to release the contact of patients with their images, helping them to trust in the images flow which we seek to establish through the scenes, helping them to stir their "psychic waters". And as I pointed out above, I must help them to rely on *their waiting*. I think that, at first, the most important thing is to be able to release this flow that requires confidence in one's psyche and in how I, as a therapist, will be welcoming their images. Once this is my main goal at the beginning of a therapeutic process, I do not usually find it constructive to comment on scenes, for this practice performed early, when the patient is still doing reconnaissance of the area, building up a connection with me and with the sand/miniatures, this may cause them to activate a reasoning that can disrupt or even halt the flow. And in the next session they would probably show up more thoughtful in face of the miniatures and the sand. And that is precisely what I refuse: that curbing type of thinking!

As a conclusion, I would like to add that, as we put our "playful eyes" to action while observing a sequence of scenes in the sand (or in clay, watercolor, drawing or any other artistic material produced by our patient), we experience the conflict inherent to the myriad of possibilities brought by images. This conflict is edifying for us, therapists, therefore, for our patients. When it is possible for us to sustain it as we see ourselves in face of a psychic image and not feel obliged to decipher it, quickly "solve it", thus allowing ourselves to silence, triggering our inner ear, magnifying our gaze and harvesting feelings and impressions, I believe that we will be effectively helping our patients to build a healthier relationship with their mental images, with their unconscious – in my view, the prime objective of our work. That is how we can support them in restoring confidence in those images and in the individual ability for dealing with them in a creative manner. In doing so, we will be honest to the eternal process of becoming a therapist who specializes in the work with images! ■

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<sup>1</sup> English for “A Complicada Arte de Ver”

<sup>2</sup> (Elementary Odes)

<sup>3</sup> Famous poet, teacher, philosopher and writer of short stories connected to Brazilian Modernism.

<sup>4</sup> She refers to Carlos Drummond de Andrade’s famous poem “No meio do caminho”, originally published in 1928.

<sup>5</sup> N.T.: Attempted translation for the original Spanish “Psiquear”.

<sup>6</sup> Short for Sociedade Brasileira de Psicologia Analítica (Brazilian Society of Analytical Psychology)

## Resumo

### *Sandplay: conflito e criatividade plasmados na areia*

*O artigo tem como objetivo refletir sobre a prática clínica do analista que trabalha com imagens, com foco principalmente no sandplay, o “brincar na areia”, técnica criada por Dora Kalff na Suíça e trazida ao Brasil por Fátima Salomé Gambini.*

*A partir de um trecho de uma crônica do escritor brasileiro Rubem Alves, a autora defende a possibilidade e a necessidade de ampliarmos nosso olhar de analistas. O texto ressalta a importância de o analista junguiano exercitar seus “olhos brincalhões” (termo utilizado por Rubem Alves na crônica), isto é: o analista precisa trabalhar para conquistar um olhar amplo e não*

*limitado à necessidade de interpretação imediata do símbolo. Para isso, o analista precisa investir no desenvolvimento da sua capacidade imaginativa e precisa conquistar uma liberdade imaginativa para possibilitar o contato criativo do paciente com suas imagens inconscientes plasmadas na areia.*

*A autora defende que o analista junguiano que trabalha com imagens, seja com sandplay, barro, pinturas ou no trabalho com sonhos, vive um eterno processo de vir a ser um analista. Ele nunca está pronto, está constantemente em formação, está sempre aprendendo com as imagens. ■*

Palavras-chave: Sandplay, imagem, símbolo, capacidade imaginativa.

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