



Florida Sandplay Therapy Association

Fostering growth & healing through symbolic process

Interview with Patricia Dunn-Fierstein, LCSW, CST-T

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How did you first become interested in sandplay therapy?

I'm sure that the seeds of sandplay therapy were planted in me unawares, as a child in the basement of the home of my pal, Linda. There we had an endless array of "Barbies" and other similar dolls. Her father had a heart condition as a boy and had to be very still, so his mother and aunts taught him to sew. Linda and her sister had the most beautiful dresses, handmade by their father! He also crafted tiny furnishings for our dolls' homes. We had little cushioned couches and upholstered chairs. He crafted wooden tables and cupboards for our kitchens, bedspreads for our beds, even high fashion, one-of-a-kind garments for our dolls to wear. We had a large carpeted corner of their unfinished basement set up with wide shelving-sized boards atop cinder blocks so that we could sit on the floor and work in our miniature worlds—no molded plastic doll houses for us. Thinking back, it was just like the sandplay scenes of my clients without the sand.

The seeds were planted and sat undisturbed until I went to Switzerland to study at the Jung Institute in 1983 and 1984. I always knew I wanted to be a child therapist, so when a fellow student from the Kinder program told me about sandplay therapy and Dora Kalff, I was very intrigued. Sadly, I had a serious family tragedy that prevented me from exploring sandplay or Dora while I was over there. But when my fiancé (now husband) and I returned, it was the first thing I began to investigate and have used it in my practice since 1984.

As a teacher, what is your main goal for students?

My main goal for students when I teach is for them to feel their way into the work of sandplay therapy. We normally teach psychology from the thinking function and students often feel afraid that they don't know enough about what something "means" so they're afraid to speak up. I work with my students from the very beginning to approach images and symbols with the feeling function first. I find that this enlivens their psyches and allows participants to understand the images from the inside out. Once this process is initiated, the teaching becomes fun. I bring enthusiasm to my teaching and love to see it in my students because this derives from the Greek words *en theos* or "having God within." Then the fire is lit and we all take that back to our clients.



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Is there a religious aspect to Sandplay?

There is very much a spiritual aspect to the sandplay process. I am not convinced that we always see that in every tray, or that everyone touches that depth but this aspect is available. It depends on how the therapist holds the space and how the client is capable of approaching the process. Our job as therapists is to be sure we hold the *temenos* securely so that the “vulnerable personal spirit” (Kalsched) may feel safe to enter. By the way, this may mean we are silent for an adult and we sing for a child; it doesn’t mean we always look like Gandhi. If the client is ready and we’ve set the stage properly, then spirit may enter and the healing/transformational capacity of sandplay has the greatest potential. Each time I see this, it’s wondrous.

For more information, please visit the Florida Sandplay Therapy Association website at www.sandsearch.org.