

## **CAST Sandplay Conference: Gates in the Sand**

June 8 - 10, 2006

*By Jackie Jenkins*

The gate is an apt symbol for this conference, as it can be thought to represent the interface between a person's outer life and the altered state of the therapeutic container.

### **A Brief Summary of the Conference Events**

#### *Thursday, June 8*

Joan Neméth opened the conference with the question, "What is the necessary task that the patient will not accomplish?" (Hollis, Swamplands of the Soul). The client who comes to us may have waited for ego strength to proceed on this journey; and may be in great distress for wanting change so badly. Joan's photos of sandpictures portrayed one client's process of preparing for this descent.

Nena Hardie followed Joan, calling our attention to the saying "it takes a village to raise a child". She was referring in particular to the potential hardships of the adoption process on nuclear families. An adopted person's transformative work in therapy includes the encounter with the unknown life into which she was born. In going back to the origins, this schism can be integrated, paying homage to the birth mother and her birth roots.

The Annual General Meeting was the final afternoon event. Everyone met up again at the Wine and Cheese gathering at Sylvia Simonyi-Elmer's home, a beautiful horse farm, where the indoors and outdoors blend into each other through glass and open concept design. It was an easy space to move through, meet people and talk. Towards the end of the evening we chanted to Heliosa Porto's drumming.

#### *Friday, June 9*

A gentle pace with time to take a walk in the warm drizzle, form small groups to talk about training, and so on. The meals were relaxed and catered to our group pretty much exclusively. We began the day with new songs we learned to sing in rounds.

The talks included Maria Iosue's presentation on the elephant. She sang for us the Elephant Hunting Song that inspired her research. I enjoyed seeing the chakras from the perspective of the elephant in combination with symbolically thinking of 'elephant' as 'horse' of the east (Jung). The collective unconscious emerges in the sand whether we are from the east or the west; transporting us

back to our origins.

Regina Cowan's "Paths of the Heart" began with a quote from the Little Prince, "It is only with one's heart that one can see clearly." Regina offered us a multitude of similar allusions from many diverse cultures. As a culture we have ignored its place in our psyche to our peril, treating it as if it is just a pump. The heart is the path to the Self. It is the way home.

Denise Tanguay generously presented her talk twice – once in English and again in French. She shared with us some research results about the effects of creative arts therapies. Sandplay was one of the approaches used with persons with developmental disabilities. Using Buhler's *World Test*, they found a decrease in aggressiveness, withdrawal, confusion and rigidity, as well as improvements in self-confidence and self-esteem. We look forward to hearing more.

Catherine Brooks led us in several aboriginal rituals as we sat with each other for the first time in a large circle. She talked about her worldview as a mixture of Ojibway, Cree, Mohawk and European. The aboriginal cultural tradition offers us such a rich and accessible opportunity to prepare ourselves to come Home.

The evening banquet was held in a wood paneled intimate setting. Joan Neméth and Brenda Weinberg presented certificates of congratulations to Yvon Rivière and Maria Iosue for completing their CAST/ISST certification. We sang and danced in celebration of their achievement.

*Saturday, June 10*

Brenda Weinberg's talk was about the leading edge of science and psychology: the maze that is the physical brain. It is the psychic inner landscape from a neurobiological perspective. It included fascinating information such as that facial expression mirroring happens in .003 seconds. How to connect the spiritual experience of sandplay to the physiological laying down of strands of meaning?

Yvon Rivière stayed true to his theme of the stage of the therapeutic process when the client's need is great enough to return to our origins to heal. Sandplay therapy involves the phenomenon of the psyche reconnecting to bodily energy. And the crucial role of the therapist is to not collude with the defenses of the client and to be receptive of the client's anxiety without reacting to it. Yvon generously presented his talk in English and in French.

On to Olga Lipadatova's whirlwind tour of the evolution of the city from the perspective of Neumann's evolution of consciousness. Signs of these origins appear at times in our collective unconsciousness: one example is children building channels outside their sandcastles as perhaps remnants from the time

when the king's power was related to the crucial irrigation systems surrounding the city.

Louise Lacroix generously presented her talk in English and in French. She shared sandpictures of preschoolers from immigrant and refugee families who participated in creative expression workshops given by the Department of Creative Arts Therapies at Concordia and the Transcultural Psychiatry team at Montreal Children's Hospital. As the timing of the workshops coincided with the Asian tsunami tragedy, the sandpictures were able to provide insight as to how children represented that tragedy; and how they were able to use their sandplay expressions to disclose their experiences of loss, separation and trauma.

Heloisa Porto quoted Jung, "The psyche is as much a living body as the body is a living psyche." She gave us several illustrations of body/mind continuity such as the nostalgia of childhood play showing up in the sand. Sandplay was shown to be an instrument of resonance with the body with explanations from the field of neurobiology.

Frances Burnell invited us to find our own connection to fishing and fishermen. Her multimedia presentation included an animated feature and an experiential aspect in which participants connected with their creative selves, sculpting fish and fishermen from modeling clay as she brought in her own experiences as well as the mythological aspects of the ancient fisherman.

The whole conference was so interesting and meeting up with people was so wonderful, it was most certainly a feast. On the drive home we were able to start the slow process of digesting our experiences. I already missed my new and old friends and colleagues. I felt waves of gratitude to the elders of CAST who have carried the torch of this exciting organization. And we looked forward to the days ahead when we would be integrating our experiences into our practice.