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## UMBRELLAS AND PARASOLS

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**I**n my view and experience, the use of the umbrella or parasol in sandplay is a powerful symbol for the safe connection between therapist and patient. As therapist, I act as an umbrella, under which my clients are free to express their feelings. The *Webster Dictionary* defines the noun umbrella as:

A small, portable, usually cloth canopy that is fastened to a frame with hinged ribs radiating from a center pole; has a circular convex shape when open, can be opened or closed by means of a sliding catch, and provides protection against the weather. (Webster, 2002, p.2481)

When used as an adjective, umbrella means "...taking in many individuals or groups: all-embracing" (Webster, 2002, p.2481). Symbolically, umbrellas represent:

Divine or royal power, halo, radiant solar wheel, rain, scorching sun, spiritual authority, universe tree. ... Word from the root umbel. One of the eight glorious Buddhist emblems; it keeps away the heat of evil desires, and expresses official authority. (Jobes, 1962, p.1623)

OPPOSITE: *Umbrella*.  
Symbols, Signs &  
Signets, by E.  
Lebner, Dover, NY,  
1950. Also image on  
page 127.

De Vries says an umbrella represents: “1. dome of the sky; 2. verticalization: the cosmic tree, the phallic father; 3. a sun-emblem; *cf.* Parasol and Sun-shade; 4. divine and royal power, protection” (1974, p.481). Cirlot states that this symbol is invariably related to a sun-shade, which is a solar emblem of certain monarchs. Its mechanism gives it a phallic significance, and with the attribute of protection it becomes a father symbol (1962). Gibson states that

The parasol...or umbrella is a symbol of elevation, dignity and honor in Buddhism...Important personages, such as kings and princes, were protected from the hot Asian sun by parasols...The parasol's mystical significance as a link between heaven and earth is further compounded by its shape: its canopy is reminiscent of the sun, of the radial effect of the sun's rays, and of the vault of the heavens, while its shaft acts as an axis mundi... (Gibson, 1996, p.23)

Cooper defines umbrella or parasol as a solar disk or wheel. Its spokes are the rays of the sun and its shaft is the world axis. The canopy is of the heavens, it has both temporal and spiritual powers, and provides warmth and protection (1978). Bradway states that an umbrella is a “father symbol with implications of protection and of mourning” (Bradway, 2001, p.94).

Among the people of Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, including the Fante and the Twi “the umbrella is an important political emblem for Akan chiefs. It is a symbol of the protection the king provides for the nation” ([www.marshall.edu/akanart/umbrellatops.html](http://www.marshall.edu/akanart/umbrellatops.html)).

*The Umbrellas*, a Renoir painting at the National Gallery, in London, portrays a group of people sheltered from the rain under huge umbrellas. A little girl clinging to a hula-hoop, looks out to the viewer, protected from the elements. The picture is painted in a palette of soft blues and beiges.

A century later, in 1991, Christo and Jeanne-Claude, installed 1,340 vivid blue umbrellas, each 19 feet high, in a lush inland valley seventy-five miles north of Tokyo. They placed the umbrellas at close intervals over twelve miles, emphasizing the contrast between the scarcity of the land and the density of the population. Then in California, they installed 7000 bright yellow umbrellas more sparsely over eighteen miles, bringing attention to the uncultivated pasturelands of that area. The umbrellas were opened simultaneously in both countries, to exhibit “freestanding, dynamic modules...creating an inner space [of protection]” ([www.taschen.com](http://www.taschen.com)).

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The use of umbrellas in sandplay has been described in three case studies found in the *Journal of Sandplay Therapy*. Betty Jackson (1991) pointed out the value of a therapist's feeling response to sand scenes, and mentioned a tray with a small crab taking shelter under a bright purple umbrella. When presenting this case, a student commented about how peaceful and complete she felt looking at the tray. She had picked up intuitively that this was a final tray. Just like Philip's final tray (discussed later in this article) the shelter of an umbrella seems to indicate that a sense of protection and safety had developed.

In a 1998 *Journal* article Kate Amatruda described the "big storms" made by Tony, a seven-year-old with cancer. After the storm, a pink parasol appeared, perhaps representing and helping to prepare Tony for the next round of radiation to his head. In each of these cases, the parasol/umbrella may be seen as a symbol of protection.

In *Sandplay: The Sacred Healing* by Amatruda (1997) she includes the case of Lizzie, a young girl recovering from the murder of her "Auntie." In Lizzie's fifth session Amatruda describes how Lizzie actually "got into the sandtray... surrounded herself with rocks and a pine-cone, and held a pink parasol over her head." After requesting her picture to be taken, she moved to the wet tray building a huge mound. Asking Kate to work with her, they created a symbolic picture of how Lizzie now experienced the world as precarious. In this case the use of the parasol could represent a powerful symbol of Lizzie's experience of safety provided by her therapist.

More recently Barbara Waterman explored the umbrella and proprioceptive defenses (2004).

In the psychoanalytic literature I found that Freud describes the umbrella as symbol of the male genitals (Wilson, 1967). Wilson considers it a bisexual symbol though, since it also protects from the wet and the cold, which is a more maternal or feminine behavior. He discusses two cases: one of a bisexual man in which the umbrella in his dream represents a breast-penis and masks his feminine identity; and another of a female patient, who left a beautiful gold-handled umbrella in the waiting room, possibly representing her wish for a breast-phallus (1967, p.84).

In the projective drawing literature, Hammer (1958) documents the "Draw-A-Person-In-The-Rain" test as a way to measure the amount of stress a person is undergoing, as symbolized by the amount

of rain in their picture. People's emotional defenses, their protection from stress is seen with their portrayal of an umbrella and other rain gear. A diagnostic concern is whether the umbrella in their drawing is large enough and able to protect the person. The umbrella in this drawing assessment, represents how a person copes with environmental stressors.

#### CLINICAL VIGNETTES

##### AMANDA

When I first met Amanda she was a tall, dark haired ten-year-old, with very low self-esteem, and poor body image. She was the tallest in her class, looked like a teenager, and had been labeled Learning Disabled due to poor organizational skills and difficulties with reading and mathematics. Both her parents were high achievers, and her mother complained that Amanda could not concentrate at school and seemed depressed. Amanda was gifted artistically, loved to draw, paint, make collages, and create intermittent sandplay pictures. Initially she avoided eye contact and emphasized what a failure she was in school. She said she had very few friends and felt inferior to her younger sister who had many social engagements, was athletic like her parents, and had no difficulties with academic performance.

Amanda felt her parents did not understand her. Her mother emphasized her mental inadequacies, and her father worried that boys would be attracted to her only for her looks and physical appearance. Amanda told me she dressed differently from her peers so she would be noticed and considered good at something. She spent an enormous amount of time on her appearance.

At fourteen Amanda's parents agreed to breast reduction surgery. When I had met her four years previously, her rounded shoulders and stooped posture indicated how embarrassed she was about her breasts. It was only after two years of therapy that she began to talk about her body image. She was upset about her breast size, and also that one side was noticeably larger than the other. She spent an enormous amount of time binding her breasts in an attempt to disguise their size and shape.

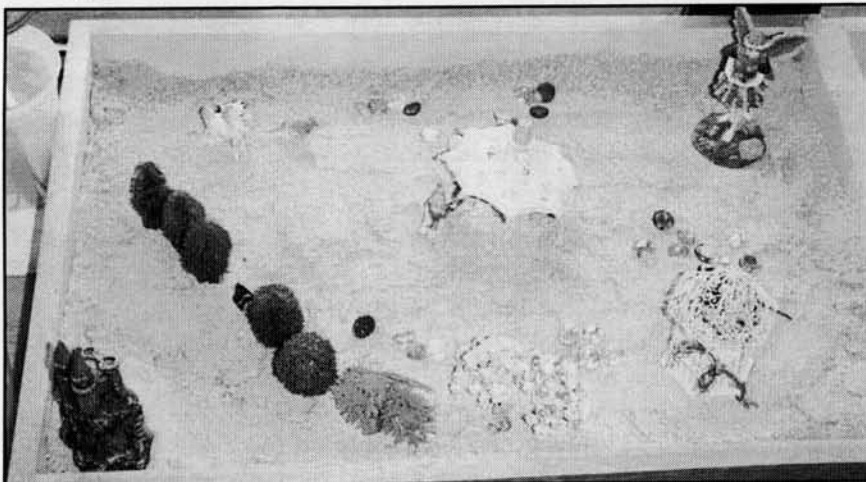
Two years later we met just before the surgery was scheduled, and she assured me she understood the procedure and the recovery process, and was certain she wanted the operation. She made the following sandplay picture (Figure 1).

Amanda placed a parasol on top of a small mound, towards the center of the tray, with a fairy seated underneath it. In the far left upper corner she placed a unicorn and a narwhal, and in the lower left corner

she put a castle with a row of trees, one of them fruit bearing, and a picture of the Virgin Mary. Diagonally from the castle, in the upper right corner is a fall fairy who holds several acorns in her palms, and in the lower right hand corner is a gazebo filled with flowers. Amanda scattered glass pieces and jewels to the left and above the gazebo, smiling contently as she finished the tray. In my countertransference, I felt joy for her as I noticed the parasol protecting the seated fairy. Perhaps the jewels were indications of Amanda's inner treasures, and the acorns symbols of new life.

I saw this scene as a centering tray, with protection as its main theme. Ammann (1991) describes movement from the lower left toward the upper right of a tray as announcing a development 'into life,' or the external world (1991, p.49). In Amanda's picture, there is diagonal movement from the safe space of a castle in the lower left corner, through the enlivening energy of fruiting and evergreen trees, to the fall fairy in the upper right. This diagonal movement passes through the open parasol and fairy in the center of the tray. Gibson sees a parasol "as a mystical link between heaven and earth" (1996, p.23), and Chevalier & Gheerbrant describe fairies as representing "paranormal powers of the spirit that create amazing transformations" (1994, p.369). Perhaps Amanda is drawing on her spiritual resources to transform her body and establish a new life.

I wondered about the parasol in Amanda's tray. Could it represent the union of opposites: the sheltering maternal aspect of the canopy, and the masculine phallic energy of the handle, or is it shield-



*Figure 1.*



ing the fairy from Amanda's "masculine" solar judgments about her body? Was this tray a harbinger of the manifestation of the Self? It was a powerful and numinous scene, and Amanda and I sat in silence for the rest of the session.

The following week (Figure 2) Amanda worked rapidly and purposefully in the sand. She placed Ariel in the center of the tray with her hand pointing towards a mirror, and in the upper right she put a bride with stars strewn in her path, and a crystal ball. In the lower left she placed four columns, with a portrait of a girl in the center.

Ariel may be seen as Amanda finding her voice, with her figure reflected in a mirror. Perhaps she was feeling mirrored by the therapy and also able to mirror herself. Like the miniature of Ariel, Amanda was moving towards the future, towards the bride and the crystal ball, a symbol of wholeness. She called this tray "My passage into life," and expressed her excitement about the imminent surgery, how it would change her entire life, and how she would now feel like all other adolescent girls.

The presence of the mirror in this sand scene emphasizes the importance of Amanda's transformation, which had been birthed in her previous tray. Winter comments:

Sandplay mirrors its creator and incarnates the new life. In object relations' language, there is a moment of fusion between the object and the subject in the doing of sandplay. At a certain moment the sandplayer is aware that s/he is finished, that s/he has created something that is "me" When the therapist is able to connect empathetically, the sandplayer is able to experience mirroring on a profound level. (1999, p.94)

In a recent communication with Amanda, she said she no longer was considered to have a learning disability, was not depressed, and was eagerly awaiting news about her acceptance into art school.

#### PHILIP

Philip, a six-year-old boy, referred because of rage attacks against his mother, made thirty-four sandplay pictures over an eighteen-month period. At his last session, he bounded into my office, hungry as ever and eager to have his requested favorite snack of ice cream. He presented me with a photo of himself, and had inscribed on the back "Thank you, Liz." After his snack we reviewed the album of his sandplay photographs. Then he glued his picture on the front of the photo album. As he was about to leave he rushed over to the sandtray and made a final picture (Figure 3).



Figure 2.

He worked rapidly in the wet tray, filling a container with sand and making a sandcastle on the left side. He placed a blond boy, a figure he identified with during therapy, onto the sandcastle, and added an open red umbrella over the castle sheltering the boy. Then he wrote his name in the dry tray, and without a word bounded out of the room joyfully. He had completed his process.

Philip's first tray made many months previously, had contained a castle that appeared frequently in subsequent sandplays. In this final



Figure 3.

scene, the presence of the castle underneath an open red umbrella suggests that Philip felt like he was now able to protect himself. The red color of the umbrella may symbolize the "freed energy available to create change, [and] heal [his] wounds" (Eastwood, 2002, p.95). The archetype "one" with the color red, carries the positive aspects of creativity, safety, and security (Eastwood, 2002, p.33). In this tray the image of one appeared three times: the sand castle, the boy, and the umbrella. Perhaps the umbrella indicated a union of opposites, with its circular, mandala form (Cooper, 1978) as a symbol of the feminine, and its shaft as the world axis or the masculine.

#### RACHEL

Rachel, a slim, quiet six-year-old was referred by her kindergarten teacher for being defiant and often sad and withdrawn. She had Lyme Disease, and her parents were having marital difficulties.

Rachel loved to draw, and initially played superficially with the sand. She made no eye contact and behaved as if she were alone. After the eleventh session I had an emergency meeting with both parents. They were concerned that Rachel had said "Daddy could shoot me," and had talked about wanting to kill herself. I felt anxious about her state of mind and hopeful that her play might give me an indication of what she was struggling with.

She immediately started playing on the floor, and assembled a log cabin. Then she made a uterus like form using thirteen colorful umbrellas, a parasol, a queen and four columns. She hung five colored fairies from the umbrellas and one from a column (Figure 4). She said "This is a fairy house." Then she took out all the fences, and lined up horses and unicorns in procession. She provided a trough to feed the animals, and said "This is the forest, and there is food and water for them [the animals]." She then made a mandala with four sand dollars, three starfish and a large whale. This form encircled two seals, a scuba diver, a turtle, a dolphin, a sting ray and an octopus. A shark was placed in the center (Figure 5).

In my countertransference my heart sang as I noted the starfish and immediately thought of its regenerative power. I felt relieved and reassured that Rachel's psyche knew she had the ability to work through her issues, and that her remarks about ending or having her life end, were not confirmed in her pictures. The shark in the center of



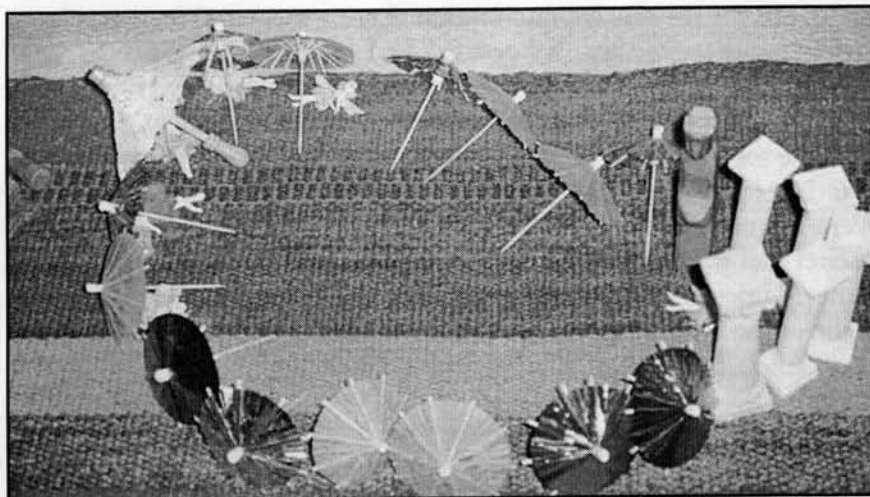


Figure 4.

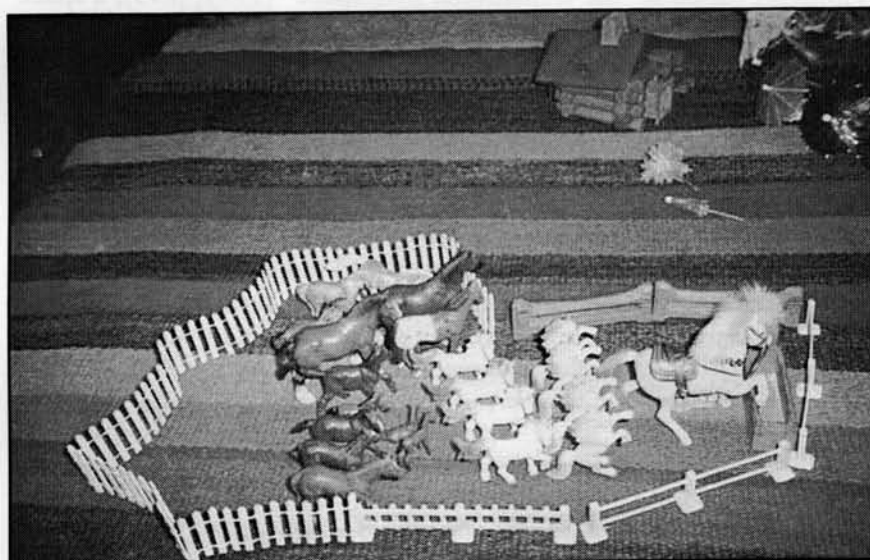


Figure 5.

the mandala gave the impression that there was something very dangerous or threatening in her life. As I sat with these pictures, I wondered why the umbrellas were lying on the floor, since I had materials she could have used to stand them upright. The form she made could be seen as womb. Did the sharp ended handles of the umbrellas pointing inwards, possibly represent her experience *in* the womb? Were the umbrellas and columns marking a threatening space? Did Rachel feel progressively safer as she expressed herself in her floor scenes? Unicorns according to Kalff, represent the mystical experience of the union of opposites (Bradway & McCoard, 1997, p.170). Rachel fenced these animals in, perhaps indicating her ability to contain these unconscious energies. The underwater scene of the shark and starfish was both disturbing and hopeful. As far as Rachel's ego development was concerned she was in the first stage, the animal or vegetative stage (Kalff, 1980, p.32).

The following week Rachel arrived, went straight to the sand, and drew a butterfly that encompassed the whole tray. The symbol of transformation confirmed my belief that she would and could experience healing in the temenos created by the holding environment. Winnicott called it "the transitional play space" (1971, p.95), a space created by a therapeutic dyad with the therapist, as witness, recreating the mother-child relationship.

#### CONCLUSION

When umbrellas and parasols were placed in the clients' tray, they often created a numinous experience, or heralded powerful transformations. In these three cases, the umbrella or parasol seemed to represent a potential union of opposites and the potential for constellation of the Self. The umbrella or parasol in sandplay serves as a powerful symbol for the safe connection between therapist and patient.

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