

# Water: A Symbol of Potential

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Water is a recurring motif in many fairytales, legends, and religions, and therefore it is perhaps not surprising that it appears regularly in the sandtrays of counselees taking part in sandplay therapy. As a symbol, water is rich with psychological meaning for it represents the source of life, maternity, potential energy, healing, wisdom, as well as destruction. It embodies all possibilities and potentiality, both harmful and helpful. Specific symbolic meanings were examined in the case studies of two counselees who were in the early stages of psychotherapy at the time of research. Both utilized water in significant ways in their sandtrays, serving as a portal for their descent into the unconsciousness and discovery there of potential energy and possibilities at the wellspring of life. As a result, this study found that water functions as a symbolic mediator that reveals human problems and offers the possibility of healing.

**Keywords** Symbol, Water, Healing, Potential energy, Sandplay therapy

## INTRODUCTION

Working as a sandplay therapist, the author has noticed that many clients use water in their sandtrays to recreate fountains, lakes, rivers, seas, waterfalls, and wells. Water has a positive meaning for them but sometimes it also becomes an object of fear. Observing this duality, She increasingly became interested in water and its symbolism (Figure 1).

The Belgian philosopher Gerhard Dorn (c.1530-1584), who inspired Jung's interest in alchemy, talks about the dual nature of water:

*This smelly water connotes everything that one needs. It is an Ouroboros which is self-sufficient such as someone who bites his own tail, someone who produces himself or someone who kills himself and eats himself. Water kills but also gives life.*

His words, "water kills but also gives life" mean that water can

wash away life as we have known it and, at the same time, it is holy water which prepares for the birth of a new existence (Jung, CW 3).

Often we take water for granted as we enjoy a plentiful supply in contrast to many other parts of the world. However, upon reflection, we are reminded that water is an indispensable and fundamental component of individuals and humanity. Without it, nothing can exist on Earth. Scientists claim that life originated in the sea over three billion years ago. Likewise, our body is formed in the amniotic fluid of our mother's womb. About seventy percent of the body consists of water, which performs the functions that sustain life. Water is crucial for our blood circulation, digestion, metabolism, and temperature (Kim, 2002). In contrast to amniotic fluid, blood, semen, and saliva, all of which have a finite lifespan, water is infinite and thus transcends them as a symbol of the origin of life.

The earliest civilizations in human history, namely Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Indus Valley, all developed around major river systems that provided a reliable water supply, which in turn allowed for sufficient agriculture to support a large population. Yet water is by no means a constant resource. Recently, a team of scientists have argued that the collapse of the Indus Civilization was due to climate change. They suggested that the civilization relied on seasonal monsoons for their farming, and did not develop irrigation systems; consequently, as the monsoon patterns changed, the water supply for its agricultural activities was diminished. As a result, the large population centers became gradually unsustainable, leading to their eventual abandonment

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**Figure 1.** English Bay, Vancouver, Canada.

(Maugh, 2012). Apart from climate change, flooding, rainstorms, and tsunamis can impact water supplies through pollution and diversion of waterways, threatening the civilizations we have built for ourselves.

Figuratively speaking, as water is a symbol of the unconscious, emotional flooding may be understood as an unconscious psychological attack on human beings; or, in other words, one-sidedness in consciousness or emotional states. Yet despite the destructive qualities of water in both the inner and outer worlds, many scholars have admired water for its softness. Lao-tzu, a semi-mythical Chinese philosopher (6th century BC), said that he preferred water to mountains and he ascribed human characteristics to it. The first reason he gave is that water is gentle and does not seek to dominate the other elements. Second, water is not weak but shows flexibility, adjusting itself to fill the shape of a bowl. Third, it has the virtue of humility to flow down from mountains to lower places such as plains and valleys. For these reasons, Lao-tzu said he preferred water to mountains (Kim, 2013).

Thales, an Ancient Greek philosopher (6th century BC), theorized that the world and everything in it was composed of water. For him, water was divine and creative and the substance from which the Earth was spontaneously generated. Through the works of Aristotle, an arguably more famous Greek thinker, Thales has continued to influence intellectuals even into the modern era. Hermann Hesse, a German writer (1877-1962), reflects the idea of water as the ultimate substance in his novel *Siddhartha* where he wrote, “Learn from water... Only the present exists in water. There is no shadow of the past, or of the future. Water is the sound of life and the sound which generates forever” (Hesse, 1922).

Many religious rituals, such as Christian baptisms and Hindu ablutions in the Ganges River, embody the notion of water as the source of life. Thus purified water has become a sacred symbol in different cultures that wards off disaster and evil, and this is a belief that continues to hold truth for many people today.

## TYPES OF WATER

Water exists on Earth in many forms: clouds, frost, glaciers, groundwater, hailstones, ice, rain, rainbows, rivers, seas, snow, steam, thermal springs, and wells. It covers three quarters of the earth's surface in lakes, seas, and oceans. Liquid water can be frozen into ice or boiled into steam. In fact, water is the only element in nature that can turn into three different forms – solid, liquid, and gas.

## WATER AS A SYMBOL

Water represents the origin of all possibilities, indeed the origin of the very universe, hence its strong associations with birth, femininity, and life (Cooper, 1978). According to Jung, people form their personality by identifying with *imagos*, usually images of a parent, that emerge from the collective unconscious. When the mother-image is projected onto it, water acquires a maternal numinosity or even holiness. In Christian churches the baptismal water is symbolic of holiness for in these rituals we are asking to be born again as a new person after the forgiveness of our sins. The ocean in dreams and fantasies is a symbolic representation of the unconscious. The maternal quality of water is consistent with the nature of the unconscious because water could be the mother-body or mother-image in which we are sustained unseen and from which we are born (Jung, CW 8).

## WATER IN MYTHOLOGY

Water is commonly imbued with a productive quality in mythology, notably in many creation stories in which water is revealed as the origin of life. According to a myth from Jeju Island in Korea, the world was in darkness and chaos before it was divided into heaven and earth by the spirit of creation. All creatures started to emerge from the resulting synergy of dew from heaven and earth (The Academy of Korean Studies). As the source of all creatures, water, here in the form of dew, was viewed as pregnant with all types of possibilities.

Water was also associated with a destructive quality in the ancient world. Flood myths were prevalent in the Near East such as Greece (Deucalion), Israel (Noah's flood), and Mesopotamia (*Epic of Gilgamesh*). Similar stories are found in other cultures from around the world, including India (Manu), Korea (Namu Doryeong), and Hawaii (Nu'u). This type of myth may have been created out of suffering from the disasters of hurricanes and floods. Most flood myths have some points in common. One is that mankind faces extinction from a great flood but a few people survive to become the founders of a new world. The flood serves therefore to cleanse and renew the world by destroying the old order, perhaps because of human sin or decadence. Purification assumes reconstruction in this context.

According to Jung (CW 3), purification serves to discriminate order from chaos and yet unite these opposite poles in a harmonious way. He emphasized that a rational human being should distinguish himself from archetypal figures, while still participating in patterns that are activated in the collective unconscious at particular times in life in order to avoid a one-sided conscious attitude.

## WATER IN RELIGION

Water carries symbolic meanings in various belief systems. In the major world religions of Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism it is a symbol of purification and used in offerings of commemoration, compassion, creation, rebirth, and wisdom.

Cooper (1978) mentioned that blood or water is used in religious initiations such as Christian baptism because water symbolically purifies and gives the recipient a new life. The old life is washed away with blood or water and the new life becomes holy. Immersion in the water symbolizes a return to a pure state, the end of the old life, and the birth of the new life. Water is a recurring image of purification in the Bible, for example, "I will sprinkle you with clean water, and you will be clean and acceptable to me. I will wash away everything that makes you unclean, and I will remove your disgusting idols" (Ezekiel 36:25).

Water is associated with purification in Buddhism. Practitioners perform a purification ceremony to free themselves from worldly desires and thereby attain enlightenment by immersion in water. There is also a ritual bath that is performed to enable the soul of a deceased to enter Heaven. Buddhist monks habitually carry a bottle for clean water to dedicate to Buddha (The Academy of Korean Studies). Water is also used in a purifying sense in Korean shamanism. The shamans venerate the power of water for healing, purging evil and negative forces, harmony of heaven and earth, and regeneration (The Academy of Korean Studies).

In India the rivers have long been held as sacred by Hindus. In particular, the Ganges is venerated because the water of the river is believed to flow from the heel of the god Vishnu. Moreover, the river is believed to purify bathers of their sins and assist the souls of the deceased in their ascent to heaven.

## WATER IN MOVIES

Many films evoke the symbolism of water. In the French film *Le Grand Bleu* (1988) the main character grew up in a small fishing village where he came to regard the sea as his own family after his father died in a diving accident. Ironically, his adult rivalry in diving with a former childhood friend leads to the latter's death. Suffering from guilt, he resolves to become one with the sea and one night he goes diving and appears to drown, though the end-

ing is ambiguous. Water in this film is therefore depicted as an object for eternal rest.

The Korean disaster film *Haeundae* (2009), about a tsunami that strikes the titular place, highlights that although water can devastate it can still be defeated by human love as demonstrated by the survivors who comfort and help each other in the wave's aftermath. Water serves the role of awakening human beings to higher values than mere self-preservation as characters in the movie sacrifice their lives to save other people.

In summary, water is richly invested with symbolic meaning in cinematic, literary, mythical, and religious stories from many different cultures and time periods. It represents the source of life, maternal imagery, vitality, purification, and wisdom; conversely, water is also a symbol of fear and destruction. Water is thus a symbol that embodies all potential possibilities, whether helpful or harmful.

## WATER IN SANDPLAY THERAPY

When clients express their thoughts, feelings, emotions, and images through sandplay therapy, they often use water as symbols. The pictures that are presented here are of the sandtrays that the two clients made during their first sessions. Kalf (1988) explains that the first sandtrays not only provide indicators for the directions and resources for healing the client, but also often includes indicators for the problems that motivated the person to seek therapy. She also stressed that the first sandtray represents the counselee's general feelings toward the therapy and their connection with their unconscious mind (Turner, 2005).

A, the first client was a thirteen-year-old boy. Whose unemployed father took care of the house whose mother worked to support the family. She was an achievement-oriented and competitive woman. The boy had difficulty in making decisions independently, wanted to sleep with his older sister rather than by himself, and played games to the detriment of his schooling. Developmentally, he did not have an early affinity with his mother who reported that she had little affection for him and hired child minders to look after him. He was very sensitive whenever his child minder was changed. Consequently, his dependence on his sister became stronger and the sibling relationship was distorted.

The client's very first sandtray (Figure 2) does seem to indicate his problems and future direction. He poured water onto the sand in the center of the tray and then put a rowboat in the water. He placed three large trees on the left side of the water and seven small trees at the front of the sandtray, which was directly in front of where he was standing. He also placed several figures in and around the water: a baby beside the water's edge in the front right area; a female lifeguard behind the baby; a man sitting in the rear center, facing the water; a diver on the right side of the water; and a woman with a camera in the right rear cor-



**Figure 2.** Client A's sandpicture.

ner. Finally, the client placed a crab, lobster, octopus, and squid in the water.

Afterwards, he explained that the figures were a group of rich friends enjoying themselves in a garden and on a boat in a river. He regretted that he could not make the river flow or plant a forest with a lot of grass. He also admitted that he wanted to remove the camera woman, who was said to be tanning herself, because she was just pretending to be beautiful. The therapist told the client that he was allowed to remove anything he wished, but he did not do so. This seemed to reflect his reality in which he could not change things even though he wanted to. The fact that he wanted to remove the tanning woman suggests that he wanted to escape from his mother's domineering presence; she did not come across as an attentive or helpful figure in his life.

The client was both amused and interested by the figures in the therapy room. The centrality and circularity of his sandtray's area of water, though not perfectly circular, suggested that Self energy was constellating in the unconscious. Talking about wanting the water to flow also suggested that he had some awareness of his life energy being blocked in some way and that he wanted it to flow too. Although working consciously, he showed potential for descending into the unconscious through the figure of the diver and a commitment to make it conscious, that is, develop his observational ego, through the woman with the camera. The boat on the water suggested that a psychological journey would be undertaken, though as yet there was no boatman. A potential candidate was the baby looking at the boat; however, he was not yet mature enough to row it and therefore must remain beside the water to be safe and not overwhelmed by the unconscious. Realizing that the baby needed protection, the client placed a lifeguard nearby. The author pondered the identity of this female figure and wondered if she was a mother image, perhaps a child minder or even the therapist, though it would be unusual for transference to develop so early in a child's life. He seemed to contrast this "good" protective maternal instinct with the "bad" energy expressed by the tanning woman who was only



**Figure 3.** Client B's sandpicture.

pretending to be beautiful.

Perhaps then the other male figure, at the rear center of the sandtray, was a father image. The fact that he was just sitting and watching the scene suggested a father who, while a stay-at-home dad, was not involved in caring, nurturing, and protecting the boy. The client regretted that he did not make a hole in the corner—perhaps some awareness that he needed to dig down further—and that he did not plant a realistic forest. He also commented he felt weird. The author wondered though if a forest completely surrounding the water would frighten him. In any case, it seemed that he was not satisfied with things as they were and his "weird" feelings might be difficult for him to articulate more precisely.

B, the second client was ten years and eight months old. At the time of counselling she was living with her parents and younger sister. Her father spoke harshly and nagged his family, while her mother was introverted and worried a lot about what others thought. Their marriage was characterized by much conflict. The girl was considered lazy by her parents. She also had difficulties in maintaining friendships and could not solve problems alone so her mother had to help her with tasks. The client gave polite, yet excessively verbal, responses to this therapist's remarks. Moreover, she often asked how I thought she looked at me.

Her first sandtray (Figure 3) well represents Kalf's animal/vegetable stage of sandplay therapy and it projects plenty of active and passive energy. She named the scene the 'Forest.' In the right rear corner is a pair of young white tigers trying to catch fish in a pond at the bottom of a waterfall. There is a tree on either side of the pond. On the front right side of the sandtray are a tree, mother deer and fawn, and giraffe. In the front right corner there is a tree growing between rocks and beside them is a pair of chimpanzees. In the left rear corner there is a pair of adult white tigers and a small brown tiger. The client explained that the mother tiger was busy taking care of its young one, which had a birth defect—possibly its color. Adjacent to the tigers is a tree whose leaves a giraffe is nibbling. In the front left corner

there are three flowers, which are studded with thirteen glass beads, and a pair of camels looking at them with wonder. The client said the camels were attempting to eat the sparkling beads without realizing that they were actually diamonds. In the center a black jaguar is facing a group of four zebras. She explained that the zebras were a family and wary of the jaguar for it was after the young zebra. The chimpanzees were also said to be hiding from the jaguar.

The client commented that she thought it was weird that the mother of the young tiger was worrying about it; that the deer wanted to drink water from the pond, but could not because of the white tigers that were fishing there; and that the camels had accidentally found the sparkling diamonds. The client expressed satisfaction with her sandtray by opining that all the animals looked happy regardless of their circumstances. Perhaps, given the parental conflict that this young girl lived with daily, we should regard it as a compensatory picture, though her vulnerability to threats was also apparent.

The author was intrigued by the waterfall in the sandtray. Symbolically, we can think of water in the form of a waterfall flowing into a lake or pond as energy arising from the deep unconsciousness. The young tigers are fishing in the pond beneath the waterfall, while the adult white tigers in the left rear corner are eating a fish. This may represent an inversion of the parent-child relationship in that the young are obtaining food while their parents are eating it. The author was also struck by the diagonal axis between the waterfall and the thirteen diamonds in the front right corner of the sandtray. She interpreted these diamonds as representing the client's fragmented energy of the Self, which was not yet organized or constellated into a solid center, yet had the potential. The constellation of Self energy is essential for the healthy development of ego energy. The choice and orientation of the camels towards the diamonds is interesting for such hardy animals can make the arduous crossing of a desert. The author viewed this as revealing the possibility that the client may endure and complete the journey on which she is about to embark and discover something marvelous at the end of the road.

The jaguar menacing the zebra family in the center of the sandtray, which interrupts the potential between the right rear corner and the front left corner, creates a tense, terrifying atmosphere. The fact that the client placed these figures here suggests that she felt threatened by something yet to be revealed. Although the young zebra is surrounded by the adults, it does not appear to be properly protected. The author wondered who this little zebra was supposed to represent. Relative to the client's family, the young zebra may represent her younger sibling. This interpretation suggests that the client herself is projected as an adult zebra, though she is not really an adult. In light of her family situation, she may have represented herself as the adult zebra because she had been trying to be independent from her strict father and her mother

who took care of her younger sibling. Alternatively, this baby zebra could represent the girl herself, as it is not being adequately protected and nurtured. The jaguar is a solitary animal that moves around stealthily and hunts for prey at night. A black jaguar can be symbolically associated with depression, and the client seems to be depressed as she placed the jaguar in the center of the sandtray. Moreover, its confrontation with the zebras that may symbolize the integration of the opposite poles appears to indicate the problems that the client's psyche is centered on at this time.

In conclusion, it seemed that the water in A's first sandtray was the starting point for a journey to the potential possibilities of the unconscious. The round shape of the water symbolized the self energy that was constellating in the unconscious. The water in B's first sandtray represented the energy that the client, as a unique and special being like a white tiger, needed though it might be unavailable to her at this time. On one level, the water is a life source that is symbolic of unconscious, spiritual energy; on another, however, it is a dangerous distraction for the young white tigers seen drinking as they lack the presence of a parental figure and are therefore vulnerable to attack. Such an image could represent the child's sense of being disconnected from what she needs on both a physical and psychological level. This observation highlights the need in future for a connection between conscious and unconscious energy. The disconnection also seemed to warn about the unilaterality of the energy. What needed to develop was a relationship between the Self and ego so that the child could function effectively in the outer world and feel a sense of harmony in her inner world. Since the two sandtrays were created in the clients' first sessions, it is clear that they are yet to become conscious about water, but they display the potential energy in their unconscious minds.

## CONCLUSION

Water has been indispensable for humanity throughout its history and indeed the origin of life on Earth. Therefore it is unsurprising that water has important and varied symbolic meanings. Water represents creation and destruction, life and death, birth and rebirth, chaos and order, and pollution and purification. For the author personally too, images of water represent a changeable and solvable potential as well as a confusing and destructive potential. Despite her often contradictory feelings about it, she can accept that water as a symbol is inherently two-sided. Her own internal images of water have helped her to find and accept her identity at times when she was unsure of herself and struggling with fears and loneliness. Writing about water for this paper has therefore been powerfully cathartic for her, even giving her the feeling of being born anew. She now understands that it is important to stay connected to water, not to allow herself to become depleted of it nor to become excessive with it, if she is to live wisely.

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