

*Dedicated to Florence Grossenbacher, Senior STA Member, mentor and initiator, who one evening at Asilomar gave of her time to urge the publication of Ese's journey, and to help me to fully realize the importance of this work. This pivotal encounter will forever resonate in my sandplay room and in my soul.*

**Ese's Emancipation**  
**Lorraine Razzi Freedle**  
**Santa Fe, NM**

**Abstract**

*Ese's Emancipation* highlights the sandplay process of a 17 year old gang- involved youth who is transitioning from living in a group home for juvenile delinquents to living on his own. His use of sandplay to reconcile the despair of his abusive and neglectful childhood, to disengage from an identity centered on violence and antisocial behavior, and to launch into adulthood with newfound protection, offers possibility to all those dedicated to the prevention and treatment of youth violence.

Youth violence is epidemic and on the rise in the United States (Flannery, 1999). Youthful victims of violence, including children who have been abused or neglected as well as those who have witnessed domestic violence, are at significant risk for engaging in violent acts and later transmitting violence to the next generation (Flannery, 1999). These youth are filled with rage, and often distance themselves with recalcitrance from those who want to help them. Beneath this rage is despair. In order to reconcile the rage, these youth must learn to gain trust in others, give expression to their despair, and ultimately find hope (Lavin and Park, 1999). They also must learn to understand their potential for violence and to choose peaceful and constructive alternatives when frustrated, challenged, or threatened (Lacerva, 1996).

In the following pages, I will present the sandplay process of a young man whom I shall call Ese. I first met Ese at a juvenile correctional facility where he had been detained for over one year for burglary, auto theft, and numerous crimes against property. Ese was seventeen years old and tired of living behind bars. I interviewed him to see if he could live in a group home until he could function on his own. He told me he had stopped fighting and earned his GED since the last time he was turned down for release, but was discouraged that these efforts would make a difference. I sensed his sincerity and told him with conviction that I believed in him. I accepted him for placement at the group home where I worked.

Ese created ten sandtrays with me during his stay in the group home. As synchronicity would have it, he began his sandplay process shortly after my daughter was conceived and completed it two weeks after her birth. Together we incubated for nine months in a powerful psychological field. His sandplay process focused first on issues of anger related to his experiences of abandonment, child abuse and neglect, as well as his parents' alcohol and drug addiction, and their domestic violence. Sandplay enabled him to express the despair beneath his rage, face the forces of good and evil, find value in self control, and separate himself from an identity centered on violence and an antisocial lifestyle. Through sandplay, Ese accessed archetypal parents and protectors that launched him into adulthood with newfound strength and hope.

Within days after his arrival at the home, Ese had assumed the role of alpha male. He wore baggy clothes and maintained a cool strut. He did not have to oversell the image of being a gang member as a "wannabe" does. He was the real thing. Ese is white, but was raised in an impoverished Hispanic neighborhood where he joined a Hispanic gang at an early age and found acceptance. During our first session he spoke about his abusive childhood:

“My stepfather would hit us and stuff, back before I started school. There was lots of drinking and drugs. It was rough... My mother never took care of me, even after *he* was out of the house.” He told me without any apparent emotion that he was incarcerated for over one month before his mother knew where he was. Even after being notified of his whereabouts, she never wrote, visited, or supplied money for clothing. He announced that emancipation would be his discharge plan. Then he created his first sandtray (**Figure 1**).



**Figure 1. Sandtray #1**

In the tray a semi circle of evil figures surrounds two figures in the center: a giant gremlin hovering with widespread arms behind a blonde boy. Nearby, a woman representing his mother is turned away. In the upper left hand corner there are larger figures of a Chinese fisherman and a white angel. In the other three corners are eyes looking towards the center.

Ese said, “This (blonde boy) is me. I don’t know which way to go. I’m surrounded by evil. This is my mom. Her back is turned. I feel like everyone is watching. This (fisherman) is an old, wise man, but I cannot get to him. This (white angel) is death, because my grandmother is dying.”

**Figure 2** is another look at forces surrounding Ese. The hovering gremlin carries the same color scheme as the blonde boy Ese had chosen to represent himself. The symbolic configuration of the gremlin and the boy may represent Ese's identification with male aggressors who abused him and his mother. He will need to understand this violence within himself to break free of his past.



**Figure 2.**

Ese created his second sandtray over four months later (**Figure 3**). During this lapse he was rebellious with staff, but also obtained employment at a fast food restaurant. During this session he said, “Even when the other guys say something is fun, I just don’t feel it. I don’t know how to have fun, or how to use my imagination.” He talked about the adrenaline rush he used to get while stealing or fighting, and how these activities no longer had that effect. He verbalized fears of hitting his girlfriend or his children someday, but said that his current relationship is going “okay.” He stated, “I only cheated on her once so far.” Then he reflected sadly, “... I guess I never had good role models.”



**Figure 3. Sandtray #2**

Ese began creating his second sandtray by slowly dropping one black, glass bead at a time into the tray as if he were crying a river of dark tears. In the sand, he could express the tears that he would not cry in the external world. Then he created the rest of the sandtray. The large black river of beads is striking and divides the tray vertically. A bridge over this river connects the tray's two sides. On one side, a boy and a girl stand by a house behind a white picket fence. Many men are working nearby. A bandito on horseback, a mariachi band, an Hawaiian king, a rainbow, dice, a sun and two moons, and a large, empty cave are visible on the other side. The figure that Ese identifies as himself is a blonde man in overalls with a ball and chain around his ankle. He stands facing the female mariachi singer. (**Figure 4**).



**Figure 4.**

In this tray, forces of hard work oppose a live-for-the-moment mentality and portray Ese's exploration of cultural and psychological energies. Ese will need to reconcile these opposing forces. Perhaps the large cave in the bottom left corner is an archetypal womb or place for rebirth. It replaces the mother figure that had been in the same location in Ese's first tray.

In the next session, prior to creating his third sandtray, Ese reflected on the rules of the group home without his usual rebellious attitude. He also shared with some embarrassment, that he had sent his girlfriend flowers. Ese had picked up the legal paperwork for emancipation, and during the session he called his mother about signing the papers. She said she could not visit him, but agreed to sign the papers if they were mailed to her. Thus, with a phone call and a few signed papers, it seemed that Ese's desire for emancipation would be realized. He appeared sullen though, as he began to work in the sand.

Ese's third sandtray (**Figure 5**) has an empty quality about it. There is a blonde, male figure in the middle of the tray next to a large suitcase that could represent his impending emancipation, the baggage of his past, or the possibility that he is "packed and ready" to continue his sandplay journey. A

direction post near the boy points in many directions. Ese identifies other items around the boy and states, “These are the choices I have when I get emancipated: get married (small wedding couple); get a house (small red house); get a car (white convertible); maybe start a family (baby). I could party (alcohol bottles) or go back to my old ways (pirates in the corner). The statue of liberty is the freedom I’ll have, and the money is the money I’ve been saving.” We sat a long time in silence after Ese made this tray.



**Figure 5. Sandtray #3**

In his first tray, Ese was directionless and surrounded by evil. In this tray, he is conscious of the choices he can make. A baby in a bottle sits in the corner where the empty cave existed in his previous tray (**Figure 6**). Perhaps the baby has been birthed from an archetypal mother, and now is protected in a bottle. A centering constellation, albeit sparse, is visible in this third tray. It may signify a strengthening of Ese’s ego, something that happens before descending deeper into the unconscious.



**Figure 6.**

Ese's fourth tray marks a descent (**Figure 7**). The tray is vibrant and contains an array of figures, including cartoon characters, monsters, and mythological figures. A central, horizontal arrangement of three characters is apparent. On the far right, a hovering gremlin from the first tray seems to represent the violence and abuse of Ese's past. In the center, a Tasmanian Devil suggests anger spinning out of control. On the far left, the Incredible Hulk brings to mind the rage that is often activated when dealing with powerful and personal oppressors (scifi.com, 2004).



**Figure 7. Sandtray #4**

Ese said of this tray, "These are my feelings...anger, happy, and all different feelings. This Droopy dog has a sign that says he's happy, but he's not on the inside." In this sandtray, for the first time, Ese spontaneously accesses a range of emotions that up until now he had denied. The free flowing expressions in the sandtray empowered and enabled him to talk about his real life dilemmas with more feeling and connection. He expressed irritability with his present situation, and an eagerness to leave the group home. He also stated with both sadness and anger, "It really sucks that I am seventeen, and I have to do this all by myself. It's always been this way."

During the next session Ese made his fifth tray (**Figure 8**). He seemed more optimistic about emancipation and said, "I have a lot of options. I don't feel so trapped anymore." With his parole date is just over two months away, he began to shop for house wares and an apartment. At the same time he reflected on his long hours at work, and how tiring this was for him. His sandtray is certainly primordial. It is swampy, dense and dominated by two snakes, one red and the other black. Perhaps these snakes reflect the aggressive and/or sexual energy of Ese's impending manhood. There is a feathery hummingbird in the corner. Ese said this about the tray, "Life is a jungle. There's always someone out there to get you, well not always, just sometimes.... This bird can leave whenever he wants. He's not stuck." Ese was right when he said he wasn't trapped anymore. Healing energy had been released, but I wondered if he was strong enough to manage it.



**Figure 8. Sandtray #5**

Three days later Ese was provoked by another resident of the group home and lashed out. In his next session he processed the incident and said, “Dang! I just let out my anger all of a sudden. I haven’t done that in a long time, but at least this time, I knew it was wrong.” As I listened to Ese, I noticed that his affect matched his words. He said he wanted to continue working hard to understand and better himself. He was excited that he had achieved his goal of saving \$1,000, and had decided to break up with his girlfriend because she was spreading rumors about him. Ese was also concerned that his mother would sabotage his emancipation efforts by not signing the papers. Perhaps breaking up with his girlfriend had reactivated feelings of loss related to his mother.

Ese made his sixth sandtray and called it, “The Long Journey.” (**Figure 9**). Strong, sturdy animals and animal families head toward a small lake as a lion stands proudly atop a mountain overlooking the journey. There is definite movement here. Ese said, “Everyone is just trying to survive while they go toward the oasis.” At this point, Ese seemed to recognize that his new way of life is a long journey that requires many sacrifices and perseverance.

For the first time in his process, Ese cleared sand to reveal the blue bottom of the tray. Perhaps he is ready to plunge deeper into the unconscious. I felt hopeful that, with lion energy and camel stamina, Ese will be victorious in his search for an oasis.

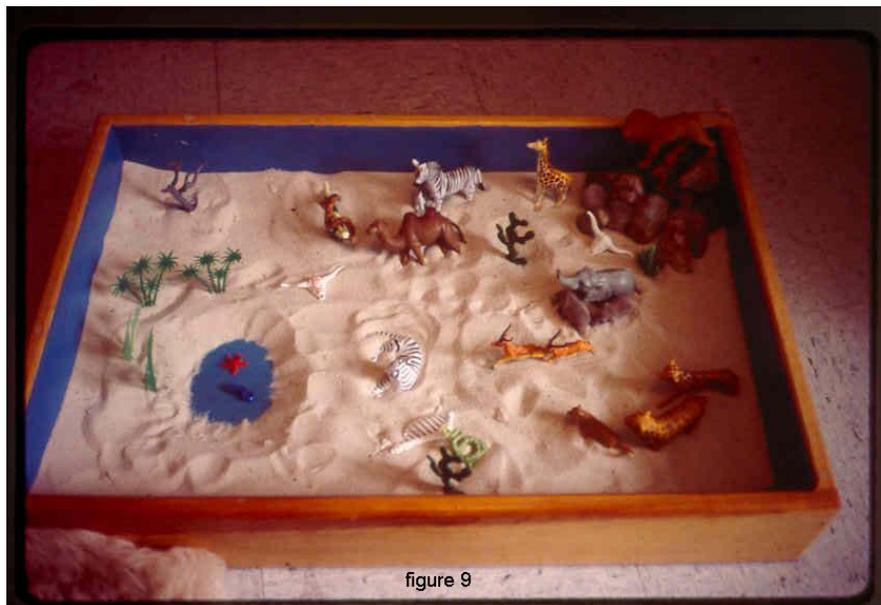


figure 9

**Figure 9. Sandtray #6**

In the next session, Ese shared that his ex-girlfriend had come to his place of work, cursed him and slapped his face. He said he was humiliated and enraged, but exercised restraint and calmly asked her to leave. He said, “I can’t believe I let someone get away with hitting me like that, but this is the first time I can remember that there was a crime and I was the victim, not the suspect!” He felt power as well as ambivalence in exercising restraint, and was able to preserve both his job and his freedom by remaining calm. He then talked about “real men” being capable of managing aggression without unnecessary violence. He stated that the male role models in his life had been abusive and never dealt with conflict constructively. He was baffled, but pleased with the way he had handled the situation.

In his seventh sandtray (**Figure 10**), Ese created the opposing forces of his inner world again, but at a qualitatively deeper level than he had in his second sandtray. This time a single horizontal line of black, glass beads divides the tray into two sides. Dark and rebellious figures (including some of the “evil” forces that surrounded Ese in his first sandtray) are on one side of the tray. Ese called the other side “love.” Among other things, it contains a black bear, her cubs and a large, white unicorn cradling a blonde boy. A beckoning hand crosses the line of black beads, and a crucifix stands on the line itself.



**Figure 10. Sandtray #7**

Ese called this tray, “The thin line between love and hate.” He said, “There’s a couple of guys over on the hate side trying to tempt the others to come over. This guy (the clay death figure) is giving birth to all the hate things on this side. (**Figure 11**). The cross is in the middle because Jesus died for everyone’s sins.”



**Figure 11.**

Rise' (1994) calls attention to God's appearance in the sandtrays of boys dealing with aggression and violence. He suggests that God appears in some form subsequent to the establishment of an ego-self axis, and that this helps stabilize the fluctuations between passive depression and outbreaks of violence. In Ese's seventh tray, God appears on the right side of the line dividing the tray as the crucified Christ—a symbol of sacrifice and death that leads to resurrection and hope. It was no surprise that Ese seemed more hopeful as he reviewed his progress during the next session: his depression was fleeting and less intense; he had not had an explosive episode for over a month; he felt more in control of and in touch with his emotions; at work he had been awarded "crew member of the month."

In Ese's eighth sandtray (**Figure 12**), the blonde boy appeared in the center of the tray facing a circular nativity scene and handcuffed to a gold "Tree of Life." On the periphery of the tray are a crucifix, the Virgin Mary, angels, the Infant of Prague, and Jesus giving communion. During his life Ese had sustained abuse from white men. He did not identify with his Anglo culture or with a lifestyle of goodness. In his world, white was shadow. In this sandtray, the handcuffs that once punished Ese are now holding him safely in a divine place, allowing him to retrieve the luminous aspects of the

white shadow so he can achieve psychological wholeness. Ese said of this tray, “These are the good things waiting for me if I stay on the right track. Sometimes I feel held back and frustrated. I can’t remember what it was like to be free.”



**Figure 12. Sandtray #8**

I reflected on Ese’s first sandtray and noticed that in the corner where the fisherman and angel once stood, Ese now receives communion from Jesus. Through the intercession of the Virgin Mary, he is one with the Father and has been forgiven. Nearby, the birth of Jesus is taking place, symbolic of Ese’s budding spiritual rebirth.

In the next session Ese affirmed his desire to stay on “the right side of the law.” He had been talking with other group home residents about changing their ways, and he shared that helping others feels good to him. In fact, Ese was feeling so good about himself that he mentioned returning to his hometown after his parole to help his gang friends. He minimized any risk associated with such a prospect.

Ese symmetrically arranged shooting stars on each side of his ninth sandtray (**Figure 13**). He placed a key, a full moon, a sign of celebration, and a crescent moon in the four corners, and then added unlit candles near each object. A rainbow with a gold nugget was placed near the middle of the tray, and in the center the blonde boy lay facing upward next to a tall wishbone and a blue and gold celestial pyramid (**Figure 14**). Ese's mandala brought tears to his eyes as he finished the tray. An air of numinous beauty permeated the room. I watched silently in awe and became filled with emotion myself.

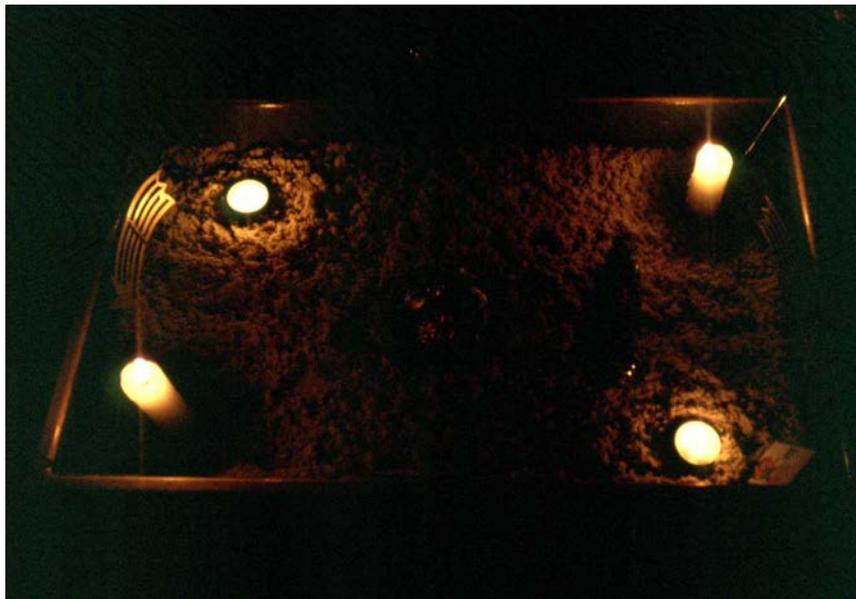


**Figure 13. Sandtray #9**



**Figure 14.**

Ese lit the candles and we sat for some time in silent witness. He said with deep emotion, “This is me lying on my back looking at the stars. I really hope life turns out this beautiful... There’s this spot that I can lie on my back and look up at the stars... It’s really cool (pauses again, tears flowing gently now, the only time I had ever seen him cry). In this corner there is a key. It is half buried. It’s there for answers... someday... but not now... Someday it will help me answer all of the questions I have.” Ese reminded me that it was nighttime and the stars were bright, so I invited him to turn out the lights. He did so immediately. We then sat quietly in the candlelight (**Figure 15**).



**Figure 15.**

In this tray, Ese laid down his ego figure with the recognition that his ego is contained in totality. I was truly honored to bear witness to this manifestation of Self, and to join him as he experienced profound spiritual rebirth. Our bond was powerful, and before our next session I gave birth to my daughter!

In the next session, Ese told me that since his last session he visited his mother's home to gather his belongings. She told him she had gotten rid of his things, "because they were cluttering up the house." He said that he "bit his tongue" and left abruptly. Ese understood that his mother was not capable of parenting him in the way he might want. Although he had known this intuitively for some time, in this session I sensed his acceptance of this. Ese decided to contact his grandmother, knowing he could experience some nurturing with her.

At this point, although Ese had been released from parole for over a month, he was not eager to leave the group home. He planned to remain on a voluntary basis to ensure a successful transition to independence, and decided not to return to his hometown. He wanted to remain in the same community as the group home. I was relieved.

Six weeks later, in his last sandtray (**Figure 16**), Ese placed a single, black glass bead in a thick circle of protective trees and large shells. This arrangement was located in the upper left side of the tray where the fisherman and the angel once stood. Ese is no longer surrounded by evil. Outside the circle, a pile of black, glass beads seemed to represent the outside world and Ese's past pain. He had left behind his old lifestyle, and come to realize he is unique, separate, protected, and able to relate to the painful parts of his outer world differently.



**Figure 16. Sandtray #10 (final tray)**

Although Ese's parents are absent, through the symbolic and dynamic process of sandplay he entered the realm of soul and spirit to access archetypal guardians—a fisherman and angel, the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ, thick trees and large shells. These guardians are now able to surround and protect him as he ventures into the world of adulthood.

When I saw Ese at his place of work over a year later, he politely took my order at the drive-thru window. I noticed his name tag said, "Assistant Manager" and I congratulated him. Suddenly, we heard yelling as rival gangs drove into the parking lot and exchanged vulgarities. My daughter was in the car, and I became fearful. Ese bolted into the parking lot and told them to leave. As they drove off, Ese calmly returned to the drive-thru window and took our order. I thanked him for his bravery and he commented, "I just could not have them disrespecting my restaurant. Not on my shift, anyhow." Then he smiled at me and said, "Remember when I used to be like that?"

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