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## PREFACE

Teenage Trauma – such as divorce, substance abuse, violence or loss of a loved one – creates internal demons that can lead to self-destruction. Sandtray Therapy can connect teens to an inner world of which they may have no awareness. Once the inner world is discovered, teens have the opportunity to take a difficult but rewarding journey, where they can define, face and transform these internal demons.

Fifteen-year old Rob, the story's protagonist, begins his journey at his father's funeral. He soon meets the Wicked Witch, an internal demon whose job is to instill guilt and self-hatred. As the story unfolds, Rob learns that pushing her away and denying her existence creates increased turmoil. He discovers ways to face her directly. He eventually learns that she was originally constructed to protect him from the pain of his father's death, and she becomes an ally instead on an enemy.

This scenario of breaking through the denial, facing the internal demons and beginning the transformational process is a theme that flows throughout the book. This scenario is known as integration. This is an avenue that teens can follow in order to heal the wounds from trauma.

This book provides parents and teens a way to face “stuck” loss and pain by breaking through fear. It informs readers how they can transform this state of “stuckness” to the opening of the heart and discovery of forgiveness. It teaches how to resolve trauma by demonstrating how the author worked through his anguish.

This is a story of a fifteen-year-old boy who starts out feeling lost, isolated, afraid and guilt-ridden. He feels that he has no one to talk to and has great difficulty in expressing his true feelings. This story is based on the true-life experiences of the author.

Rob's healing journey occurs in the world of Sandtray Therapy, a world of powerful, vital images. Allow me to describe the Sandtray therapist's office. It is an inviting, stimulating and creative setting. There are several small sandtrays held above the ground on stands. These sandtrays are approximately 20 inches by 30 inches and 3 to 4 inches deep. White, green, black, and purple sand fills each tray. There are rows and rows of shelves with hundreds of miniature

figures. Farm animals, religious icons, cartoon characters, trees, stones, regular people, super heroes and heroines, monsters and angels are some of the figures on display. Pitchers of water are available to pour into the trays.

The client is encouraged to choose figures from the shelves that move her in some manner and place them in the tray. The therapist then asks the client about the sandtray world she has created.

In Sandtray Therapy, the client is encouraged to be exactly where they are, and they are allowed to play with their situation by placing figures in the sandtray. The sandtray process teaches you that it is ok to be who you are, and if you play with it, by moving and changing figures in the sand, your life can transform.

Personal trauma is a theme that is frequently created in the tray. Those traumas may be child abuse, divorce, disasters, or death of a loved one. Memories, feelings, understandings, and experiences are continually created in the sand. They can then be faced and worked through on an intellectual, emotional and spiritual level.

The “working through” was an important aspect of the Sandtray Therapy I experienced. The figures and corresponding scenes were alive and visible. The placing of the figures and their connection with other figures in the tray touched me deep inside.

I learned that Sandtray Therapy could deal with trauma and loss in a way that regular talk therapy often does not reach. The figures are placed directly in front of the builder. The painful memories and feelings emerge during scenes in the tray. The builder is able to hold these painful scenes because they are standing in front of him. This is different from regular talk therapy where the memories reside only in one’s head. In talk therapy, the memories are discussed and intellectualized, but not seen or experienced.

Regular talk therapy tends to give much of the power in the session to the therapist. She asks leading questions designed to break through defenses and the resistance of the client, in order to help him gain insight about his problems. During Sandtray Therapy sessions, the client is more active and in control. She is building her own scene, working on her own issues. Instead of having the primary relationship between the therapist and the client, with work proceeding through transference (perceptions of significant people in the client’s life that

are transferred to the therapist), the primary focus is between the client and the sandtray. The Sandtray therapist serves as a guide and a container of a safe space.

The Sandtray therapist attempts to assist the client in accepting her own healing powers to heal the psyche, Although healing and transformation do occur in talk therapy, the talk therapist tends to attempt to be the main healing object during the sessions, where the client may become dependent on the interaction with the therapist and may not focus on the healing process within.

Gisela Schubach De Domenico Ph.D. is a nationally recognized expert on Sandtray Therapy. She has been my teacher since 1991. One of her teachings that I have incorporated in my work is that one's psyche works through issues related to the personal, then moves to the family, then the societal, and on to ancestors, to humanity as a whole, to the transpersonal to the universal.

Rob's (my) healing process follows the spiral path Dr. De Domenico describes. It moves from personal isolation to deep connection. The first scene I created was *Funeral Day*. I assembled my father's casket, the Rabbi, my mother and sister together. I did not know what the purpose of this creation was until I talked about the scene. I realized that I was not really present for his funeral, that I had really never experienced the full impact of that day.

The sandtray work solidified my belief as a therapist that in order to heal from past trauma, one needs to work through it by returning to the memory and original action of that trauma. I also learned that there is no limit to the times one can benefit from returning to the trauma. As you will see, I created many scenes that took place at my father's grave. I returned to the grave and demons many times. Returning is a natural part of grieving. Along the way, I experienced many moments of insight and consolation.

But healing rarely occurs in a single flash, no matter how powerful and enlightening the experience may be. Like Rob, I often experienced relief and release in the sandtray world, only to find that the demons and fears were still there in full force. Returning is a natural part of working through trauma. This is a teaching that seems to be left out of most self-help/how to books. The beginning sessions were painful, but I eventually found a way to return to the grave without the heaviness and numbness. My repeat visits to the grave brought growing wisdom.

Writing this book has educated me in how to assist my own clients who have experienced a loss or have been victimized by abuse. Each chapter represents one or more sandtray sessions. The action, although alternating between present and past, is described in present tense. The reader is taken directly into the graveyard, hospital or bedroom.

Each chapter includes a chapter heading with black and white photos of the sandtrays, a narrative section, which tells the story, and a commentary section that discusses the Sandtray Therapy process, the major figures utilized, and the teachings learned from the chapter. The reader has the option of reading the entire book in the sequence it was created, or going through the narrative sections in turn, following Rob's journey, and returning to the commentary when desired.

A family discussion section follows each commentary, with questions designed to inspire family members to discuss how this particular chapter affected them. It is my hope that these questions will lead to improved communication and healing between teenagers and their parents. This book allows for the lifting of taboos around traumatic issues. It provides parents with language and images they can use to communicate with their children about such difficult issues.

This is not a traditional self-help book with a definitive step-by-step process you explicitly follow in order to reach salvation. Instead, you are asked to travel with Rob as he makes his journey, meeting the Demons, The Voice of Wisdom, Gods and Goddesses and eventually his father. You are invited to step into Rob's shoes as he breaks through the denial of death and the denial of the goodness of life. It is hoped that you can connect with Rob's struggle, courage and transformation. It is also hoped that this healing journey inspires you to seek out Sandtray Therapy.

## CHAPTER ONE



## *FUNERAL DAY*

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### *FUNERAL DAY*

Rob recklessly smacks his hand through the first floor apartment window. He is lucky that no arteries are severed or blood splattered. He is angry, no, enraged. He has no idea why he is so upset. Every day that passes is experienced as prolonged agony. He has reached the fourth decade of his life and happiness continues to elude him. He has no sense of security and worries all the time. He wonders what the pain in his stomach is about. He pushes away all those he loves by intimidation and sheer cruelty. Isolation and alienation follow him everywhere. Life has become a cruel mystery. The intense turmoil always leads back to a profound agitated despondency.

This nearly middle-aged man does have the sense that his problems began a long time ago. He does not want to investigate his past, although a force inside pushes him back...way, way back.....

Rob finds himself in a dark cave, a place he goes to escape the pressures of acting normal in front of others. The gangly teenager lights his first Marlboro of the day as he paces the cave's floor. The smoke is taken deep into his lungs and then released into the dankness. The smoke swirls around the cave as the radio plays mid-1960's rock and roll in the background. The hypnotic effect of the music's rhythm combined with the haze in the cave cause Rob to get up and walk further into the cavern. The smoke has become so thick he can barely breathe. He is choking and only has enough energy to find his way to daylight. He tumbles out of the cave and falls onto the ground.

His eyes sting from the smoke and he has difficulty seeing. Eventually the blurring clears and he becomes acquainted with the surroundings. Look, over there! He sees a long street with two-story houses constructed right next to each other. They are painted a variety of drab colors, obviously not an architect's dream. Oh, there is his white house on the corner with the screened-in back porch. There is his father in gray chinos and an old flannel shirt walking to the family car, the putrid brown Mercury Comet. A billed cap hides his face. The car sputters to life and pulls away from the curve.

Rob watches the Comet as it reaches the highway. Suddenly it begins swerving and crossing lanes as the honking of horns interrupts suburban routine. The brown car barely misses a head-on collision. A police car's siren comes screaming up behind Rob's father and demands that he pulls over. The police officer rushes out of his car and immediately inspects the driver's side of the Comet. Rob's father is gasping for breath and his face is blue as he falls into a coma.

An ambulance rushes him off to the hospital. Rob runs towards his house and his grandfather greets him with a somber look of anguish. "You're father died of a stroke today. He was fifty-six years old."

Rob quickly returns to the cave and attempts to push away all that he has just experienced. Although the cave is very warm, he is freezing and his hands tremble as he turns up the volume on the radio. The song bursts out in a soulful dirge like Motown's greatest hits jamming all at once "My heart is broken, no tears have spoken, what really matters when your whole life is shattered?" He believes that the song should resonate with him, but he is unsure of what he thinks, feels or needs. The distant voice of his mother echoes in the cave. He cannot make out her sad words and the next moment he is with his mother and sister inside a limousine.

He looks out the window and sees the barren suburban wasteland that New Jersey becomes in winter. The trees are lifeless and the grass is brown or turned into frozen mud. He looks at his legs, arms and fingers. He realizes this is his body, but today every moment is projected as some hideous movie, someone else's film that moves slowly and without pace. He fears that this movie is endless. Rob feels alienated from all life forms. He does not know who he is, where he is going or why he has to go there.

The limo stops in front of a temple and his family gets out and walks inside. Rob notices the man in the front, the leader of this service, the Rabbi. He has a bald head and is muscular. He wears a purple shirt and pants. He is strong and self-assured. Maybe he can tell Rob what is going on.

Rob sits down amongst his family and friends, but he does not feel that he is actually in the room. He wonders if he is on some other planet observing the ritual of a funeral service conducted on earth.

The Rabbi asks Rob to visit with him in private for a couple of minutes. The Rabbi's bald head glistens with sweat and witch hazel. He says, "I don't know you, I don't know your mother, sister or your father. Why are you here?" The sinister Rabbi displays his impatience with Rob's non-answer with a dismissive wave of his multi-ringed hand.

The Rabbi begins the service by saying, "The deceased did not have a Jewish name, and although I did not know him at all, I am certain that he was a decent sort." The Rabbi sneaks a look at Rob and smirks. He continues, "His son had some idea that I am supposed to be of great assistance today, that I am supposed to ease the pain and explain what death is, but he is just a young fool. He hasn't yet learned that I am doing this for show and for my cut of the funeral action."

Rob is stunned and is unsure if he should beat the Rabbi senseless with his fists or throw up. He decides to go outside and puke, but a woman who looks remarkably like a witch intercepts him. She has moldy, green skin and the breath of cheap wine and spoiled cheese. Her dingy black outfit consists of a dress and cape ensemble. She gets right up in Rob's face and points her finger. She says, "You want to know the truth, well here it is. You caused your father's death, you miserable bastard. You did not help out enough around the house. His heart gave out because of your laziness. There are a million ways you could have saved him and it is my job to inform you what they are. I will not rest until you are fully tortured by the words I so brutally deliver."

Rob is frozen by the witch's harsh message. She is the voice of Supreme Guilt, the feeling of tremendous, all-consuming guilt that can never be erased or atoned for. He wants to move away from her, but cannot find the strength to do so. Words like machine gun fire and spittle fly onto Rob's face. She continues, "Why aren't you crying? Are you aware that you are the only member of your family who has not shed a tear? How can you not show any emotion at your own father's funeral? What are you, some kind of robot? Don't you have any sense of respect? Can't you even fake tears? Get back in the limo, you useless loser. Guess where you are going now."

The graveyard is below heavy power lines that sway in the cool wind. It is filled with decaying tombstones, ornate and simple, of various shapes and sizes. The cemetery is not frightening or consoling. It is numbing, a bone chilling stillness that knows neither time nor emotion.

The Gravediggers are methodically shoveling dirt out of the way for Rob's father's casket that is being carried from the limousine. The Gravediggers are not in tune with the solemn theme of the day. They seem to be unconcerned with Rob's father, mother, sister or anyone else. Rob asks one of the Gravediggers if this hole should have been completely dug out hours ago out of respect for his family. It seems rude to have this work done now, as the graveside service is about to begin.

The Gravedigger throws down his shovel and laughs at Rob and his family. "Respect," he says, "Why should I have respect for you, who are you? You are not important like these big tombstones over here with all the flowers in front of them. Respect. You can kiss my ass."

The casket is resting on the ground until the Gravediggers complete their task. Rob is standing next to his mother and sister. He feels estranged from both of them. They both seem totally unapproachable. His mother is wearing a dark blue outfit. Her eyes are red from days of crying and her face is haggard from the sudden loss of her husband. Her head is bowed to the ground. Rob wonders, "Should I comfort her? How do I do that?"

What can he say to ease her pain? Does he echo other empty phrases he has heard today? "Every thing will be all right, just give it time." "At least he was not in pain." "It was God's will." No, those words seem infinitely meaningless. Maybe his mother should be comforting him, but why should she want to comfort someone as horrible as her son had turned out? He has never seen his mother look so disturbed before, and he feels utterly powerless.

His sister is two years younger than he is. She seems crumpled and alone as her arms hang heavily by her sides. It is a burden just to lift her head and move her feet. She is crying buckets of tears. Why is he the only one not crying? Is this good or bad, right or wrong? He wonders what role he should play with her. The death of his father must be even more difficult for her than for him. Should he attempt to help her, or would she just tell him to leave her alone? He does not really know much about his sister and gives up on ideas of how to connect with her.

The Gravediggers haphazardly lower his father's black coffin into the ground. They toss it in like it's all in a day's work. Rob yells at them and requests that they be gentle. He is concerned because none of the mourners seem to share his outrage. The gravediggers hold their shovels in front of them

like microphones and begin to sing. “What is death anyhow? How can you live and die without a Jewish name? Is death a time to be merely tossed into the ground? Death is numbing, endless and unforgiving. Death is when your father leaves one day without notice. Death holds no answers for those who are undeserving. Death is isolation. Death is all anguish and without hope. Mr. Death is the Grim Reaper who arrives for the end of the funeral. He is a faceless, ghastly entity whose sole purpose is to take you out.”

The Gravediggers unceremoniously shovel the final grains of dirt on his father’s coffin. It is all so surreal to him. This is not really happening. This is a nightmare that will end as soon as he wakes up. His father is not really dead. How could he be? He must have gone to Vermont to visit his birthplace. Rob just saw him the other day having breakfast. He can’t be dead. He can’t be gone. No way.

Rob and his family crawl back into the limo and head for home, a home that will be a dismal place. He is totally demoralized, confused and broken. His nerve endings have become anesthetized. He attempts to look into the future and all he sees is darkness. Life will never be the same again.

## COMMENTARY

### Chapter One - *FUNERAL DAY*

#### MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Rabbi played by Lex Luthor  
Supreme Guilt played by the Wicked Witch  
The Gravediggers played by men shoveling  
Death played by The Grim Reaper  
Rob, Mother, Sister played by human figures

This first sandtray was built almost twenty-five years after my father’s death. I was astounded by the realization that I had never fully experienced his funeral. That is, my experiences of his death up to this point had been incomplete. During the course of the previous twenty-five years, I had developed at least two versions of what happened that day. Throughout my life, I would focus on the story line that provoked the least amount of pain. One version was that I was numb and in a state of shock, and that is why I did not

demonstrate any feelings on funeral day. The other was that the funeral was facilitated in an outstanding manner and all my needs were met.

I felt that there was something terribly wrong with my grieving process, but I was afraid to really look directly at my father's death. The "numb and state of shock" version of the story was that my visual memory of that cold gray November New Jersey day, the temple debacle and the lowering his casket into a hole, encompassed my entire experience of his death. At different stages of my life, I believed that the visual memory, devoid of any feeling was all I took from that day. This story line was one of detachment and isolation.

Over the years, I created an idealized version of the funeral that enabled survival and nothing more. The established story was that I was emotionally present from the day he died until now. I was attuned to my mother and sister's needs and did my best to help them. I was connected to their suffering and was clear on how to ease their pain. I was strong because I showed no emotion, no tears, and no requests for help. Furthermore I was not angry, sad, or conflicted whatsoever. I was shame-free and without guilt. The Rabbi was beyond reproach and his words were soothing to the ears. The funeral was an uplifting moment that launched my healing and eventual recovery. In this version, I was totally aware of the hurt inside my chest and the numbness of my heart.

This version was created in order for me to believe that I was indeed grieving properly and that I was "normal." I was unable to face my father's death in a more direct manner. What were the reasons for this self-deception? Why was it so difficult to face this tragedy? These questions began to be answered in this particular sandtray.

My long held versions of the first days after his death were now beginning to crumple and expand at the same time. They were beginning to crumple because I was realizing that these versions were created to protect me from the shock of a profound loss. Using these story lines as a starting point, I was able to expand on what happened on funeral day.

I was able to face several new truths. I was not clear about my role in the family. I was confused about whether and how I could help my mother and sister. I was internally frozen as the Gravedigger lowered my father's casket. My body and mind were infiltrated with hideous, intensive guilt. I was not emotionally present, and I had checked out long before that awful day. The

Rabbi's words were worse than silence, and they triggered self-loathing and chaos within. His words reinforced my disdain for organized religion.

The Rabbi sneered at my family when he asked, 'Did your father/husband have a Jewish name?' This question and his ghastly reaction to the negative answer was so appalling, reactionary and hollow. Why was having a Jewish name so important? Why did the Rabbi seem to give this issue more priority than anything else? The fact that he did not know my father or any of us made the situation that much more surrealistically evil. He did not care about my father's life and he showed no empathy for the loss we were experiencing. The memory of this incident sticks in my gut because the Rabbi made me feel that my father, and all my family for that matter, were not of equal value to other Jews who had Jewish names. In other words, since my father was not religious – none of our family was – he did not measure up to the others who regularly attended synagogue. This encounter with the Rabbi trampled on my already low self-esteem.

I carried vague remembrances of this spiritual shattering throughout my teenage and adult years. Fierce energy was channeled towards forcing them into hiding. I wanted to bury them deep in the ground where they would never touch me again. Denial, minimizing and avoiding were the techniques utilized in protecting myself from this deep psychic injury.

I was introduced to several major characters that played leading roles. The figures of Rob, the Grim Reaper, the Wicked Witch (who was Supreme Guilt), my mother and sister brought substance and meaning to my inner world. I discovered the different aspects and levels of each character. Confronting and inhabiting these characters was so much richer than merely thinking or talking about the funeral.

The significance of these figures is a unique aspect of Sandtray Therapy. I could choose the figures, place them anywhere in the tray and look at them for as long as I needed to. Their physical presence held my attention and encouraged forgotten memories, misplaced thoughts and hidden feelings to emerge.

What benefits were obtained through facing the figures? I confronted the belief system that I could not and should not look at what happened when my father died. It was not a simple task to pursue, but the container of the sandtray gave me a sense of safety that had previously been unknown. In other words,

since they were “just” figures in a sandtray, I could imagine their thoughts and share their feelings without being afraid those thoughts and feelings would overwhelm me.

I discovered a sense of relief at this newfound ability to look at a more complete version of the funeral. I learned that my father’s funeral was indeed, not a cathartic ceremony that released my grief. The funeral was a numbing, bone chilling event that enhanced my unwanted separateness. The funeral was not experienced as a finalization, but as a confusing march into hell, filled with guilt and anxiety. I now saw the funeral as a real, traumatizing scene, not some hazy, pumped up vision of closure. I met the Grim Reaper, took in his essence and knew I was staring at death. Yet, I could now be with that scene and not push the flurry of terror away. I now welcomed the opportunity to re-experience my father’s death in future sandtrays.

## FAMILY DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### For Chapter One - *FUNERAL DAY*

1. In the beginning of this chapter, Rob is so angry and out of control that he smacks his hand through a window. Have you ever had similar experiences?
2. Music plays a large role in Rob’s life. How does music affect you?
3. Alienation and isolation are major themes in this chapter. Have you ever felt alone, separated or different in this way?
4. Funeral day was the worst day of Rob’s life. What have your funeral experiences been like?
5. Rob meets the demons for the first time in this chapter. Have you ever come face to face with your demons? What are they like? What do they say?
6. Rob feels cut off from his mother and sister during this chapter. He also feels confused about what his role in the family should be. Have you ever felt cut off from your family? Have you ever been confused about what role you should play with them?
7. Rob feels guilty because he did not cry at his father’s funeral. Have you ever felt guilty for not crying when you think you are supposed to?
8. The Gravediggers in this chapter say to Rob at one point, “Why should I have respect for you? You are not important like these big

tombstones over here with all the flowers in front of them.” What are the social, cultural and class messages here? What do you think about them?

9. Rob feels that death is numbing, endless and unforgiving. What do you think about death?

10. Rob does not feel that the religious aspects of the funeral were helpful. In fact, he feels that they were abusive. How do you feel about religion, religious services and rituals? Are they alienating or comforting to you?