



Playing with Ritual

by Ellen G. Levine

Play and imagination are resources which help children deal with challenging life situations. I would like to present an example of the deliberate shaping of play into a ritual in a therapy treatment with a seven year-old girl. Playing with ritual is a key element in the grieving process for this child. Turner and Van Gennep write about the phases of a ritual process as beginning with the preparation period, then crossing the threshold into the “liminal space” where the transition from one state of being to another is enacted and ending with an emergence into a new social status or state of being (Turner, 1969, Van Gennep, 1960).

For a community, such events as funerals or weddings are “rites of passage” which help the participants to pass from one state to another. For an individual, the creation of a ritual can help particularly with mastery of an experience of loss. What is interesting from my point of view, as an Expressive Arts therapist, is the role of the arts and art-making in the construction and the carrying out of a ritual process.

Jon and Sue have come to see me to discuss the idea of therapy for their seven year-old daughter, Pia. Jon had been diagnosed ten years before with a malignant brain tumor. After the diagnosis, several surgeries and despite the poor prognosis, he and his wife, Sue, had decided to have a child. Everyone is amazed that he has managed to stay alive for ten years after the diagnosis. However, Jon’s condition has recently begun to worsen, and he knows that he will not live for much longer.

The couple knows that their daughter will be deeply affected by Jon’s death, that she is already struggling with his illness and the periodic hospitalizations that have become a part of their lives. Jon seems to intuitively understand what Pia needs: particularly someone to make art and to play with her and someone with whom she can feel relaxed. In subsequent conversations with Sue, it becomes apparent that Jon is the major play partner for Pia and that Sue rarely plays with Pia or joins into the fun between Pia and her father.

When I first meet Pia, I am struck by how much she resembles her father. She is an unusually tall, thin child with long curly, blondish-red hair. At first, she is quiet and a bit shy. I observe right away that she is very bright, has a great capacity for play and her imagination is rich and fertile. I know that these will be important resources in our work together. Pia loves making up stories, playing and drawing. There are several themes that emerge in the first ten sessions. Her mother attends most of the sessions throughout the treatment, and we work on helping Sue become more



comfortable with playing. Pia often wants to make something to bring to Jon during the course of his illness. His impending death is always a subtext for our work together. Throughout our time together, Jon is declining, in and out of the hospital and finally in hospice care. Pia often draws and speaks about a “magical baby” who has special powers of healing. However, the most significant theme that emerges during the treatment is the story of *The Lion King* which Pia knows in detail along with the music and all the lyrics. Often, Pia pretends to be a lion and, with the lights off in the playroom, she crawls around on the floor and roars fiercely, enjoying the feeling of being scary. Pia wants us to join in, and Sue begins to be more comfortable crawling around on the floor with Pia and I.

Pia’s emphasis in the story is on the relationship between the baby lion, Simba, and his father, the King, Mufasa. In the story, Simba and his father are very close. They often play together and the father teaches the son many things about being a lion. Life is rich and peaceful. Mufasa tells Simba that they will “...always be together,” and that “...the stars in the sky are the King lions who will always be there to guide you.” The critical scene comes when Mufasa’s brother, Scar, tricks Simba into setting a trap to kill Mufasa. Scar kills his brother and arranges it so that Simba feels responsible. Pia talks about how much she loves the scene when Simba goes to his dead father and lies for a while under his paw. She tells me that she watches that scene over and over. Pia sings the songs from the movie; she remembers all the words and knows all the names of the animal characters. Whenever she tells the story and sings the songs, her mood becomes happy, playful and she is clearly enjoying herself immensely.

Jon dies just before our eighteenth session. I open the eighteenth session with an acknowledgment that much had happened since the last session. Sue talks about all the activities that Pia had participated in as Jon was dying and after he died. A music therapist had visited Jon and had sung songs at his bedside. Pia joined in with the singing, and she told me what she had sung to Jon: *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star* was a favorite. Pia and Sue tell me that after Jon died, Pia spent several hours in and around the room where his body lay. She played and drew on the floor, moving freely in and out of the room. Pia is quite talkative and engaged in this session, and she asks Sue and I whether we want to be in a coffin or cremated. She says that she wants to be in a coffin. She wonders aloud: “What happens to your spirit when you die?” Pia wants us to join her in drawing pictures of ourselves as spirits looking down from the sky. While we draw, she talks about how we all become stars shining in the sky and that her Daddy is “watching” her. She says that she can hear his voice.

In the twenty-first session, Pia becomes thoughtful and begins talking about the “lion spirit” from our play in a previous session where she had become a very aggressive “lion spirit” who was wounding, killing and eating all the animals. She goes back to *The Lion King* story and talks about how Mufasa’s spirit talked to Simba at the end to give him the strength to go on and become the new King. At this point, Pia talks about Jon and how she wants to let his “spirit go away.” I suggest



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that we could make something together that might help her let his spirit go away. I ask her what she thought we could do together.

Pia comes up with idea that we should have a fire and burn it, and then it will float away to the sky and into the clouds. From this, I imagine that Pia wants his spirit to go up into the sky where it can stay like the spirit of Simba's father and talk to her periodically. I take this as a very serious piece of work that Pia needs to do to continue the process of mourning her father's death. I feel that she needs a frame for her play, a frame that would be effective for her.

I begin thinking about the appropriateness of designing a ritual that might help Pia at this point. It seems like an opportune moment to engage in a kind structured experience that would help her to accomplish the goal that she had set out for us which was to turn her father's spirit from a rather scary aggressor into a benign helper. Drawing upon what I know about arts-based ritual processes, I decide to invite Pia to begin by engaging in a period of art-making as preparation for the first stage.

As part of the preparation phase, I say that unfortunately we cannot make a real fire in the playroom, but we can make a pretend fire. This emphasizes the therapeutic action of play therapy which comes through the enrichment of the imagination. Empowering Pia to take the lead, I ask her how she thought we could do this. She immediately rises to my challenge and comes up with some ideas. I can tell that she is now getting excited and mobilizing her imagination.

We set to work with ordinary objects which we find in the playroom: a piece of drawing paper rolled up and some kleenex. Pia cuts the paper roll in half and tapes the two pieces together, crossing each other like two logs. Next, she directs me to help her color the kleenex to make it look like flames. We work together on this with red and orange pastels. We tape the flames (kleenex) to the logs (paper rolls). Finally, Pia takes some more kleenex and balls it up saying, "This is his spirit."

After organizing our materials, we are ready to enact the ritual play and to move into the "liminal space" of imagination and play. This requires a step out of ordinary reality. The everyday objects had now been transformed into imaginal tools and imbued with a magical or fantasy status. We put the "fire" into the center of the table and light it, letting it grow and develop. Next, Pia puts the "spirit" (ball of kleenex) into the fire. I suggest that we say some words as it is burning and we, together, come up with the following chant: "Fire, burn up the spirit! Fire, send the spirit up to the sky!" We have to say these words over and over several times. Pia then declares: "His spirit is up there!"

Because Pia is so definitive in her declaration, it now feels as if the job is finished, that the excitement of the chanting and enactment has diminished. Pia says that she wants to keep the "fire" and the "spirit" in her private drawer so that she can look at it again. She carefully puts these objects into the drawer. They have become very special because of the use they have had in the ritual.



Their everyday appearance as simply kleenex and paper rolls has been transformed. I notice that Pia seems calm and settled.

Through a ritual process that involved play and art-making, Pia is able to accomplish the task of setting things right in terms of the placement of Jon's spirit and the role his spirit will play in guiding her into the future. He has to go up into the sky, to be "up there" in a new form, as a star shining down on Pia, just like what happened to Mufasa in *The Lion King*. It is my sense that this concrete placement of Jon has helped Pia to contend with the emptiness of his absence. Pia is changed through the play that we made together in the ritual and, most importantly, Jon changed his form so that he could remain with her.

The ritual helped to create an imaginal world that could be useful to Pia in living with the fact of her father's death. I have also used arts-based ritual processes in the closing phase of treatment with a young adult woman (Knill, Levine and Levine, 2005, pp.203-210) and with an entire family in which the children have been abused (2012, pp. 58-70). When a life cycle event such as a death has occurred, it is often helpful to create an art work that functions as a totem or memorial object to stand in place of the lost person. Examples of such objects or art works are altars, collages with significant photographs, poems, stories, songs, dramatic scripts. Creating within a framed experience such as a ritual process, makes these art objects special. They carry the presence of the lost person and embody them in a shape or form. In this way, arts-based ritual play that mobilizes the imagination can be useful for working with grief and loss.

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