



THE POWER OF RITUAL

THE FAMILY SHRINE

MY TRAINING IN BRIEF THERAPY taught me to assign families a therapeutic task at the end of each session. Later, searching for a way to heighten the impact of these homework assignments and make brief therapy briefer, I became interested in therapeutic rituals. These days, rather than prescribing a therapeutic task, such as putting father in charge of discipline and having mother take a rest, my preference is to use a ritual.

A therapeutic task typically will accomplish only a limited goal. For example, when a father is asked to take charge of discipline, his child often shapes up; however, it is quite likely that a conflict will then emerge between husband and wife. Despite the change in the parent-child relationship, more work will need to be done on the marriage. A family ritual, however, can produce a shift not only in the relationship between the parents and the symptomatic child, but in the marital relationship as well.

With elegance and parsimony, a ritual can address several levels of a family's organization simultaneously. This is because the most effective rituals typically involve each member of the family and have several tasks embedded within them. When all these tasks exert their effect together, it's possible to alter the dynamics of both the parent-child *and* the marital relationship. This may take place even in families having a psychotic member with a history of hospitalization and prior treatment failures.

THE GREEN FAMILY STARTED TREATMENT with me about six years ago. They are a warm and likable Jewish family. Mother, Sara, is a 50-year-old psychiatric

social worker; her husband Mel, a 55-year-old dentist. They have three adult children: Brenda, a 30-year-old psychiatrist, who referred her family to me for family therapy; Robert, a 25-year-old accountant; and Richie, 21 years old, a diagnosed schizophrenic, who, when I first met him, had been in and out of mental hospitals for over two years.

Five minutes into the first session, I had a sense that I knew these people—they reminded me so much of my own family. Sara is an attractive and intelligent woman who is also quite demanding and controlling. Mel is a quiet man who always speaks in a choked-up, pained voice, and makes Sara crazy with his passive-aggressive guerilla war tactics. Brenda is married to an orthodox rabbi, and, at the time, was finishing a fellowship in psychiatry. Robert, like his father, is sensitive, intelligent, and somewhat depressed.

I liked Richie, the I.P., the most because of his playful eyes and mischievous spirit. He began the first session dramatically raging that his family "were fucks, full of shit; cowards, wimps, and immigrants." His denunciation was so passionate that I began to wonder whether he was expressing some of the other members' unexpressed emotions.

It became clear that Richie was giving voice to the pent-up anger each parent felt in the marriage and still harbored towards their respective parents. To release Richie from his I.P. position, he would have to be removed

Helping families express the unexpressed

from the role of being the repository and sole voice of the family rage. To begin with, his parents would need to work on their own suppressed feelings toward their parents.

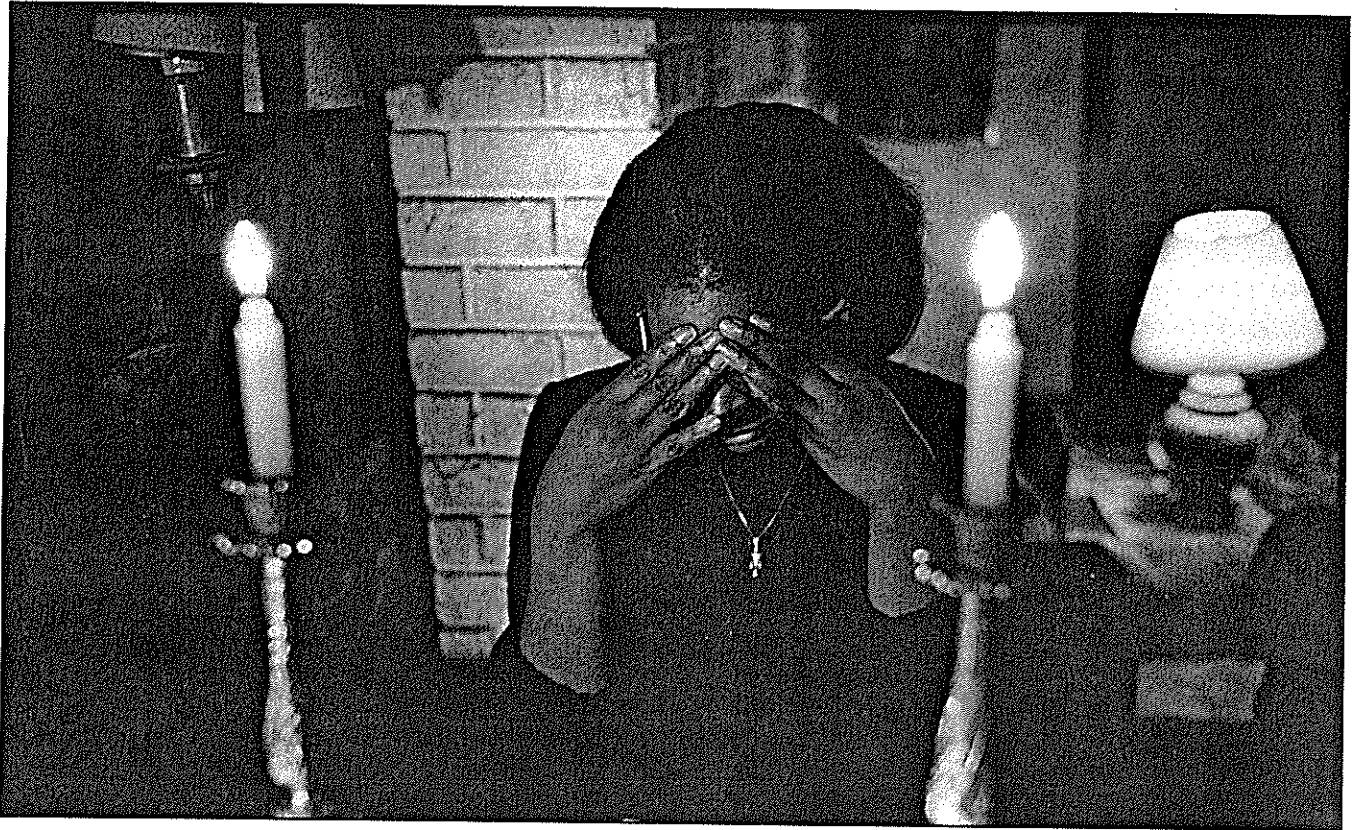
I invited Mel and Sara's parents to the next session for a three-generational

interview. Sara was still enraged over the physical and emotional abuse she received from her father 40 years ago. Ever since childhood, her life had been a painfully unsuccessful quest for her parents' validation. Her father considered her the family troublemaker. The oldest of three children, Sara had early on been placed in the role of fighting her mother's battles with her father.

The defining event of Mel's childhood had been his parents' divorce. After his father left his wife for another woman, Mel remained by his mother's side while she went in and out of psychiatric hospitals. Mel now feared that having given up the first half of his life to care for his "disturbed" mother, he would spend the remaining half taking care of his "disturbed" son.

The interview revealed how both Sara and Mel had been triangulated into their parents' marriage and gave them a chance to express some of their pain and anger. But when I proposed another session with all three generations, the grandparents all refused. In that case, I told the family, I could not proceed. I knew that if the grandparents didn't attend the next session, I would not have the leverage to change this system. I also knew that both Sara and Mel would be furious if their

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parents refused to come back. I thought that having them deal with this anger would help both of them take another step towards emotionally separating from their parents.

About a year later, I learned by phone that Richie had gone to his maternal grandfather's home in the middle of the night, and beaten him over the head so badly that the old man required hospitalization. Although the grandfather recovered, the family was horrified by Richie's violence.

During the next four years, I received periodic family updates by phone. I learned that Brenda had had children and that Sara's mother and Mel's father had died. Meanwhile, Richie moved into a half-way house, and got a part-time job. I think the family stayed in touch with me because my view of the family function of Richie's psychosis made more sense to them than previous therapists' explanations and because, following their brief contact with me, Richie stopped being a revolving-door patient.

Every once in a while, the parents would request couples therapy for themselves, which I jokingly rejected, sensing their lack of real motivation. Mel and Sara

were like some couples who cannot be with each other, cannot be without each other, and see the marital problems as the other partner's problem. Such couples come to treatment to get the therapist to play "Judge" and side with one of the partners. I wasn't willing to play that game.

And then one day, I received a call from Robert, the middle son, who was concerned about Richie being permanently damaged by his psychotropic medication. After speaking with Robert, I agreed to see the family again (minus Brenda, who was now married, with two children, and living in Paris). Robert's willingness to be the "customer" told me that the anxiety in the system had shifted. Since there was now a new customer, I thought change was at last possible.

At my reunion session with the family, I coached them to help Richie get off his medication, move out of the half-way house, and find a real job rather than his rather marginal part-time job—all of which was soon accomplished. Once again, Sara and Mel requested marital therapy and this time I agreed, provided that Richie and Robert join me as co-therapists.

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I knew I was *overtly* crossing family sub-systems and inverting hierarchy with this request. But I also knew both sons had been crossing emotional boundaries by covertly helping their parents through their symptoms and by postponing their own development. Including Robert and Richie also gave me more therapeutic leverage because the two sons were more familiar with their parents' marital games than I was. Their parents could now hear some of the sons' observations about their marriage.

Sara and Mel had done little to resolve the issues that had been apparent in my initial interview with them. Sara could not forgive her husband for failing to protect her from her father's neglect and relentless put-downs. Mel was furious over how controlled he felt by his wife's emotional intensity and unrealistic expectations. Neither one of them could talk about these feelings in a way that could be heard by the other. Instead, they would attack and blame each other in impossible, exhausting, and ever more heated arguments.

It was at this point in the treatment that I proposed the following ritual.

The family was to get together every other week at the parents' home (Richie and Robert were now living in separate apartments). Sara and Mel were to light candles in front of pictures of their parents, and talk to the pictures about their present and past pain, hurt, anger, and sadness. Richie and Robert were to sit behind their parents and just listen.

Following this, the parents were to replace pictures of their family of origin with their own wedding picture. Again, each partner, in turn, was to talk to the wedding picture about their pain, hurt,

anger, and sadness in their marriage. Both sons were to quietly listen. While one partner talked, the other partner could only listen. The couple was also coached to use only "I" statements. No attacking or blaming was permitted.

After the family had done this ritual four times over a two-month period, I prescribed it again, but now had the two sons reverse roles with their parents. After Mel and Sara completed the first part of the ritual, Robert and Richie were to talk to their parents' wedding picture about the pain, hurt, anger, and the sadness each experienced growing up in this family. Mel and Sara were to sit behind their sons and just listen.

All of the Greens found the ritual very helpful. For the first time they were able to listen to each other without going on the attack. Both Mel and Sara began hearing more clearly the pain each still experienced from their families of origin as well as within the marital relationship. The intensity and acrimony in their arguments decreased markedly. Having listened to each other describe what was painful in the marriage, they began to treat each other with far more sensitivity. They also began to see for the first time how their sons were affected by growing up in this family. They were even able to recognize how hard a time Robert, the supposedly normal child, was having.

Richie, now off medication, seemed more coherent and in touch than anyone else in the family. By externalizing the hidden feelings that Richie was expressing for other family members, the ritual released him from his old family role. He proceeded to outline the next step his mother needed to take, with which I totally agreed. Sara was to set up a meeting

with her father, talk to him about her pain, and let him know that she could no longer permit him to treat her badly. Sara also had to give up her fantasy that her husband would protect her from her father. She needed to accept that she was the only one responsible for dealing with her father and her feelings about him.

THE RITUAL, IN ITS MOST GENERIC form, consists of directing a family or a couple to construct a "shrine" somewhere in their home (or hospital ward, or school). The shrine consists of pictures of family members the therapist thinks still play a critical role in a family's difficulties. This could involve pictures of grandparents, a wedding picture of the parental couple, or pictures of a child who has passed away. Traumatic events which still remain emotionally alive can also be represented, (e.g. pictures of an internment or P.O.W. camp).

Instructions are then given for the family (couple) to go to the shrine on a regular basis, light a candle in front of each picture, and talk to the pictures. The instruction of what to say to the pictures will, of course, depend on the family. The frequency and duration of each visit to the shrine also depends on how long the unexpressed pain, hurt, anger has been stored, or, in some cases, how long the unfinished mourning has been postponed.

The idea of lighting candles in front of a picture and talking to it originated with Gillian Walker, my co-worker of 15 years. I have extended this idea by having different generations talk to their parents in the presence of a third generation, and then reverse roles and have the children talk to pictures of their parents while the parents silently look on.

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Speaking to pictures provides a safe context in which people can confront the original source of their pain. It's much easier to voice one's rage towards a picture of father than towards father himself. Having family members directly express their feelings towards pictures rather than to each other, drastically reduces symmetrical escalations (arguments, quarreling) and gives the listener an opportunity to hear about other members' feelings, often for the first time. With emotional intensity and conflict reduced, information about other people's thoughts and feelings can finally get through. By performing the ritual repeatedly, the family has the opportunity and time to get to the deeper and older hurts which have been stored away over the years and which have kept the I.P. from being released from his position.

Having the adult children sit behind the parents as part of the ritual makes it possible for them to see that their parents' current pain is often unrelated to them. Once the parents can talk about forbidden topics and begin taking responsibility for their own emotional lives, the children no longer have to serve as distractions to protect their parents. Thus the ritual makes the covert, overt and can transform destructive family games.

Having the parents quietly listen to their adult children talk to the pictures gives the children a chance to verbalize their pain and anger, rather than act them out symptomatically. It also highlights each child's unique contribution to the parental couple. Often the ritual helps parents recognize how a non-I.P. like Robert has postponed his life and quietly tried to relieve their suffering in subtle rather than symptomatic ways. The ritual puts both children at the same level and

changes the way the family has been organized only around the I.P.

One of the most striking things about this ritual is how it places all family members at the same level. The ceremony has two generations of people sharing their hurt and pain with each of their respective parents. The process frees everyone to reduce blame and guilt. They are able to feel and act more like adults and take the next steps in their emotional development.

THE STAGING OF A RITUAL IS CRUCIAL to its effectiveness. In the case of the Greens, there was so much fear of openly expressing feelings that I prescribed that the ritual be performed in the privacy of their own home. I thought they would be more willing to share their feelings on their own terms rather than on mine. I wanted to respect the family's sense of vulnerability and gave members the necessary time to say their piece. I was also giving them a vote of confidence, telling them that they were now able to deal on their own with their most disturbing feelings. Further, when the children saw their parents dealing with difficult emotions in the absence of the therapist, they could immediately recognize that something was now profoundly different in the family. This experience can be extremely liberating for a symptomatic child.

The candle lighting also played an important part in creating the right atmosphere by setting the experience apart from everyday conversation. The candles may have introduced a hypnotic element into the procedure. Finding themselves in an altered state may have led the Greens to give more

credence to their experience. Beyond that, lighting candles is also associated with religious and spiritual experience. This connotation can add to the power of the ceremony, especially when people are addressing a deceased family member.

So far, the ritual has produced major shifts and/or eliminated therapeutic impasses with all nine families having a psychotic member with whom I've used the procedure. It has also been effective with families having less severe presenting problems. Many of my trainees and supervisees have reported good results using the ritual in cases involving physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, unresolved mourning, and marital problems. The only failure so far has been a multiple-problem family, containing several substance abusers; they were unable to follow through on the performance of the ritual.

I use this ritual when I feel stuck as a therapist: stuck because the family is not giving me the emotional material I need to help change the system, or stuck because the I.P. has assumed too much responsibility for calling attention to the issues the family considers unspeakable. The ritual redistributes attention, enables everyone to voice the hidden feelings they need to express and releases the I.P. from having to carry the family's emotional burden. It offers further evidence of the power of ritual to help families confront deeper levels of their experience. ■

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