

COMMEMORATING LIFE'S PASSAGE: THE HEALING POTENTIAL OF THE GROUP SANDTRAY

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The sandtray can be used to celebrate or commemorate important life experiences or developmental life passages. At the recent Network Conference, John Burr and Valerie Corliss described two different sandtray rituals: one celebrating the adoption of a child, and the other marking an adolescent's initiation rite.

I recently participated in a different ritual in which the sandtray became part of a ceremony commemorating a woman friend's reaching the age her mother had been when she died. My friend's mother, who had had a difficult life, died in her early fifties of cancer soon after my friend had left home for college. Because she had been away from home and because her family was one in which the members did not freely discuss their feelings, my friend had experienced the loss of her mother as an incomplete and disturbing experience. In a visceral way, she also had no sense of what a woman's life after her early fifties was like. In order to heal this early tragedy, to honor her love of her mother and her connection with other women and also to underline to herself how her life was different from her mother's, my friend wanted women who were closest to her to gather together and create a community to mark this rite of passage. She included thirteen women whose ages ranged from eighteen years old (her daughter) to eighty (one of her mother's closest friends).

The three-hour ritual began with each of the participants telling the group how she was connected to my friend. Everyone had been asked to bring some meaningful object to give to my friend to mark this day, and each also shared what she had brought. Then I asked everyone to participate in creating a sandtray to mark this occasion. I asked them to select whatever images spoke to them about their connection to our friend, their feelings about her mother's death and this life passage, and/or their own personal losses. I said they could use anything they might find on my sandtray shelves as well as the objects they had brought. We used Gail Danchig's four-foot square tray filled with white sand. We took photos of the completed sandtray (see photo). After the sandtray was completed, everyone explained the meaning of the images she had contributed and shared her experience with the group. Some participants had created self-contained worlds within the larger world and others spread out more throughout the tray. Some women focused more on their own personal experiences, while others more overtly related to my friend's experience.

After the sandtray, we fashioned a treasure box for my friend using the offerings and art supplies, which participants had brought. (Gail Danchig who is running groups on altar-making suggested this ritual.) We started with a large wooden box which my friend had provided and profusely decorated the outside of it with materials such as handmade papers, flowers, buttons, snake skins and shells. We gave my friend the remaining treasures so that she could arrange the inside of her box herself. In the meantime, each woman described the story about what she brought to a scribe who transcribed all of them into a book to be kept inside the box.

This sandtray experience was quite meaningful to my friend and the other participants. It brought together into a temporary community a group of women who came from different parts of my friend's life, many of whom had never met before this event. We were able to provide a holding environment for our friend as well as to bear witness to the importance of this anniversary. The sandtray enabled us both to dip deeply into her self and to share ourselves with the group. It seemed quite important to my friend not to be the center of attention and for her friends to receive as well as give. The give and take inherent in a group sandtray was perfect for this occasion. The shifting nature of the sandtray, in which the world can constantly evolve, seemed to directly reflect our constantly changing world in which people appear and disappear in our lives. As in life, an important moment can be temporarily captured through the camera and through our joint sharing. The treasure box also gave my friend a concrete object to mark this important day in her life, her friends' caring and connection to her, and what she means to her friends.