

"Laughing Tiger"

Let me introduce you to Laughing Tiger. I first met him myself when my niece Jannie was about two years eight months old. One afternoon as I entered the door of her grandparents' house, I found my niece just about to leave with her grand-uncle. Jan did not greet me; if anything, she looked a little annoyed at my entrance, like the actress who is interrupted during rehearsal by a clumsy stage-hand who blunders on stage. Still ignoring me, Jan pulled on white cotton gloves and clasped her patent purse in her hand in a fine imitation of a lady leaving for an afternoon engagement. Suddenly she turned and frowned at something behind her. "No!" she said firmly. "No, Laughing Tiger. You cannot come with us for an ice-cream cone. You stay right here. But Jannie can come with us. Come along Jannie!" And she stepped out the door with her uncle, swinging her purse grandly.

I thought I saw a shabby and wistful beast slink across the hall and disappear in the shadows. When I composed myself I found the child's grandmother and said, "Who is Laughing Tiger?" "He is the latest one," said grandmother. We understood each other. There had been a steady influx of imaginary companions in this household and an even greater number in the child's own. There were chairs which were sacred to Jane and Tommy, places reserved at the table for rabbits, dogs, and bears, and the very substantial and real child who directed this menagerie often did not answer to her own name. I noticed now that the child's grandmother looked a little distraught, and I realized with sympathy that she must have had Laughing Tiger under foot for most of the afternoon.

"Why Laughing Tiger," I asked.

"He doesn't roar. He never scares children. He doesn't bite. He just laughs."

"Why couldn't he go for an ice-cream cone?"

"He has to learn to mind. He can't have everything his own way... Anyway that's the way it was explained to me."

At dinner that evening my niece did not take notice of me until I was about to sit down. "Watch out!" she cried. I rose quickly, suspecting a tack. "You were going to sit on Laughing Tiger!" she said sternly. "I'm sorry. Now will you please ask him to get out of my chair." "You can go now, Laughing Tiger," said Jan. And this docile and obedient beast got up from the table and left the company without a murmur.

Laughing Tiger remained with us for several months. As far as I was ever able to tell he led a solemn and uneventful life, with hardly anything to laugh about. He never demonstrated the ferocity of his species and gave no cause for alarm during his residence. He endured all the civilizing teachings of his mistress without rebelling or having a nervous breakdown. He obeyed all commands even when they were silly and contrary to his own interests. He was an irreproachable guest at the dinner table and a bulky but unobtrusive passenger in the family car. A few months after Jannie's third birthday he disappeared, and nobody missed him.

Now the time has come to ask, "Who was Laughing Tiger?" If we go way back to the beginning we find that Laughing Tiger was the direct descendent of the savage and ferocious beasts who disturb the sleep of small children. It is not a coincidence that Laughing Tiger sprang into existence at a time when Jannie was very much afraid of animals who could bite and might even eat up a little girl. Even the more harmless dogs of the neighborhood occasionally scared her. At such times she must have felt very small and helpless before the imagined danger. Now if you are very little and helpless before dangers, imaginary or real, there are not too many solutions handy, good solutions anyway. You could, for example, stay close to mother or daddy at all times and let them protect you. Some children do go through clinging periods and are afraid to leave a parent's side. But that's not a good solution. Or you could avoid going outside because of the danger of an encounter with a wild beast, or you could avoid going to sleep in order not to encounter dream animals. Any of these solutions are poor solutions because they are based on avoidance, and the child is not using his own resources to deal with his imaginary dangers. (Instead he is increasing his dependency upon his parents.)

Now there is one place where you can meet a ferocious beast on your own terms and leave victorious. That place is the imagination. It is a matter of individual taste and preference whether the beast should be slain, maimed, banished or reformed, but no one needs to feel helpless in the presence of imaginary beasts when the imagination offers such solutions.

Jan chose reform as her approach to the problem of ferocious animals. No one could suspect the terrible ancestry of Laughing Tiger once he set eyes on this bashful and cowardly beast. All of the dangerous attributes of tigers underwent a transformation in this new creation. Teeth? This tiger doesn't bare his teeth in a savage snarl; he laughs (hollowly, we think). Scare children? He is the one who is scared. Wild and uncontrolled? One word from his mistress and this hulk shrinks into his corner. Ferocious appetite? Well, if he exhibits good manners, he may have an ice-cream cone.

Now we suspect a parallel development here. The transformation of a tiger into an obedient and quiescent beast is probably a caricature of the civilizing process which the little girl is undergoing. The rewards and deprivations, the absurd demands which are made upon Laughing Tiger make as little sense to us as we view this comedy as the whims and wishes of the grown-up world make to a little girl. So we suspect that the reformed tiger is also a caricature of a little girl, and the original attributes of a tiger, its uncontrolled, impulsive and ferocious qualities represent those tendencies within the child which are under-going a transformation. We notice, too, that Laughing Tiger's mistress is more severe and demanding than the persons who have undertaken the civilizing of the little girl Jan, and we confirm the psychological truth that the most zealous crusaders against vice are the reformed criminals; the strength of the original impulse is given over to the opposing wish.

But let's get back to imagination and its solutions for childhood problems. Jan's imaginary tiger gives her a kind of control over a danger which earlier had left her helpless and anxious. The little boy who stalks tigers and bears with his home-made Tommy-gun and his own sound effects, is coming to terms with the Tiger problem in his own way. (I have the impression that little boys are inclined to take direct action on the tiger problem, while the work of reforming tigers is left to the other sex which has so long demonstrated its taste and talent for this approach.) Another very satisfactory approach to the tiger problem is to become a tiger. A very large number of small children have worked their way out of the most devilish encounters, outnumbered by ferocious animals on all sides, by disguising themselves as tigers and by out-roaring and out-threatening the enemy, causing consternation, disintegration and flight in his ranks.

Under ordinary circumstances, these practical experiences with invisible tigers, fought on home territory under the dining table, in the clothes closet, behind the couch, have a very

good effect upon the mental health of children. Laughing Tiger was a very important factor in the eventual dissolution of Jan's animal fears..."

[From Selma Fraiberg, "All About Witches, Ogres, Tigers, and Mental Health," chapter 1 in her The Magic Years: Understanding and Handling the Problems of Early Childhood (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959), pp. 16 - 19.]