

INTRODUCTORY NOTE TO THE READER: The Lost and Found

"I have come to suspect that in the absence of ritual, the soul runs out of its real nourishment," Malidoma Some'

Or, to put it another way, the loss of ritual leaves a hole in the heart of persons and society. In the place of solemn or celebratory markers of significance, our culture's iconic enactment is the disneyfied Super Bowl. Gang initiations replace rites of passage celebrated in community.

In my Ritual and Healing seminars and workshops over many years, I observe an increasing thirst for means of renewal and meaning-making. For years I envisioned an accessible and alive book on the topic. Maybe a summary from my seminars? *Not that interesting.* Maybe preach about lame rites of passage in our culture? Link the healing professions to the robes they have inherited from high priests and shamans?

Finally what excited this collection was to invite "everybody's" stories of ordinary and extraordinary experience with ritual, then see how they organize. The call for chapters asked the authors to explore how ritual attends a significant shift in meaning and perception in their life story. We asked, *In first-person narrative, describe an experience arising from ritual. The ritual setting may be a particular event or a longer practice that made " internal difference, / Where the Meanings, are . . ." for transformation and for psychological/physical healing.*

This collection of real-life stories intends to encourage readers about the accessibility of ritual for their own lives and practice.

The stories in reply are amazing in depth, span, and authenticity, from Nevada's Burning Man festival to Albanian mourning rituals. Just now I finished reading through everything before writing this introduction, and I'm astonished. The authors' experience with ritual in their own lives and practice are poignant about what's lost and found; they provide access and encouragement.

From the sacred to the secular, the stories also define ritual (rite, ceremony) and purposes with such richness that little on that account needs be said here. Metzner's chapter reviews contemporary ritual behaviors; Krippner's preface describes the types historically. He also provides a succinct definition of the more formal/sacred performance:

"ritual" . . . a prescribed, stylized, step-by-step, goal-directed performance of a mythological theme. It is "prescribed" by such practitioners as shamans, religious functionaries, or family or community elders.

The Oxford dictionary definition from the Latin *ritus* (religious) also stresses the “solemn” and sacred, but then goes on to note “social and psychological” convention, “the habitual.” That brings up the question I’m often asked, what’s the difference between ritual and the habitual.

Metzner’s description helps define:

Ritual is the purposive, conscious arrangement of a sequence of actions, at particular times and in particular places, according to specific intentions.

The habitual and routine (dinnertime, for example) might become ritualized by “conscious arrangement” and intention, as the Lawsons’ chapter describes. With purpose and specific intentions, Elva Beach ritualizes cleaning her house. The ordinary can manifest significance, given attention and awareness. Every day we re-enact “generational wisdoms” simply through our physical being and actions. Ritualized or not, our choice. We are standing in the place of those gone before us. Now it’s our turn, and responsibility, to be amazed at sunrise, a star-filled sky (or traffic). Interesting that both Cappadonna and Howell coin the term “Re-Membering” in the titles of their chapters.

Another question, “What’s ritual for?” came up at a backyard barbeque (which has its own ritual overtones) last week. I reflect that she might have been asking “what’s ritual good for anyway?” or, as a psychologist, “what psychological functions are served in ritual performance?”

Actually that’s one question. From several chapters, a simple answer would be that we are made to feel safe. I imagine how, at the dawn of consciousness, primordial people created rituals to create a predictable order out of chaos, to protect the ego against disintegration.

The unexpected range of “functions served” as experienced by these writers is remarkable in what they let go (anger, grief, innocence) and find. What they find is personal, but here’s a generalization. When ritual attention is paid, something creative happens. Ritual:

- Provides meaning, order, purpose, relationship.
- Helps with life-stage passages, transformation.
- Gives solidarity to cultural world-view and membership.
- Brings into life those things in our unconscious we do not ordinarily access.
- Re-minds that we belong to a supra-rational field of biological, cultural, psychological, and cosmological relationships.

“What’s healed?” by *the purposive, conscious arrangement of a sequence of actions, at particular times and in particular places, according to specific intentions?* Biologically, with a change in our attitude, our “molecules of emotion” can do wonders. But in sum, most healing rituals intend the restoration of harmony, balance and relationship, then the rest will take care of itself. Navajo

healing ceremonies, for example, locate the one to be healed (balanced) at various places in a depicted world of wholeness. Like the Tibetan prayer mandala, Navajo sand paintings in a healing ceremony are two-dimensional representations of a three-dimensional environment and multi-dimensional cosmology. Incantatory prayers call in powers from all the directions for the one to be healed.

When I woke up afterward, I never thought that my fall off the roof onto the rocks below was going to kill me. “Hospital staph” was now another consideration. From trauma hospital to the insured placement, nobody paid much attention to the tube that emergency stuck through my back ribs to drain a collapsed lung.

After awhile this staph infection, seemingly immune to antibiotics, comes to the attention of the chief surgeon. I notice the epilate on his hospital garb for daily rounds. He seems impatient to perform the inevitable. Every day he describes how he will do the lung cavity surgery. Split the rib cage and fold back. By this time the infection will be crystallized, so he’ll need to scrape the lungs before scrubbing them down, and then good luck with that.

Friends notice this nocebo (opposite of the positive placebo) effect taking me down. They arrange a healing ceremony in my hospital room, under the direction of Dr. Coyote (we’ll call him). He’s an M.D. friend who spent years of learning and practice in the Navajo Nation.

He asks that friends and family in the bedside circle bring a talisman object, imbued with their healing intentions, for an altar. Dr. Coyote circles up and smudges for performance of ritual attention and intentional outcome. Then here comes the surgeon. After an exchange that established that Coyote knows medical-speak, surgeon backs out, with a “Well, good luck with *that*” attitude. Then everybody spoke and then Coyote invoked powers of the six directions. Everything got prayed for, including the wheezing suction machine and the rose color in the tube from my lung, not to get cloudy. Lifted by Ken’s flute playing, I drifted over to the red rock canyons east of Gallup. All was as should be; beauty surrounds us. The ritual’s attitude adjustment charged everybody in the circle, and was the beginning of my recovery—with no surgery.

The call for “all my relations” in healing rituals also includes restoring relationship with our own unattended fears or gratuities, healing our separation from the underworld parts of the psyche. (Readers can journey there in chapters by Plotkin, Davis, Lukoff, Fleuridas, among others). The symbols, motifs, and patterns of ritual resonate with the archetypal. C.G. Jung even suggests that when we’re in distress, a corresponding archetype is called up and “brings about a spiritual preparation” in the form of “magical ceremonies, sacrifices, invocations, prayers, and suchlike” (*CW* V, p. 294).

The restoration of relationship may be social, cultural, psychological, cosmological, or all of the above. My friend Jack from the Institute told me that Jung witnessed elders at the top of Taos Pueblo whose job it was to make the sun come up for everybody. Emptying lungs into their hands, at the right moment they threw the breath of life into the void, praying for life's renewal. In return, the sunrise! Beyond cause and effect, In this symbolic function not a day could go by without the pueblo's active relationship with the source of life.

That something needs to be sacrificed for renewal seems an archetypal pattern. Surely that's inherent in our psychological development as we leave one stage of life behind and move to the next (attended by intentional rites of passage, one hopes). But this knowledge of sacrifice necessary for new life, inherent in our psychology and in nature, can be misconstrued and made literal. The Aztecs and Mayans are not the only cultures manifesting blood sacrifice. It's rooted in mythologies Norse to Egyptian, in religions pre-Christian and Christian. And in ritual abuse. Scarification and genital mutilation come to mind. As Metzner emphasizes, ritual itself (with its structured elements) is neutral.

And at best, an element of sacrifice or suffering, at least some physical engagement, seems important in full-blown rituals of transformation and rites of passage. To get out of ordinary space and time we need to get out of our heads. Wes Chester preoccupies juvenile delinquents with power tools. Several writers describe wilderness rites of passage, vision-quest fasting, participation in indigenous ceremonies—Beck in a sweat lodge, Escamilla in the grave for an overnight of attention. Whether self-inflicted or in strict religious practice, deprivation (sacrifice, cousin of suffering) often comes up as necessary to obtain clarity of vision, even access to the sacred.

About ritual and the sacred, I'll follow up on the earlier mention (the Oxford definition of ritual rooted in the religious, the "solemn and sacred"). Many of the chapters incorporate orthodox religious faith. More of them find the sacred in nature, and some "make" the sacred through ritual. Is the sacred something to be *found* (in nature or a deity), so that we can ritually go there and bring it back? Or do we *make* the sacred? -- ritualize a stone wall, a flag, a sunrise, a pilgrimage destination, a relationship-- so that when we go there we can participate in the sacred also. Perhaps the numinosity of the sacred locates in our collective unconscious, waits for the tools of ritual process to bring to the light of consciousness this inherent human trait.

If you want to go further into these mysteries, I recommend Mircea Eliade's ***The Sacred and the Profane***. He suggests that sacred ritual collapses time so that we not only enact but participate in our beginnings, in an "eternal return." To him, the sacred contains all reality/value. Other things contain reality to the extent that they participate in the sacred.

Now back to the beginnings of this Introduction, about the lost and found of ritual in our society. Perhaps everyone in our informational age (whose time is linear and goes off into the future), perhaps everyone still carries nostalgia for the loss of significant rituals. Our clocks are set to the cycle of seasonal markers. Waiting for rain, waiting out long nights for the return of light, would be life-long and primary in ritual attention to a hunter-gatherer or an agrarian culture. Postmodern we, with a flick, make light and heat or switch our identities. For better or worse, some things are lost.

Not that ritual will ever go away. These writers describe the plural emergences that fit to our era. And in our times still each person's childhood has a story-line punctuated with symbolism and ceremony, ritual elements (including suffering) and community recognition. We each remember significant "emergences" on our path toward adolescence. But as the last two chapters describe, without community-recognized rites of passage we have 30-year-old adolescents and youth "at risk" *and all kinds of social problems then ensue*.

My own growing up "country" was a pre-modern, even tribal, culture. Always at the mercy of weather and seasons, regular mealtimes with food we raised and prayed over. Chores. A one-room country school that was also the community center for seasonal "programs" in which every kid performed, and everybody-- even the bachelor farmers-- attended and applauded. Every Fall a time to ready crop and livestock to show and be judged at the Russell County Fair (and, the carnival!). Church on Sunday, catechism on Saturday, where I most sincerely studied "The Office of Keys and Confession" as passage to the sacred. This path through adolescence a matter of following things in their right order-- calving, weaning, and butchering; planting and harvesting. I was privileged to have been embedded in those natural cycles and in community, that reference.

But as with all our various childhood markers, they are lost. Now we all are left to find significance and renewals through *intentional acts concerning vital, existential human concerns* (Krippner). That's the *why* of ritual. Each person's ordinary and extraordinary healing story in this collection describes the *how*.

I hope that you the reader enjoy the variety and depth of these experiences shared. I hope you will be encouraged to find (or more appreciate your practice of) ritual to enrich you own life with psychological and physical healing. Pass it on . . . especially to teenagers. Share your story at www.ritualandhealing.com

Good Road! Don Eulert