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Notes from Plenary and Workshop Presentations
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“Ritual at the Crossroads:



**human-divine encounter
in liminal and postmodern realities”**

Since the conference theme had to do with “crossroads,” and I was at the conference to provide worship design, leadership, plenary and workshop presentations, I wanted to look at ritual (a crossroads of “divine-human encounter”) and the particular crossroads at which college students find themselves.

“divine-human encounter”

We talked about what worship is...

A place of experiencing and acknowledging the power of encounter with God
A move from the ordinary to the extraordinary... a place to soar with the Spirit
A time to encounter the presence of Jesus... the invitation to reside fully in the moment

And...

A place to “speak about the deepest things we know right away.”

We come to worship yearning to be touched by a Word of God for our lives...

Something that is “M-M-Good” (meaningful and memorable)

[see Marcia McFee, *The Worship Workshop*]

“liminality”

Ritual theorist Victor Turner described the “liminal state” as a time of “betwixt and between” (transition)...

We are no longer what we were but not yet what we are becoming



The moment of encounter with students in campus ministry is a time of great “liminality” in their lives...

Take a moment to think of what college students are “betwixt and between” about.....

Ritualizing takes place in order to move us through liminal states....

We look for structures and symbols that interpret and guide experience...

and help us make connections.



Three human-divine needs

The Need for Ritual

Creation is made up of patterns, cycles, seasons.

We, too, search out patterns for our lives.

These patterns help us identify and/or re-create ourselves, order/reorder our interactions, open us up to discovery.

Rituals can be familiar patterns...

And rituals can also contain surprising elements.

In ritual, the divine-human encounter is intensified.

Here's one definition:

“Ritualizing transpires as animated persons enact formative gestures in the face of receptivity during crucial times in founded places.” - Ronald Grimes

In other words, what makes “ritual” (or ritualizing... a more preferred active term)

different from “everyday” activity

is that we intentionally do things that facilitate deep reflection and heighten our awareness and experience of the Holy.

We do this in times and places that are made special -

significant life moments, special day of the week -

and in spaces that are made special -

either because they ARE special already or because we make them special through the way we prepare the space.



The Need for Symbol

The Bible is full of times when “things” point beyond themselves to the Holy. Rainbows, burning bushes, doves, olive branches, etc.

We, too, are what I call “meaning mongers.” In fact, our brains are wired to search for meaning and to understand sometimes abstract concepts in concrete ways.



One of my new favorite shows is “Miami Ink” (Bravo channel)... about tattoo artists in Miami. It is a “reality show” but more than simply being about the lives of the artists, it is a wonderful chronicle of people finding ways to symbolize their experience and relationships as they decide what kind of tattoos they want based on what the art symbolizes about their life and who they are. Our identities are shaped by experience and relationship. We have life “narratives” and symbols help us tell that story.

The tattoos that I got on my 40th birthday are, in the first layer of meaning, simple signs of the words “peace” and “passion” written in the Chinese language - words I often use as a signature line and in benedictions. But as symbols, they are layered with meaning related to a rite of passage - the passage of time, my own understanding of the temporal nature of my own life, and the relationship I have with my Chinese stepmother who created the designs with me. The tattoo itself becomes an accessible and tangible “presence” of those larger-than-life things.

All symbols start out as ordinary things that become extraordinary when layers of meaning are attached to them. Anything can function as a symbol - any element; visual, word, tangible, etc. Symbol (*symbolein - to throw together*) acts to fit together both the element serving as symbol and the context in which it resides. We only have ordinary things to help us grasp ideas of the Holy. In communal ritual, common objects become common symbols at the crossroads of our faith “narrative” and our life “narratives.”



The Need for Relationship

We know that God had need for relationship with humanity because of the in-dwelling of the Holy in the flesh and blood of Jesus. We too need relationship.

Rituals help us embody (“try on for size”) the kind of relationships that God intends... “right relationship.”



As college students face “liminal” realities in their lives, campus ministry worship can provide a place to ritualize those life passages, providing symbols that “crystallize” the crossroads between life narratives and the narratives of the faith, and helping them to put into practice (“try on for size”) ways of being in right relationship as they are forming their identities and maturing their faith.

Ritual at the Crossroads in liminal and “postmodern realities”...

But there are other crossroads to deal with in ritualizing in the campus ministry context. What does it mean to ritualize in “post-modern” realities?

You’ll notice I’ve used the plural - “realities.” I do not claim to know “a” reality called “post-modern” but simply acknowledge that there are some things that present themselves differently than when many campus ministers were themselves in college.

Many authors on post-modernity speak in terms such as: post-linear, post-centralized authority, post-certainty, post-textual, and post-rational (not that the things behind the hyphen are non-existent, but they don’t hold the power they once did).

Here are some thoughts....

“post-modern ritualizing”

- **post-linear (multi-directional)**

Our opening worship featured several prayer stations and time to wander - making your own choices about how you would spend your time praying. There were strong symbols having to do with the message proclaimed... journeying into the unknown with God and each other. But you were left to follow the Spirit’s lead in your response.

- **post-centralized authority (highly participatory, interactive)**

Our closing worship featured “proclamation of the Word” that only came about because of the communal sharing of beloved scriptures and wisdom (“What I know is this...”). Contributions from “the many” are valued.

- **post-certainty (authenticity, questions, reflections, dialogue)**

The “Good News” is proclaimed, but more important than pinned-down answers is the invitation to find and ask provocative questions. Ambiguity is not feared but is seen as an opportunity to continue the quest for understanding. The end of my sermon on the first night was filled with questions... “How do we struggle with what it means to face an unknown future in an uncertain world?” The Good News was that God calls us into community where we support each other and struggle “together” -- which we did for the next three days.

- **post-textual (image rich)**

Emerging generations are doing what all “emerging” generations have done throughout history... they are pushing the boundaries of what preceded them by looking for different ways to communicate, to be, to relate. Especially in a Protestant heritage, where our rituals have been so text-based, we now see a move by emerging generations to incorporate image-rich and fully embodied ways of communicating. Tex Sample (*Powerful Persuasion*) speaks of the difference between “critical distance” and “critical immersion.” Rather than “looking on” at text in order to encounter information, emerging generations are being “immersed in” environments in which to soak up an experience. Screens are replaced with projections on walls, ceilings, floors. Musical leadership is not necessarily or always front and center, but there to create a sound-environment in which to worship. As we encountered the song “Wade in the Water” on the second night of the conference, we wandered in the aisles, the balcony, the chancel among the bowls of water in a candle-lit space. Rather than simply hearing or singing a song about crossing the Jordan, we waded through it, allowing our own bodily experience to become part of the “crossroads” of life and faith.

- **post-rational (mystery)**

Again, we aren't saying that the rational is taking a vacation. But we now understand the absolute interconnectedness of the rational, the emotional, and the mysterious as important to our ways of knowing. "To know" or "to believe" comes in many ways... and the experiential and aesthetic are valid and important in the process. When we participated in a communal drumming experience, we did reflect on the wisdom that was coming from our experience of doing that. But just as valid as the verbal reflection was the "feeling" created when we all found the groove, when the crescendo of the drums filled us and when we experienced the profound and vibrant silence that came after we all hit the last note together. The feeling of being "in synch" was as physiologically profound and wise as the words that eventually came to describe it.



The Primal Patterns

Speaking of rhythms, we also talked about the fact that we are all "marching to different drummers." Yes, there are things that make experience for this college generation different than others. But we must always acknowledge that there is great diversity of experience even within each generation. We looked at my research into physiologically differing patterns of movement in persons to help us understand why different kinds of worship is going to literally "resonate" differently among students. For more on this, please download the document at the top of my "links" page called "Rhythms of Liturgy and Life" at my website.

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My workshops continued the conversation about “M-M-Good” worship. I called the workshop **“Close Encounters of the Worshipful Kind.”** While this title evokes a move that was “before the time” of many campus students, what postmoderns do know is the power of worship as encounter with God, not just simply a lot of talking about God. Experiential worship draws on all the senses: the Word is seen, heard, felt, touched, tasted.

We looked at Ronald Grimes’ “premises” for ritual. I believe these are insightful about how worship goes from the “ordinary” to the “extraordinary” as we create ritual that speaks of the deepest things we know.

(see Grimes’ book *Deeply Into the Bone: Reinventing Rites of Passage*)

- the premise of “processual primacy” - the process which takes place in the ritual will be more formative than the content (pay attention to the “from this.... to that” aspect)
- the premise of enactment and embodiment - action is the primary form of engagement; talk is secondary (pay attention to posture, gesture, placement, objects and actions)
- the premise of ordinariness - ritual takes the ordinary and makes it extraordinary with extraordinary attentiveness (pay attention to the power of the everyday used as ritual symbol)
- the premise of attunement - be responsive to the environment and acknowledge the interdependence of others (pay attention to the NOW... we are a particular community at a particular time/place)
- the premise of receptivity - receptivity is open, empty waiting which requires exertion and attentiveness, not passivity (create invitations to expect something will happen, a congregational “posture” of leaning into it rather than sitting back)
- the premises of silence and stillness - there should be some of this in even the noisiest of celebrations (this is one of the best ways to “soak up” the moment)
- the premise of mystery - mystery is wonder coupled with reverence. It is an outcome of being attentive to whatever presents itself (create an atmosphere of the mystical - name the Holy)
- the premise of play - play is detachment from “ends” and productivity and focuses on a willingness to explore (revel in the moment)
- the premise of imagination - ritualizing is a form of imaginative activity (create opportunities to dream, to name the future)
- the premise of improvisation - we have no choice but to improvise and we have no choice but to structure what we improvise (finding good structures in which to improvise is more important than simply deciding on content)
- the premise of criticism - good ritualizing comes with experience; learn from what works and what doesn’t; but don’t criticize prematurely or over-criticize (we are human, if ritual is “perfect” it isn’t revealing the crossroads of real life and the holy)

Worshipping with “every ounce of our being” - the multisensory experience

Another way we can look at our diversity is through the lens of Howard Gardner’s Multiple Intelligence Theory.

Our worship must pay attention to the many ways take in information:
(for more on this see McFee, *The Worship Workshop*)

verbal-linguistic
musical-rhythmic
logical-mathematical
visual-spatial
bodily-kinesthetic
personal (inter- and intra-)

At each workshop, we determined that in worship in our ministry settings, we could be more inclusive of those whose intelligence relies heavily on the visual and the bodily-kinesthetic. And we affirmed that with every generation, we need to pay attention to all of these categories.

“Layering” - Think Like a Filmmaker!

When designing worship, I keep in mind the “3 V’s”

Verbal
Visual
Visceral

(see my book for more on this)

So... how does all we hear (including words, music, sounds, silence) help to tell the story?
How does what we see (colors, textures, lighting, objects, seating arrangement)
help to tell the story?

How does what we DO help to tell the story?
(or my favorite question: “how can we embody what we proclaim?”)

I want you to begin to think like a filmmaker as you find ways to tell the “Story.”

What dialogue is crucial?
How does music set a tone, a mood?
How are the visuals painting a picture?
EVEN how is the timing of the motion enhancing the story?

Campus ministry “ritualizing”

- **regularly-scheduled worship**
- **special “event” worship/”altaring”**
- **drum circle** (google “Arthur Hull”)
- **roundtable ministry** (google “JustPeace”)

Finally... how do you do this creative stuff without getting burned out??!

Share the task! Plan with a team!

Get more students involved in the planning and leading!

(we did a brainstorming process in the workshop that you can find more about in my book...)

Plan seasonally/thematically!

Use an over-arching theme over a series of services
so you aren't creating all new visuals, etc. every time you worship!

Keep it simple!

When you brainstorm, you will have more ideas than you can do.
Keep the main thing the main thing!

Plan ahead!

You can't start to plan something a day before
and have time to do the creative things you'll think of!
Schedule a brainstorming session at least four weeks before the season...
have a fun brainstorming and resource-gathering retreat at the beginning of the semester.



Campus ministers.... You INSPIRED ME! I am looking forward to engaging more with campus ministry in my own work. Thank you!

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