

**Engaging Conflict:
The Role of Ritual When Two or Three are Gathered
Gathering of JustPeace 2006**

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“Ritual & Symbol”

*[these notes are abbreviated and without, of course,
the experiential pieces of the presentation that defy placement on paper]*

**What ritual is NOT:
“Business as usual”**

A popular usage of the term “ritual” pejoratively associates it with “bad ritual....”
In our discussion of the role of ritual, what we do not mean is “business as usual” (rote, unthinking, dry, ossified, without intention, lifeless, etc).

**Ritual:
container for
the “deepest things we know”**

Ritual is a place where the ordinary becomes extraordinary.
(See “Metaphoraging” in Marcia McFee, *The Worship Workshop*, Abingdon Press).
My friend Nina Reeves can turn a simple lunch into a ritual moment. The food arrives and we silently lift our plates upward together... a simple gesture that instantly creates a connection between this moment, this food, and our thankfulness - the “sacred” becomes instantly “palpable” (or “more real”). Then she looks into my eyes and says, “Let us speak about the deepest things we know right away.” Ritual produces a container for conversation to take on “depth dimensions.” What we say, see, hear, and do is not careless. And we are opened to the layers that exist in one short “moment.” We are invited to the core things that underlie a simple gesture, a simple glance, a simple word.

What some theorists have said about ritual:

Tom Driver, *Liberating Rites*

“Rituals are expressions of human agency... the power of humans to act...
[ritual] mobilizes human energy and focuses it in collaborative action.”

Ritual gives needed direction... directionlessness produces a feeling of the threat of doom.

The business of rituals: establishing order (and “re-ordering”)
 fostering community (“acts of belonging”)
 affecting transformation (moving and mobilizing)

[I would add “opening to Mystery and Being”... absence and presence)

Barbara Myerhoff: *Number Our Days*

Ritual is a way of “enacting our identities; making visible hidden things of the heart in public performance.” In ritual, “doing is believing...” rituals are “like a vessel - anything can be poured in...” (and so we must be careful to understand what is being given power through ritual expression)

Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*

ritualization = a strategic way of acting that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian, activities...

[by way of translation - a way of “setting apart” ordinary activities in a way that they become extraordinary...]

...for creating and privileging a qualitative distinction between the 'sacred' and the 'profane,' and for ascribing such distinctions to realities thought to transcend the powers of human actors.

[again... more plainly, the “holy” has something to do with why these ordinary things become extraordinary... we see them through a particular lens - in light of their sacred worth. For example, we may have seen a particular couple look at each other or hold hands many times. But as they take vows in a ritual, their looking at each other and holding hands takes on a depth dimension - it is “set apart” as something extraordinary, sacred, and we understand this moment, these actions to be imbued with the “holy”]

Ronald Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*

“Ritualizing transpires as animated persons enact formative gestures in the face of receptivity during crucial times in founded places.” *[Let’s unpack this.... As you read each one, consider the circle process and how it is an act of “ritualizing” - a “dynamic symbolic act” of mutuality and reconciliation]*

“Ritualizing

[Rather than use the word “ritual” which can be construed as “static,” Grimes uses “ritualization to connote that it is primarily a bodily activity - a “happening” - utilizing both tradition and improvisation]

transpires

[Rituals are “events - not artifacts!” They are living and breathing (trans - spirare = “to breathe across.” We can create “containers” called ritual, but ultimately we cannot “contain” what happens there.]

as animated persons

[To be “animated” is to “enspirit.” There is an invitation to “show forth” ... for the inner to become outer as persons open...]

enact formative gestures

[Rituals are enacted in gesture - they are embodied states of being - “dynamic symbolic acts” - and they shape/ form and re-shape/re-form us.]

in the face of receptivity

[Ritualizing requires vulnerability, an opening of persons. “The more deeply an enactment is received, the more an audience becomes a congregation.”

I (Marcia) believe that “expectation” is required for receptivity, and when this happens, we look, listen, sense with a different and greater intensity that creates opportunity for insight.]

during crucial times

[Naming and recognizing context is part of ritualizing. Driver says time is “concentrated and thereby consecrated.”]

in founded places.”

[Boundaries of sacred space are created and “set-apart” - whether by geography, architecture, objects or simply by bodies themselves.

David Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics and Power*

“Transmission of messages through ritual dramatization is much more powerful than communication through verbal declaration....”

In my translation,

“How can we not only talk about hope, reconciliation and right relationship, but embody these things in our rituals?”

Rituals are where we “try on for size” those things we desire to create.

Kertzer also says, “The greater the transition, in general, the more elaborate the rites.”

The circle process usually takes place in times of “great transition” for the persons involved. Kertzer’s notion of the need for “dramatization” or, in other words, vital symbolic acts, points us to the importance of the opening ritual of circle processes, careful attention to objects used as a talking piece or centerpiece and the need to find powerful ways to let these things “speak” throughout the process.

[Note: for more on the following concepts as discussed at the JustPeace gathering, **please refer to my article, “Ritual Formation: Liturgical Practices and the Practice of Peacebuilding”** in *Conflict and Communion*, Tom Porter, ed.]

“Liminality”

A word that describes a state of being that is

- a “threshold”
- “betwixt and between”
- some aspect of relationship has changed, yet we are not yet to a new understanding or configuration of relationship

**We need ritual leaders for “rites of passage” through the liminality of conflict.
We need those who can “get us to a good place in a good way.”**

The Neurophysiology of Ritual Practices

Forming and Re-Forming: Jesus as “Shape-Shifter”

Symbols: the primary “language of ritual”

“Humans are a symbolizing, conceptualizing, meaning-seeking animal.... Symbolic activity is an attempt to provide orientation in our ‘drive to make sense....’ Symbols are a tangible formulation of notions from experience fixed in perceptible forms... vehicles for a concept.”

Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*

Mary Collins, *Worship: Renewal to Practice*, describes symbols as “transformers” (the electrical kind). She says that concepts of the holy are simply more wattage than we can grasp. Symbols help us find a way, a conduit, for describing and grasping indescribable and ineffable power. Symbols help the mysterious become more tangible - a “wattage” we can use.

Symbols not only “point to” something - they make that something “truly present.” For instance, circles of restorative justice not only point to a desire for mutuality, circles are an act of mutuality. The “dynamic symbolic act” participates in that to which it points.

Symbols (and their use in ritual) are especially powerful because they are:

Multivalent: Symbols are open enough to mean different things at the same time. We are empowered to gifts of interpretation and insight from various perspectives.

Connectors and Animators of Experience: Symbols draw together an element (object, visual, words, gesture) with a context.

Layered with meanings: Symbols have a “first order meaning” (water is H₂O and we use it to wash, etc.), but they also have second order meanings (water speaks in our common faith story of cleansing, renewing, baptizing) AND they have diverse meanings to individuals based on our own experience of them (my own experience of nearly being washed out to sea).

Ambiguous: The use of symbols and ritual makes it possible for a community to *experience* a bond, a connection, without requiring uniformity of belief - to have solidarity without absolute consensus - we experience common participation and emotional involvement, not specific rationalizations (See Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics and Power* for much more on this important concept). Ritual is not a “fix” in and of itself for processes of reconciliation. But having had ritual *experiences* of common bonds and shared symbolic vocabulary, our verbal discourse can then take on more safe and respectful tones and processes (the basis for the importance of worship in the midst of our “holy conferencing.”)

A way “in”: Symbols help us find vocabulary for deepening our questions and conversation.

Ritual and Rhythm

Note: Through the process of community drumming, the group reflected on the rhythms of relationship, of community, of love and of being “out of rhythm.” Some ideas expressed:

- sometimes some percussion “voices” have to listen in silence
in order for other “voices” to be heard
- the variety of percussion voices brought depth of gifts of sound, adding to the whole
- it is difficult to find one’s own rhythm if overpowering rhythms are left to dominate all the time
 - safety must be created in order to try to “entrain” with other rhythms
 - a good structure is necessary in order to hear all voices
 - drumming together as community gave some support and confidence to join in
- if the “law of entrainment” says that rhythms will “synch up,” we must be conscious of what rhythms we are surrounding ourselves with (the concept of “colonization of our bodies”)

Primal Patterns

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[See also, "Rhythms of Liturgy and Life" downloadable from www.marciamcfee.com or Marcia's dissertation "Primal Patterns: Ritual Dynamics, Ritual Resonance, Polyrhythmic Strategies and the Formation of Christian Disciples"]

We are dynamic energy systems constituted by our rhythms - from the pulse of neurons and muscles that move us through the world, to the rhythms of our relationships with each other and with the holy. Ritual is one of the places where we crystallize and express in symbolic ways our experience of being a part of the sacred, cosmic, rhythmic dance of life.

"The body is one big rhythm machine!" We are all dancing physical entities. And yet, we are not all "dancing to the same drummer," so to speak. From our earliest rhythmic patterns of breathing as infants, to our basic brain waves and the patterned manifestations of our fingerprints, we are living distinctly varied rhythmic lives. The rhythmic "frequencies" through which we experience the world-our perspectives-are varied.

Starting in the 1930's, with the bulk of the research done from the 1970's to today, a group of kinesiologists began to study the way people moved... the dynamics through which they moved through their lives. Up until then, human movement had been analyzed, but the focus was really the differences between human movement and that of other species. But *these* particular scientists were interested in the ways people did similar things but with diverse energy. They came to realize that people's muscles fire off in different ways. Our brains and muscles - the "neuromuscular connection" or "neuromuscular excitation patterns" - do not all work with the same dynamics of energy.

"We all have a kinesthetic vocabulary" We all have "home patterns" - ways of moving that bring us the most ease and power. Like the best sense of the word "home," a home pattern is one in which we find our greatest ease of expression and resonance in terms of energetic identity. Although we use all the patterns, our home pattern is one in which we feel most like "ourselves." And because we now are beginning to understand better the intimate connection between the workings of our bodies with our minds and spirits, what we begin to see is that our ways of moving in the world also become ways that we perceive the world, deal with relationships [including conflict], and even how we experience God.

The Patterns

[Note: Each of the following patterns were experienced through moving and singing. Reflections on each pattern centered around questions like, "In dealing with conflict in circle and other processes of mediation, when is this particular dynamic pattern of energy needed? When does an override of this pattern hurt the process?"]

“THRUSTERS”

sudden,

ballistic

neuromuscular patterns

of movement

strong sense of direction

getting somewhere

“Just do it! Go for it!”

THE GIFTS OF THRUST

decisive movement toward a goal

the dynamic of change, of purpose

rally for action

sense of a “mighty force” at work

this is a God of action;

a transformational God;

a God “on the move” who makes a way out of no way

OVERRIDES OF THRUST

unbalanced, it can drown out some voices - marginalized voices

keeps us from also experiencing the “still small voice”

opportunities for collaboration and relationship may be missed

victory at all costs is not victory

“SHAPERS”

carefully placed movement

ability to “hold” and “contain”; stillness of pose

focus on proper structure and form

“A place for everything and everything has its place.”

THE GIFTS OF SHAPE

helps “set apart” ritual time and space

defining and clarifying; easily repeatable

offers a sense of “the way things are” when all else seems to be falling apart

virtues of fidelity and endurance

this image is an eternal, steadfast, enduring God

OVERRIDES OF SHAPE

unbalanced, it can err on the side of the “correct” to the detriment of what is called for in the moment

lack of play and improvisation

can avoid the heights and depths of joy and sorrow;

ritual ceases to mirror the ebb and

flow of life - to feel relevant

“SWINGERS”

fluctuating movement

highly interactive; multidirectional

personal; direct relating

“Get in the swing; swing on by; mood swing”

THE GIFTS OF SWING

strongly interactive, playful, emotional
the language of celebration, of creativity
gives focus to a sense of community
celebrates process more than form or goal;
“it takes as long as it takes”
image of God as relational
a God of hope and possibilities

OVERRIDES OF SWING

unbalanced, it can get stuck in its back and forth
to the detriment of going deeper or going forward
can get too self-focused
lacks understanding of “big picture”

“HANGERS”

sustained and freeflowing

willingness to “meander”

indirect in focus;

sees the big picture

“go with the flow”

THE GIFTS OF HANG

this is the language of “being”
a sense of going deeper; of mystery and awe
comfort with silence and prolonged reflection
a God who is ever-present at the
deepest core of our being

OVERRIDES OF HANG

unbalanced, it can be difficult to initiate action or take a stand
avoidance of a solid “place”
without structure, it can read as indecisive or unorganized
can lack needed personal interaction