

# Ritual

from Trauma Healing and Transformation, Chapter 5, p. 190-199  
—Patricia Mathes Cane, Ph.D.

From earliest times, the clan, the group, the community gathered together to ritualize significant moments of life, death, and passage. With the advance of modern culture the focus of ritual shifted away from the circle of community, and the power to lead ritual was taken over by priests or leaders. In some places traditional rituals and gatherings in community were lost for a variety of reasons—the migration of refugees, the break up of local communities by war and violence, the power of some churches who were against popular rituals and gatherings, and the “advance of modern ways”. In many cultures ritual has been a resource for people to deal with grief, loss, and emotional pain. Rituals and gatherings in the circle have provided ways to reclaim the healing power of community and to make meaning out of difficult moments that people have experienced individually or as a group. There are so many positive benefits for grassroots people who reclaim their power and right to gather together for ritual. In his book *Ritual: Power, Healing, and Community*, Malidoma Somé of the Dagara tribe of Burkina Faso, West Africa, says: “The abandonment of ritual can be devastating. From the spiritual viewpoint, ritual is inevitable and necessary if one is to live. . .Where ritual is absent, the young ones are restless or violent, there are no real elders, and the grown-ups are bewildered. The future is dim.”

The power of the gathered circle is recognized by Christina Baldwin in *Calling the Circle: the First and Future Culture*. Baldwin describes meeting in a circle as challenging five thousand years of enculturation. In the gathering “power will be shared, opened up, dealt with differently, so that we may find a new way of being together.” The ritual circle also offers a way of moving from being a passive spectator to being a creator of the ritual experience. Maria Harris, writing on feminist spirituality, says that it is important to create rituals that “do include us, speak for us, and place us in the position of celebrants and full participants in the community work of acknowledging the continuing Presence of Goodness gifting our lives.” This section deals with the elements of ritual, the creation of ritual, and some plans for rituals focused on healing and transformation of the community. These ideas are offered to inspire groups to look to their own cultural resources and to talk with their grandmothers and elders about what was traditionally done in their own communities.

## The Nature of Ritual

Each culture has its own ceremonies and rituals to celebrate special moments during the year and significant occasions in life. Most often we think of “ritual” as a prescribed order of religious ceremony, like worship or liturgy that follow rubrics and ancient traditions to call upon and connect with the divine. Rituals elevate all involved to the realm of sacred mysteries beyond and to the spiritual connection with the ancestors. Rupert Sheldrake in *The Rebirth of Nature*, says that “through ritual participation, the past becomes present. The present participants are linked to all those who have gone before—to the ancestors, and ultimately to the primal creative moment the ritual commemorates.” Through morphic resonance, an

energy field is created by the ceremony, bringing the past into the present. Participants step outside of space and time, in union with all who have ever been part of the ritual act.

Besides formal religious ceremonies, there are also many other kinds of rituals that touch the ordinary moments of life. One definition of the word “ritual” is “a pattern of activity that is repeated over and over again”, like a ritual afternoon cup of tea, a ritual bath, or the way some families eat their main meal together. Elinor Gadon in *The Once and Future Goddess* describes another aspect of the word: “Ritual’ comes from ‘rtu’, Sanskrit for menses. The earliest rituals were connected to the woman’s monthly bleeding. . . Women’s periodic bleeding was a cosmic event, like the cycles of the moon and the waxing and waning of the tides. We have forgotten that women were the conduit to the sacred mystery of life and death.” With mindful attention to the many human and ordinary moments of life, ritual can imbue them with extraordinary meaning. Mindfulness transforms many routines into rituals. Christina Feldman and Jack Kornfield in *Stories of the Spirit, Stories of the Heart* write: “Our growth as conscious, awake human beings is marked not so much by grand gestures and visible renunciations as by extending loving attention to the minutest particulars of our lives. Every relationship, every thought, every gesture is blessed with meaning through the wholehearted attention we bring to it.”

With these different aspects of ritual in mind, it is important to begin to look at how ritual is a part of your life. And if it is missing, to take some time to talk to grandmothers, members of the family and community to discover what are the traditions and rituals of your heritage. Claiming traditions and rituals can be a wonderful way to reconnect with community and to bring healing to many wounds of the heart. There are a number of books now available that offer different kinds of life rituals for both the individual and the community. To keep within the focus of this book the discussion here will be limited to communal rituals of healing and transformation, with only a brief consideration of personal rituals.

## **Personal Rituals**

Many of the great religious traditions have brought the sacred dimension to daily moments of life. In the process of healing, mindful attention to daily routines can bring a sense of energy and renewal to body, mind, and spirit. The following are some simple suggestions of daily rituals that can bring the sacred dimension to life.

- Candle Rituals: Lighting a candle to connect with the Light within—at a difficult moment, a time of distress or depression, at a time of joy, for a dinner celebration, to honor the memory of a loved one.
- Cleansing Rituals to cleanse negative energy or difficult memories—a ritual prayer; a ritual shower or bath; a cleansing diet or fast; use of water, salt, music or incense to clear negative energy.
- Forgiveness Rituals to forgive and let go of the past—a prayer, a ritual gesture with another person.
- Thanksgiving Rituals to acknowledge the blessings of life—a prayer, candle, flowers, gesture.
- Rituals of Remembrance to connect with— persons who have died, events of the past, special moments.

- Creation of a Sacred Space—an altar or some simple place in the home where images, flowers, photos of loved ones, momentos, elements of nature and written prayers may be reverently placed.

## **The Elements of Ritual**

Rituals, both personal and communal, may include many different parts. The following is a simple formula of elements to help in the creation of rituals:

- The invocation—or calling upon the sacred to be present. This can take the form of a song, a formal prayer, or a gesture, such as lighting a candle or burning incense. The invocation creates the field of energy into which all are drawn.

- The action of the ritual—deals with the reason why the community is gathered together, or why the ritual is being done. This part may include any or all of the following:

- readings from sacred texts, poems, or writings of group members

- music and songs

- dance and symbolic gestures

- a prayer of petition, asking for the benefit of the community

- a communion with food

- a commitment of the community.

- A prayer of thanksgiving and blessing—through gestures or words. The community gives thanks for the gifts of life and for what has been received, and receives a blessing to carry on the journey.

- A concluding action or gesture—to close the sacred space and mark the moment of return to daily life.

- Elements to use—water, fire, candles, incense, flowers, food, sound (such as bells) salt, oil.

## **How to Plan a Ritual**

Rituals can be easily planned on different occasions for the community by an individual or committee. To truly touch the lives and energies of the group, I find it is best to include a number of people in the planning of and carrying out of the ritual. Some of the following questions may be helpful to guide the planning:

- What is the reason or purpose of the ritual or the theme for the gathering of the community?

- What action(s) will best represent the purpose or theme of the ritual?

- What ritual elements do the people already have in the community that you could draw upon—songs, prayers, readings, poetry, dance, physical elements, and images, etc?

- Who in the community are the dancers, poets, speakers, singers who could be drawn into the action?

- What elements of ritual would best serve the community and touch the lives of the people?

- What kind of practice or preparation is needed to do the ritual? The simpler the better if at all possible. Usually the simplest rituals are the ones that most deeply touch the people. A lot of preparation can get in the way or can block people from being moved by what is most important.

Be well prepared with all of the elements to be used. One or two persons should take responsibility for the process of the ritual, to give people cues for readings or songs, and to give the group a sense of confidence. Spontaneous rituals are also wonderful if a group is comfortable with that. Some of the best rituals I have ever participated in or have led flowed with grace and spontaneity. Before starting I had a general plan in mind, but let it go as the group's energy moved with spirit creating a ritual much richer than I could have ever planned. Keeping in mind the stages or elements to be included (p. 192), gives some form and direction to the flow.

The following pages will give examples of various rituals of healing and transformation that have been created by different groups. You can use these rituals as models, or even better, be inspired by them to create your own. Each person has the capacity to bring the sacred to the ordinary and extraordinary moments of life.

### **The Healing Circle Visualization**

The following guided visualization may be done as a ritual or to conclude a workshop or ceremony. The words may be adapted to the culture of the participants. The middle of the circle can be a sacred space with images, symbols, flowers, and a burning candle. Invite participants to form a circle. Soft music may be used as background to this visualization.

As we form a circle of healing I invite you to face your left hand upward to the sky and your right hand downward to the earth. With the left hand we receive and with the right hand we give. So now with this position of hands, reach out to take hold of the hands of the persons on either side of you. Close your eyes, and breathe deeply, with your feet planted firmly on the ground. Imagine the energy of the earth entering your feet and legs, circulating throughout your entire body to bring peace and healing to you. As you breathe out, imagine the healing energy moving out your right hand into the hand of the person on your right, filling them with whatever they may need in the moment. Breathe deeply again, and imagine this healing energy flowing from one person to another filling each one here with whatever they may need. Take a moment as we send this vibrant pulse of healing energy to all here present. Now imagine that from this circle we can send healing energy and love to the communities where we live and work. (name some of the places of participants), and then on to the larger world (name other countries and places where there is war or suffering). Imagine that you are able to compassionately send healing energy to all those who need support and blessing today—those who will die, those who are dying in spirit and despair, the children of the streets, the perpetrators of violence, and to all beings on our planet. (include any other images that are appropriate)

And after you have sent your healing and blessing to the larger world, imagine now that you are able to return to the safe and sacred space within you—the refuge of your soul. Take a few moments there alone, nourishing your spirit, grateful for the blessings of your life, knowing that you are held and protected at each step of your journey. Take a moment more in your sacred space, then breathe deeply, and when you are ready, open your eyes and be completely present here in the room. Look around the room at each person here. See the soul of each person and appreciate who they truly are. Bless them with your eyes and remember them in the days to come. As we close this circle of healing we greet each other with Namasté.

## Resources for Further Study

### Books

- Baldwin, C. Calling the Circle. Newberg, OR: Swan-Raven & Co., 1994.
- Barks, C. translator. The Essential Rumi. NJ: Castle Books, 1997.
- Harris, M. Dance of the Spirit: The Seven Steps of Women's Spirituality. NY: Bantam, 1991.
- Hays, E. Prayers for a Planetary Pilgrim. Leavenworth, KS: Forest of Peace Publishing, 1989.
- Houston, J. Life Force. Wheaton, IL: Quest Books. 1993.
- The Possible Human. NY: Putnam/Tarcher. 1982.
- Merrill, N. Psalms for Praying. NY: Continuum, 1996.
- Richardson, J. Sacred Journeys: A Woman's Book of Daily Prayer. Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 1996.
- Night Visions: Searching the Shadows of Advent and Christmas. Cleveland, OH, United Church Press, 1998.
- Roberts, E. & Amidon, E. Earth Prayers. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991.
- Life Prayers. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1996.
- Roekard, Karen. The Santa Cruz Haggadah. Berkeley, CA: Hineni Consciousness Press, 1991.
- Sheldrake, R. The Presence of the Past. Rochester, VT: Park Street Press, 1995.
- The Rebirth of Nature. Rochester, VT: Park Street Press, 1994.
- Somé, M. Ritual: Power, Healing, and Community. NY: Penguin/Arkana, 1997.

### Music: For Rituals

- Robert Gass & On Wings of Song selections: Omna mayaha Shiva, Alleluia, Kyrie, Gloria, and others
- Streams of Dreams, Michael Maxwell, Dan Gibson, Solitudes, Inc.
- Quiet Heart, Spirit Wind, Richard Warner, Enso Records.
- Path of the Heart, Max Highstein, Desert Heart Recordings.
- The Poet, Michael Hoppé, Martin Tilman, Teldec Classics International.
- Anjali, Inner Light, Anjali Quartet, Sri Rama Publishers.