

Ritual and Ceremony in Therapy

Maggie Fisher

The word ritual comes from the Sanskrit "rite" which refers to both art and order.

"Like all real art ritual provides organic order, a pattern of dynamic expression through which the energy of an event or sense of events can flow, an evolution process towards larger meaning or a new stage or level of life"

- Houston (The search for the beloved: journeys in mythology and sacred psychology). Farmer (Sacred ceremony: how to create ceremonies for healing, transitions and celebrations) suggests there are three types of ceremony - ones for healing, helping with physical, psychological or spiritual woundings, marking transitions and celebrations.

A reflection on my journey with ritual and ceremony

My work with ritual began with my own need to mark my father's death - to create a ritual for myself having attended his funeral where I felt a stranger and did not recognise the man of whom the minister spoke. This brought me into conversation with a Benedictine monk with whom I worked in palliative care. We then worked together developing our understanding of ritual. Having raised my

awareness of ritual I began to see its potential within my therapeutic practice particularly in relation to death. Initially the work Brother Francis and I did together was about loss and death because of our shared world of palliative care and the socially accepted role of the priest in funerals. We worked together with clients of mine who seemed to need to mark meaningfully a loss which had been unsuccessfully or incompletely marked previously or which now carried a new and

different meaning for them for example the loss of someone close to them and where requested the presence of a 'holy figure.'

We then began to expand our work recognising death as an aspect of inner life experience and worked, for example, with a client who had post traumatic stress disorder. Through our work we came to define ritual as

"A sacred space created for an individual family or group to offer a safe meaningful way of journeying through difficulties, to enable them to transform and integrate experience." (Fisher and Brother Francis)

This work with Brother Francis alongside other parts of my own journey in shamanism and my transpersonal psychotherapy training enabled me to recognise and claim my own spiritual authority and to view some of my work with clients to be about enabling them to claim theirs.

When reflecting on our ritual work Brother Francis and I began to notice that in many rituals the symbols of air, fire, water and earth were present. The four elements are the basic foundations of life on this planet, the fundamental energies, states and building blocks of reality. Air is the breath of life. Water represents survival and healing, unconditional love and caring, cleansing and reconciliation. It cools the burning psyche and in many mythologies it is the water of life. Fire is the element of origin and is present in everything and everything needs fire. Earth is

produced as an encounter between fire and water. It is our mother and our deep centre. Absence of earth causes crises and homelessness, exile and loss of grounding.

As there is a need of sun and water for plants to grow, so there is a need of the four elements for a person to keep in perfect health. (Hazrat Inayat Khan)

From my work with Brother Francis I developed my own ideas about the use of ritual with individuals and couples who were in psychotherapy with me. These include clients referred for brief therapy by Employee Assist Companies or through the NHS by their GP, or in short or longer term private therapy and individuals and groups of counsellors, social workers and nurses in supervision.

My thoughts and ideas then developed further when working with a client who had experienced ritualistic abuse. The all pervading relentless attack on her body and soul was indescribably destructive. At the same time she appeared to be particularly open to the healing power of ritual and symbol. She was able to begin to trust a priest enough to work with him on various forgiveness rituals. She found positive symbols to help to hold her at times of crises for example - she went to a room in a nunnery she used as a safe house on a regular basis and then we worked together to enable her to use this room as a space in her imagination on a regular basis being able over time to have a greater sense of a safe space inside herself. She also

carried a pink stone with her which comforted her - a transitional object from therapy.

Therapeutic Ritual

Hillman (Suicide and the soul) views ritual as a message from the psyche that something needs attending to. From a Jungian perspective ritual is symbolically the outer enactment of archetypal energy which flows into consciousness and needs to be given space to enable transformation. Imber-Black and Roberts (Rituals for our times: celebrating healing and changing our lives and our relationships) suggest that rituals have five purposes: relating, changing, healing, believing and celebrating.

Ritual and ceremony like dreams, art work, story telling, guided imagery, tarot, I-Ching, runes and other tools offers us all ways of dialoguing with the unconscious.

Ritual transcends language. Across time and culture rituals have been enacted to signify rites of passage whether joyous or sad. At a cultural or social level, rituals mark transition and change. Pincus (Death and the family) suggests that

"Rituals express the collective unconscious of the culture for which they perform a religious, social or therapeutic function."

They are an outward sign of an inward process. The absence of ritual has led to more destructive ritualistic behaviours like drug and alcohol use and that these take the place normally reserved for ritual. It is important to

recognise that ritual is not repetitive or compulsive behaviour nor is it an everyday formality. Its power is its capacity not only to announce change but also to create it. It is a place of communion in which we can connect with our inner world. Ritual can be a place of sanctuary. Its purpose is to deepen and open up experience.

"Through the creation of ceremony, we allow the free movement of our soul on to the mundane and of our consciousness in the real of the soul. It's a two way bridge."

(Wah'oo Grigori, in Farmer (Sacred ceremony: how to create ceremonies for healing, transitions and celebrations)).

I would suggest that therapeutic ritual can help us to

- reflect and slow down
- celebrate, honour and commemorate
- forgive
- express our feelings
- cleanse and heal
- file, integrate and contain
- say goodbye
- move on

The following questions may be helpful when considering the possibility of ritual in therapy

- What is the described problem ... what is the story ... the self story..?

- What is the meaning of the story?
- What is the focus of the problem ... the person's core pain ... core wound ?
- What is the need ? Does some other work need to be done first ?

What literal or symbolic process might be helpful? Considering the need or intention is central. Farmer (Sacred ceremony: how to create ceremonies for healing, transitions and celebrations) says when a ceremony is devoid of clear intention it also loses passion, inspiration and direction. The ceremony may then slip into empty ritual. Clear intention is the skeleton that supports the body of the ceremony, giving it a backbone.

I have developed the following guidelines for use with clients when considering the possibility of therapeutic ritual being helpful.

Ritual Guidelines

Ritual can be a helpful way of

- exorcising pain and promoting healing - e.g. doing something new about an old soul pain
- ritualising something that has been unfinished or unsuccessfully ritualised in the past e.g. the ending of a relationship through death or separation
- facilitating, marking or celebrating a desire to make a move towards an internal or external change

Preparation for the ritual should include where you feel you need to journey from and to both practically and emotionally. You need to give yourself time for the form of your ritual to emerge.

Some possible questions might include

- What is my central focus or purpose? e.g. Letting go? Marking movement? Integration?
- What symbols, objects, readings might I need ?
- Who needs to be present to help or witness?
- Do I need to touch my symbols, objects, helpers or witnesses?
- Is there anything else I need to do or to have others do with or/and for me?
- Are any other movements needed?
- In what order should things happen? Does the order reflect the journey I need to make?
- Where will it take place?
- At what time of day?
- How might I end?

Clients have come to use these guidelines to bring together in time their elements and symbols to mark a transition e.g. a birth, miscarriage, stillbirth, reunion, separation, a letting go of an old life script or message either privately , with someone else or in a ceremony as part of therapy in the therapy room or at a

venue of their choice which fits the nature of their ritual.

Mary was in her 50's and came via her health insurance. She was very distressed about her adoptive mother's death and wondering more about her birth mother. She was angry with both her mothers for abandoning her. We discussed the possibility of her writing to them both. She was able to create a ceremony for herself burning the letter to her adoptive mother at her graveside with her husband. This appeared to then give her permission to write a letter to her blood mother about her hopes and fears of finding or not finding her. Ultimately she discovered she had also died. During her searching journey she met with a brother she did not know about and found some healing through this relationship. She then re-wrote and burned her letter to her husband. She felt a sense of completion and release.

In the context of bereavement therapeutic ritual can enable

- mourning/expression of feeling
- h o n o u r i n g / commemoration / reparation
- healing/re-engagement with life
- disturbing images to be laid to rest
- Possible indications of when ritual may be helpful in bereavement
- the person was unable to attend the funeral or was not welcome

- the funeral did not meet their needs
- their grief has become delayed or blocked
- their grief has become protracted

"Ceremony ... provides a bridge between the material and spirit worlds ... Participating in sacred ceremony helps us bring our being into alignment with the natural flow and rhythm of life."

(Farmer. Sacred ceremony: how to create ceremonies for healing, transitions and celebrations)

Ritual can also be used to 'de-ritualise' a ritual which is damaging to replace it with one which is therapeutic and to re-ritualise a ritual which was not effective or not effective enough.

Anne is 38 and was sexually abused by a friend of her father from when she was about 8 years old until she was about 14. She was referred by her GP with depression. During her second session she told me about her abuse, the shame she felt and the cleansing ritual she had employed a least daily. These included scrubbing her vulva area with a bristle brush and disinfectant. Together we explored the meaning of the ritual. Her belief was that she was scrubbing the semen out of herself. When asked when she would be able to stop she looked disorientated and said *"I have never thought of stopping."* She became conscious that in way she was carrying on the experience of the abuse. We

discussed how she might end this and she initially bought a soft brush and soothing oils. After using these for a period she sought advice from her GP about the skin damage she had caused over the years. She now feels the need to brush herself only after sex. Her vulval area will always be scarred as will her psyche. She is however carrying these scars in a way which now dominates her life significantly less than before.

I have worked with health care teams to enable them to prevent

- 'the processed pea factory syndrome' – in which getting the task done and the outcome of it is what matters rather than the task itself, the people involved or the process of doing it
- only criticism and complaint being offered or heard
- stock piling and overload of feelings

manage

- difficult situations
- traumatic images
- overwhelming emotion

A social work team I offered consultancy to now meet regularly with an agreed structure to reflect on their case work and honour their case work through shared case studies.

The frequency of therapeutic rituals can vary – they can be

- regular
- occasional ... carried out under particular circumstances or to mark a particular moment in time
- to meet specific needs

A client has a bird who is an important symbol for her. She checks where it is in her imagination each day. It appears to orientate her to both her inner and outer world needs.

A ritual is not just the ceremony itself but the whole process of preparing for it, experiencing it and integrating back into everyday life. This is important as in a therapeutic context these three phases need to be developed. Rituals can link past, present and future. The therapeutic process itself can be viewed as a ritual.

Rituals should be considered with great care. They can be seen as being "magic wands" within therapy. It could be tempting to create a ritual through which the therapist could precipitously collude with the client who wishes to escape from, rather than work through, painful issues. There is a potential to use them defensively. They could also be used by the omnipotent therapist as a means of "getting" the client to work through their material. Whatever the therapist's orientation, I would emphasise that the ritual must fit with the emerging themes and issues in the client's material and should be respectfully embedded as part of therapy, thus ensuring the locus of control remains with the client.

Further reading

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