**RITUAL: LANGUAGE OF THE HEART**

**Just as we can be transformed by visualization, we can be transformed by the power of ritual. Ritual is one of the oldest human**

**languages, perhaps the most universal. It speaks in elemental symbols, and these symbols, like dreams, are our original language. The**

**word ritual comes from the Latin ritus, “to fit together.” Ritual**

**weaves us together with the larger meaning and fabric of the cosmos. Some years ago our men’s retreat group was invited to bring**

**our work with young men to one of the poorer neighborhoods of**

**the Bay Area. There had been an escalation of gang crime, and our group included dozens of inner city youth who were trying to leave**

**the gang life. They first came with their mentors to the redwood**

**forest of Mendocino for a week filled with mythic storytelling,**

**artistic creation, meditation and martial arts, and heartbreakingly honest talk. On the last nights, Michael Meade, Malidoma Somé,**

**poet and activist Luis Rodriguez, and I offered rituals of initiation**

**that lasted until dawn. Without meaningful initiation, young people**

**try to initiate themselves on the streets with drugs, guns, and**

**fast cars. On retreat we carried offerings for dead friends to altars**

**in the redwoods, we made prayers while passing through two roaring bonfires, we renewed ourselves plunging into moonless pools**

**in the dark river lit only by candles. Even the hard shells of the tattooed homeboys were pierced.**

**At the week’s end, our group left camp in masse to bring our**

**newfound understanding back to the community. We began a procession down the main street toward the neighborhood park, led**

**by dozens of young men playing a dance rhythm on drums, some**

**in colorful homemade masks, some carrying long wooden staffs**

**they had created to symbolize their intention to become protectors**

**of the community. As we drummed and danced our way down**

**the street, shades went up and windows and doors of run­down apartments began to crack open. We could see the curious faces of immigrants from Haiti and Mexico, Laos and Pakistan, Nicaragua**

**and Palestine. We beckoned to them to come out and join our**

**group. Surprisingly enough, hundreds did. They didn’t know us,**

**but they joined in our energy and laughed and danced. Many didn’t speak English, but they all knew what a procession was. Whether**

**they were Haitian, Ethiopian, Salvadoran, or Vietnamese, the universal language of ritual, drums, and procession spoke to them.**

**After a mile, we entered the park through a bamboo archway**

**that had been decorated with ribbons and flowers. Here stood two young men. They bowed to each of the community members who entered, and placed in their hand a small candle. Without being told, everyone entering knew what to do. We had created an altar with flowers and symbols of peace in the center of the park. Now each person placed on it a lighted candle and made prayers for themselves, the community, the world.**

**Then we sang and shared food at a community feast. Youths**

**spoke and read poetry, elders told stories, and the people connected**

**in ways only the language of ritual can provide. Our procession**

**did not end all gang violence, but it brought the people**

**together in a way that hadn’t happened before. You could see neighbors who had lived in fear or isolation talking to one another about**

**the problems in the community. You could see an appreciation and admiration for the youths who stood up, spoke their experience,**

**and read their poems. The ritual created a bridge between disparate community members that they could build on.**

**For the most part, ritual is absent in Western psychology.**

**Our psychotherapists and healers meet with patients in sterile, fluorescent lit clinics and offices, on uncomfortable chairs, unsupported by the language of ritual. Or we follow really strange rituals**

**such as no touching, no hugs, no questions to the therapist about**

**how she is doing, the rigid “time’s up” rule. All this is designed to make the work of the heart respectable, to fit it into a medical, scientific mode of analyzing life.**

**This is not surprising. Our whole society has largely forgotten**

**the necessity of ritual, especially in seasons of change or difficulty. We have a few rituals left to mark the most important changes in our life, such as weddings, graduations, and funerals, but even these often become elaborate tributes to wealth and status, rather than weaving true spiritual connection. Without ritual, as Malidoma Somé tells us, we pass one another like ships in the night.**

**Of course, ritual can be misused. We can absently turn a prayer wheel or finger a rosary, repeat a fossilized, rote performance out of custom or habit. Ritual can be superstitious or even corrupt. For**

**many of us in the West rituals can also feel superstitious, silly, or awkward, like a first date (which is, of course, a particularly difficult ritual).We have a cultural discomfort with spirituality and the**

**sacred even though we long to come together in a meaningful way. Yet used wisely, ritual serves us in ways that we may not even understand at the time. David, an internist, told my good friend**

**and teacher of physicians, Dr. Rachel Remen, about his experience**

**as a doctor on a large inner city AIDS ward. It was some years ago, before protease inhibitors and other drug therapies had become available, and almost all the patients who were admitted to his service died. Many of them were young men quite close to his own**

**age, people whose lives mattered deeply to him. He was haunted by a sense of futility.**

**David had trained as a Buddhist, and to this day, when a patient dies, he lights a candle on his altar at home and, following Tibetan tradition, keeps it burning for forty nine days. For the whole time he was at San Francisco General, he prayed for each dying young man and lit a candle on his altar. Many years afterward he speaks of this with a smile. It has made him wonder. Perhaps the reason he was there was not what he had thought. He had expected to serve by curing his patients. When their problems proved resistant to his medical expertise, he felt useless. But maybe he was not meant to be there to cure people. Perhaps he was there so that no one would die without someone to pray for them. Perhaps he had served every one of his patients flawlessly.**

**Buddhist psychology employs the power of ritual to transform consciousness. Rituals are constructed of elemental materials, as if**

**to return our sensibility to the ground in which we live. The physical elements of ritual are the most ancient of languages: fire—candles, bonfires, offering fires; water—poured, blessed, sprinkled,**

**baptized, floated, drunk; earth—buried, scattered, sacred stones, sacred ground, sanctuary; air—chants, songs, prayers, bells, drums. These elements, combined with an altar, a gesture, a bow, the ringing of a gong, the pouring of wine, the making of a prayer, the planting of a seed, the sacred pause for a moment or a day, all help us to**

**step out of time, out of business, out of success and failure. Even the deliberately low doors in certain temples require an entrant to ritually bow in order to enter.**

**The simplest gesture may become a ritual. Making a sitting circle**

**to talk is a ritual. It was a powerful ritual gesture when Nelson Mandela invited his former prison guards to a seat of respect at his presidential inauguration. In Buddhist communities, there is a ritual of forgiveness where the abbot and elders regularly bow to the community and ask forgiveness for any errors they have made in their teaching and leadership. Every year at the end of our two month spring retreat we do this. We invite our students’ written**

**suggestions and feedback. Then the six teachers move off their cushions and chairs and sit on the bare floor facing all the retreatants. We bow to them and their sincere practice. And then we**

**ask their forgiveness for any way we may have harmed or misguided them. We tell them we did the best we could. Usually a lot of tears fall before the end of this ceremony.**

**CREATING RITUAL**

**As a Buddhist psychologist, I find that incorporating appropriate ritual is important for many of those I see. Sometimes before our session we bow to each other to acknowledge our Buddha nature. Often I include an initial period of meditative reflection and silence. At other times, when it feels called for, I light a candle or**

**create a simple altar to help us hold life in a sacred perspective.**

**Not long ago, a psychologist named Alyssa came to a retreat.**

**Alyssa works with the UN caring for newly arrived refugees. Her specialty includes support for those who have been tortured and**

**are seeking political asylum in the United States. Alyssa told me she found it hard to sleep, to let go of the stories and images of suffering she was hearing from refugees of Afghanistan, Uganda, Haiti, Burma, Guatemala, Rwanda, Iraq, Bosnia, and so many other coun­tries. She is also a regular meditator, and in her meditation the stories of torture were re-­arising in vivid ways. “It is sometimes too**

**much,” she said.**

**During the retreat, Alyssa used practices of compassion and equanimity to work with these images. The meditation got easier. Then we talked about how these profound sorrows are not meant to be borne alone. I told Alyssa she needed backup. I suggested she create a large altar on the back wall of her office and place on it whatever inspired her spiritually. Initially she included statues and images of Kwan Yin, Tara, Buddha, Jesus, Guadalupe, and Mary. Over time, she added images of Latin American, African, and**

**Haitian gods and an Arabic passage of mercy from the Koran. Now when the refugees arrive in her room, they see behind her the sacred images of each of their gods with a few flowers or a piece of**

**fruit beneath them as an offering. To start each day, Alyssa calls**

**on the gods and the ancestors to support her and hold those who bring their sufferings to her. At the end of the day she symbolically places the sorrows she has heard on the altar, in their compassionate hands.**

**Now she feels that she does not carry her burden entirely by**

**herself. The altar is a daily reminder of how the forces of compassion throughout the world uphold her dedication. We do not work**

**alone for change; the power of life works with us.**

**Creating a simple ritual, such as inviting a person to make a**

**prayer or light a candle, can bring a sense of reverence and new possibility to that person’s inner work. Sometimes crafting a personalized ritual on the spot is the best medicine. It may be the ceremonial**

**burning of old love letters or the burying of relics of our**

**grief; it may be a paper listing habits and fears to be released upon**

**the waves, the ringing of a gong to symbolize the end of an unhealthy phase of life, or the dedication and lighting of a candle to**

**symbolize a newfound freedom. All these rituals can release our**

**past and reawaken our true nature.**

**Bruce came to his first Buddhist retreat with a body that was**

**rigid and pained, as if he were underneath a heavy load. A physical therapist, he carried the burdens of a troubled medical system, personal conflicts, and a difficult childhood. Bruce had healed many**

**others; now he needed to heal himself. At first, however, the retreat brought more suffering. Bruce had heard Buddhist teachings**

**of compassion and emptiness, but as he began to meditate, what he**

**felt was the opposite: solidity, hardness, and tremendous frustration. The longer he sat, the larger his fear grew. By the time he came**

**to talk to me and my colleague Trudy Goodman he said he felt like**

**a caged werewolf inside. As he said this, his eyes narrowed and his face actually became werewolf like. I asked him to breathe and mindfully notice whatever was present. He told me the werewolf**

**had been caged for a long time. It was ravenous.**

**I became curious. “What does it want to eat?” I inquired. It**

**wanted to eat Bruce. Then he went on, trembling, “What it really wants is my heart.” I told Bruce that in the Buddhist tradition, when demons and hungry ghosts appear, there is a ritual practice of feeding them. In this practice we transform the worst, most rabid, most fearful energies by deliberately visualizing what we can do for**

**them. We picture giving them whatever they want and need, even**

**our own body, until they are fully satisfied. I asked if he would be willing to feed the werewolf. Feeding his heart to this beast seemed extreme, frightening. The next time we sat together. Bruce’s suffering had become so strong he felt he needed to do something. He**

**decided he would feed the werewolf. He closed his eyes and opened the cage. But the werewolf didn’t spring at Bruce. It looked at him intently and said that when it wanted his heart, it wanted his love. And then it walked up to him, brushed against his leg, and walked**

**out to the wild. Bruce was stunned.**

**Then he told me where the werewolf had come from. Bruce**

**had grown up on a cattle ranch just outside a small Texas town. And somehow when folks in town had dogs they couldn’t take care of, they would dump them on the ranch. His father insisted that Bruce be the one to “finish off ” these “useless” dogs, which meant to shoot them. Between the ages of eight and fourteen he was forced to**

**shoot sixteen different dogs. He wept as he told the story.**

**I invited Bruce to meditate with me. After we spent some time simply focusing on a gentle healing breath, I began to chant out**

**loud and teach Bruce the practice of compassion on behalf of the dogs as well as himself as an isolated and sensitive child. “May your pain be held in great compassion. May you be free from sorrow. May you be at peace.” As Bruce heard these words and breathed through his own sadness, he began to feel the suffering of all the young soldiers of the world, all the boys who are forced to carry guns and shoot to kill. His heart was opening to compassion for all of humanity.**

**But sometimes healing needs to be physically enacted as well. When I suggested that he create a healing ritual, Bruce’s eyes lit up. Over the next few days he chose a hillside site near the retreat center and carefully formed a circle of sixteen stones, one for each of**

**the dogs that so weighed upon his conscience. Then, one evening**

**at dusk, Bruce, Trudy, and I headed up the hill together. The stars were becoming visible. Bruce showed us that the largest stone was**

**oriented north to Sirius, the Dog Star, in honor of the dogs’ undying spirits. At the base of each stone he placed a written prayer of atonement, and in the center he placed a small stone next to one**

**of the largest. This, he told us through his tears, was the puppy of**

**a dying mother who had tried to shield her, even in the last moments after she was shot. These were the last dogs he had killed.**

**We meditated in the evening stillness. He bowed, lit candles, offered prayers, and spoke to these dogs about what his heart had**

**learned and how their spirits would teach him for the rest of his days.**

**But Bruce was not yet free. He felt the dogs wanted something**

**from him. He wanted to make atonement. Bruce decided to pledge $5,000 for animal welfare, to always keep a dog, and to work half**

**a day each month in the nearby animal shelter for ten years. This he felt would be a labor of love. I saw Bruce six months later. He told**

**me that his healing work was as challenging as ever, but he felt better. I could see it—his whole spirit seemed to have lightened up,**

**and his body looked relaxed. His inner werewolf had been transformed and to my eyes had become more like a collie shepherd**

**Lab mix, running free.**

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