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THE RHYME AND REASON OF RITUALMAKING

Jeltje Gordon-Lennox

Human beings are very resilient. During precarious periods of history, humankind's adaptive capacity is put to the test. As a species we have braved – and so far survived – wars, disasters (natural and human-made), violence and personal betrayals. In the face of uncertainty, ritual contributes to our sense of security by beating time to our natural rhythms, helping us make sense of our world and enhancing our social bonds. The dislocation[1] of modern Western society causes suffering on both public (political, economic, social, cultural, spiritual) and intimate (emotional, sensory, sexual, relational, neuronal) levels. Rarely, if ever, has humankind experienced fragmentation to such an extent. Rarely have people been shielded by so few meaningful social rituals.

This chapter explores how ritual and ritualmaking as social activity – remarkable for how it sustains wellbeing for individuals and society as a whole – meets the unprecedented challenges of multilevel dislocation. I came to ritology through the backdoor as a practitioner. This means that practical experience filters my exploration of ritual theory. As a psychotherapist, I am well placed to see the pain and damage caused by inadequate ritual as well as the sense of joy and rightness when milestones

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EMERGING RITUAL IN SECULAR SOCIETIES

A TRANSDISCIPLINARY CONVERSATION

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Human beings are very resilient. During precarious periods of history, humankind's adaptive capacity is put to the test. As a species we have braved – and so far survived – wars, disasters (natural and human-made), violence and personal betrayals. In the face of uncertainty, ritual contributes to our sense of security by beating time to our natural rhythms, helping us make sense of our world and enhancing our social bonds. The dislocation[1] of modern Western society causes suffering on both public (political, economic, social, cultural, spiritual) and intimate (emotional, sensory, sexual, relational, neuronal) levels. Rarely, if ever, has humankind experienced fragmentation to such an extent. Rarely have people been shielded by so few meaningful social rituals.

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are appropriately observed. After several years of presiding at religious rites, I left the religious institution to craft secular life event ceremonies. My move from religious to secular ritual was motivated primarily by a desire to meet the growing need for non-religious ceremonies. In the process, I realized that it corresponded to changes in my own experience and thinking. I also learned that ritualmaking has not always been the domain of specialists.

SECULAR RITUAL

While observing people go about their everyday lives, ethologist Ellen Dissanayake noticed that humans everywhere avidly engage in playful, artistic and ritual pursuits. She became convinced that these activities represent a biologically endowed need, and called this compelling and 'deliberately *nonordinary*' activity 'making special' (1992, pp.42–48). Rituals have been invented and reinvented ever since humankind first felt the need to connect events with thoughts and feelings, hopes and fears. Rituals 'are adaptive', affirms Dissanayake, 'not only because they join people together in common cause but because they also relieve anxiety. It is better to have something to do, with others, in times of uncertainty rather than try to cope by oneself or do nothing at all' (2016).

Over the last century, ritual experts led us to believe that all ritual is religious, or at least sacred. Yet religion, like secularism, is just one type of worldview (see Figure 4.1). Anthropologist Mary Douglas insists that secularism is 'an age-old cosmological type, a product of a definable social experience, which need have nothing to do with urban life or modern science [...or] transcendent explanations and powers'; it can turn up in any historical age and locale (cited by Bell 1997, p.200). Anthropologist Talal Asad[2] sees the secular as 'a concept that brings together certain behaviours, knowledges, and sensibilities in modern life' (2003, p.24). Ritual studies scholar 'Catherine M. Bell's profound insight', states her friend Diane Jonte-Pace, 'was that ritual, long thought of as thoughtless

2 'The secular is neither continuous with the religious [phase] that supposedly preceded it (that is, it is not the latest phase of a sacred origin) nor a simple break from it (that is, it is not the opposite, an essence that excludes the sacred)' (Asad 2003, p.24).

action stripped of context, is more interestingly understood as strategy: a culturally strategic way of acting in the world. Ritual is a form of social activity' (Jonte-Pace 2009, p.vii). As such, ritual is neutral: it has been used to promote love, healing and social cohesion but also to foment war, hatred and racism. How it is used makes it a culturally strategic way of acting in the world.

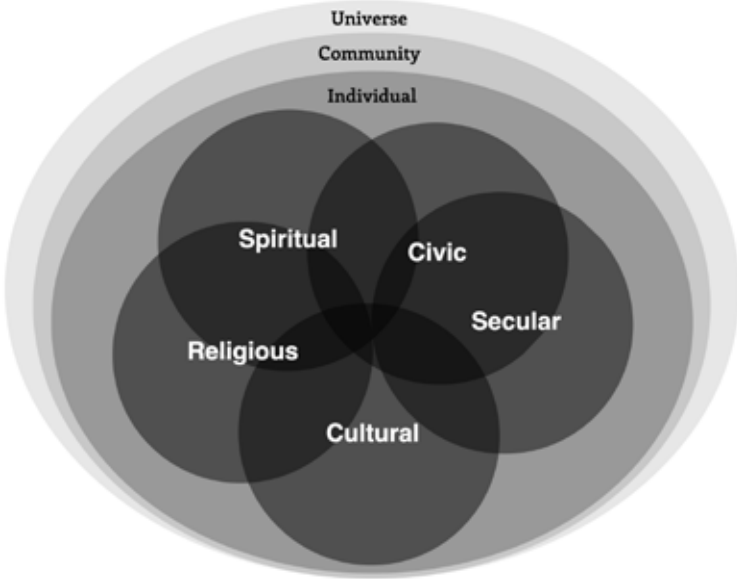

Figure 4.1. Ritual strategy
Ritualizing is a culturally strategic way of acting in the world. Religious and secular rituals are different forms of social activity that can also be spiritual, cultural or even civic. Coherence between the occasion, the context and relationships is *sine qua non* for effective ritualizing.

RITUALIZING IN AN ULTRAMODERN ERA

Whether we live in a megacity or on a small remote island, we must all adapt to urban rhythms and an ever-increasing pace of change. Moreover, society barely functions today as a social entity. Globalization and individualization, the 'free market' and relentless competition have destroyed our sense of belonging to civilized, supportive groups. French

philosopher Frédéric Lenoir dubs our era 'ultramodern',[3] and puts the hazards of accelerated change into historical perspective:

> Humanity took a giant leap at the turn of Palaeolithic and Neolithic ages. These changes affected society, religion, value systems and the way of life; they also touched and transformed the human brain. I'm convinced that what we are living today will generate equally sweeping changes that concern our innermost being. We will not emerge unscathed from these tremendous upheavals… What our ancestors dealt with in a couple millennia, we have to grasp the significance of in a few decades. (2012, p.63)

Only 5000 years ago, spirituality was still inextricably tied to ancient hunter-gatherer traditions. Societal structures were small and for the most part, horizontal. Maintaining relationships within the community and assuming responsibility towards nature are recurrent themes in hunter-gatherer rituals, because they contribute to individual and group self-regulation. Today, too, we function best when our priorities focus on sustaining our relationships with others and nature. Yet this way of functioning is incompatible with complex hierarchical social structures.

Our need for landmarks

Over the last two to three millennia, traditional ties between spiritual and cultural ritual practices crumbled as religious institutions arose capable of absorbing adherents across cultural, political and geographical frontiers. With the verticalization of socio-political structures, participative ritualizing gave way to institutionalized rites. Centralized religions and governments alike placed people in leadership roles to oversee healing, spiritual practice and moral guidance. Recent crises within these hierarchical structures – many of which concern leadership – have contributed to the breakdown of their monopoly on traditional ritual. With the dawn of the ultramodern

3 Lenoir (2012) prefers the term 'ultramodern' to 'postmodern' because the latter gives the false impression that we are disenchanted with the myth of progress and the modern process when in fact we are in the midst of an unprecedented acceleration of modernity (critical reason, individualization, globalization).

era, our vertical and horizontal safety zones disappeared. 'We have killed the gods', remarks Lenoir, 'we have abolished or erased our borders. It is within ourselves that we must now find these "safety zones"' (2012, p.64).

Change itself is neither good nor bad: it can bring relief and renewal, but it inevitably implies loss and separation from the familiar. The young, old, sick and injured are most vulnerable. Low adaptive capacity means a high need for the familiar, protection and clear markers in relationships, time and space. The momentum of change today does not take into account our individual and collective need for consistent landmarks, our capacity to adapt, or even the health of our planet.

Technological advances, in particular the internet, fundamentally revolutionize how humankind functions on all levels: social, psychological, economic, cultural, intellectual, spiritual, academic and even neuronal. Young people in particular are bombarded by a host of information they must absorb and sort. This adaptation has a price: as communication with people from around the world is facilitated, warm-hearted face-to-face talk with those around us grows increasingly difficult.

Our need to feel safe

Biophysicist Peter A. Levine,[4] formerly a NASA stress consultant, states: 'Though we as a secular society are deluged with information (much of it stimulating and useful), at the same time, we suffer from a paucity of wisdom and have the desire for more personal warmth, connection and

4 Peter A. Levine developed Somatic Experiencing (SE), a naturalistic approach to the treatment of trauma based on the observation that wild prey animals, in spite of being repeatedly threatened, are rarely traumatized. According to Levine, the symptoms of trauma are not caused by the dangerous event itself, but by our reaction to it. The reaction may be a debilitating 'large-T' trauma or a seemingly inconsequential 'small-t' trauma. The symptoms of trauma may arise soon after the event or even much later. They are caused by the residual energy of the reaction when it is not discharged from the body. Levine describes traumatic memories as being implicit and stored in the body and the brain as automatic or 'procedural' sensations, emotions and behaviours. Trauma cannot be cured by advice, drugs or understanding, observes Levine, but it can be 'renegotiated' – rather than relived – by accessing procedural memories. 'Pendulation' is a fundamental SE concept used in resolving implicit traumatic memories. It involves touching on the inner sensations and then learning how to carefully access this 'felt sense' and to tolerate the feelings by noticing that one can survive them (Levine 2015, pp.xv, xvi, 38, 55).

engagement' (2005, p.xvii). Like Lenoir, Levine encourages the building of 'islands of safety' within ourselves to keep from being overwhelmed by the after-effects of highly charged life experiences. He observes that 'whether we are survivors of trauma or simply casualties of Western culture' (2010, p.256) we suffer from what he describes as 'an impairing disconnection from [our] inner sensate compass' (2010, p.355).

Severed contact with our inner sensate compass is experienced as fragmentation or disembodiment. Psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk explains that when the connections within the brain as well as those between the mind and the body are disrupted through trauma, we become trapped in the emotions and feelings of the past (2014). As survivors of trauma and Western culture we expend inordinate amounts of energy just keeping these sensations under control – usually at the expense of concentration, the ability to memorize and simply pay attention to what is happening around us. Neurologist Robert Scaer describes this frightening experience as 'an aberration of memory' (2001, p.43).[5] The inability to live fully in the present impedes adequate preparation for the future, which in turn wreaks havoc on health and social relationships such as marriages, families and friendships (Scaer 2005, p.152; 2012, p.114).

The Book of Changes

A shock occurs, then there is a tremor caused by fear. This tremor is a good thing because it allows inner gladness and joy to follow. Even if rumbling thunder sows terror a hundred miles around, we remain so calm that we do not interrupt the ceremony by dropping the ritual spoon filled with spicy wine. (Hexagram 51, *I Ching*, late 9th century BCE)

5 In the case of trauma, memory imprints (known as 'engrams') are experienced – not as a recurring recollection of a terrible event that happened in the past, but as overwhelming life-threatening physical sensations in the immediate present (Levine 2015, p.7). These physical sensations are ever the more frightening in that they may be tied to events that we do not remember and then triggered without warning by anything, a sudden noise, a smell, a taste, a colour or a tone of voice, usually totally unattached to a conscious memory of an event.

RITUAL AS A SAFE FRAMEWORK FOR EMOTION

Ritualizing life events, in particular weddings and funerals, often evokes potentially destructive memories and feelings. When intense emotions are expressed and harnessed through ritual in a safe setting, they contribute to turning off what Scaer refers to as the 'fear generator' from the past. Ritual thus regularizes our perception of time and allows us to stay in the present to safely experience attuned relations with other people (Scaer 2012, pp.141–143). Psychophysiological researcher Stephen Porges insists that feeling safe is the decisive factor for both our wellbeing and creative activity (2012). When solving complex, deep-rooted conflicts that require lasting transformation of worldviews, identities and relationships, peacebuilder Lisa Schirch promotes the use of ritual because it can help people see each other as human beings rather than as enemies. 'Ritual is a powerful form of communication precisely because it involves people's bodies, senses, and emotions' (Schirch 2005, p.83).

While conducting secular funeral ceremonies I observe that mourners experience and express powerful feelings while being safely surrounded by friends, family and well-intentioned strangers. The grieving assembly's attention span is extremely short, but the senses are acute, particularly touch and smell. Mourners can spontaneously oscillate between sadness and gladness. Tears and laughter may follow in rapid succession. The process flows in a fulfilling manner when the ritual context, the assembly and an attentive, skilled celebrant support the oscillation by gently keeping the mourners physically in the present time. There may be signs of release or discharge: yawning, moist eyes, trembling in the face or lips, a deep breath, a shiver in the torso, the stretching of shoulders, neck, hands or legs. At that point, mourners often feel growing gratitude for their dear one's life and the times they shared.

As the ceremony draws to a close, I see people glancing around. They appear to be waking up, reorienting themselves to the present moment, the room and the people around them. Later, some describe the funeral as a time of feeling supported in a 'time-out-of-time experience'. Others speak of having sensed their loved one's passing from the realm of the living to that of the deceased. With a gut-level calm that does not exclude

deep grief, they move away from the casket, urn or grave and return home, physically anchored in a new reality.

While my observations of these reactions are entirely subjective, sociological researchers Marie Bruvik Heinskou and Lasse Suonperä Liebst draw our attention to objective ways of measuring the feelings that unfold during social engagement in ritualization (2016). In particular, Porges' landmark work[6] adds new tools and methods to the scientist's toolbox.

RITUAL ANCHORS MEMORIES AND TIME

Interestingly, Levine prescribes this process of oscillation between intense emotions for the resolution of trauma in the therapeutic context.[7] Based on the observation that pain and pleasure cannot be felt simultaneously, he advises *titrating* strong feelings and *pendulating* between painful and pleasurable memories. This is exactly what a competent celebrant instinctively does during a ceremony. Although Levine has never applied this part of his theory to ritualizing, he does assert: 'The tranquil feelings of aliveness and ecstatic self-transcendence that make us fully human can also be accessed through ritual. This way they become enduring features of our existence' (2005, p.xvii). This process is reinforced by memory.

Recent neuroscientific research by Karim Nader's research shows that, contrary to what we previously thought, memories are not permanent:

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6 'Porges helped us understand how dynamic our biological systems are. He gave us an explanation why a kind face and a soothing tone of voice can dramatically…help people shift out of disorganised fearful states… If physiological mind-brain-viscera communication is the royal road to affect regulation, this invites a radical shift in our therapeutic approaches…to anxiety, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, autism, and trauma-related psychopathology… The polyvagal theory legitimates the study of age-old collective and religious [sic] practices such as communal chanting, various breathing technics, and other methods that cause shifts in autonomic state' (van der Kolk 2011, p.xvi).

7 Levine refers to this moving back and forth between emotions as pendulation, 'the primal rhythm expressed as movement from constriction to expansion – and back to constriction, but gradually opening to more and more expansion… The perception of pendulation guides the gradual contained release (discharge) of "trauma energies" leading to expansive body sensations and successful trauma resolution' (2010, p.80). He uses the acronym TRIPODS to describe this process in healing trauma: Titrating, Resourcing, Integrating, Pendulating, Organizing, Discharging, Stabilizing.

His mentor Joseph E. Le Doux explains that the 'brain isn't interested in having a perfect set of memories about the past… instead, memory comes with a natural updating mechanism, which is how we make sure that the information taking up valuable space inside our head is still useful. This might make our memories less accurate, but it certainly makes them more relevant to the present and the future [i.e., adaptive]' (Le Doux quoted in Levine 2015, p.141). Since memories are not fixed, recall during ritualization has the potentiality of switching off the fear generator and interrupting the somatic loops that involve negative repetitive thoughts, emotions, images or actions. Rituals reflect our concept of time, how it passes and what that passing means. Appropriate ritualizing in a safe setting is an opportunity to relegate painful sensations from the past to the past by updating a memory based on new information. Upgraded sensations, in particular smell,[8] form rescripted memories and emotions that, when accessed anew during ritual, empower rather than overpower. 'In this way', remarks anthropologist Matthieu Smyth, 'ritualizing a lifecycle passage, or even a seasonal event, serves as a benchmark or reference point among a series of lesser points. It reassures us that we have indeed moved on from one phase to another, and that the transition has truly been completed; it inaugurates a new reality within which we can evolve in peace' (2014).

8 According to Amanda White, research technologist in the Psychiatry Department at Penn State College of Medicine, the olfactory bulb has direct connections to two brain areas that are strongly implicated in emotion and memory: the amygdala and hippocampus. Interestingly, visual, auditory (sound) and tactile (touch) information do not pass through these brain areas. This may be why olfaction, more than any other sense, is so successful at triggering emotions and memories (White 2015).

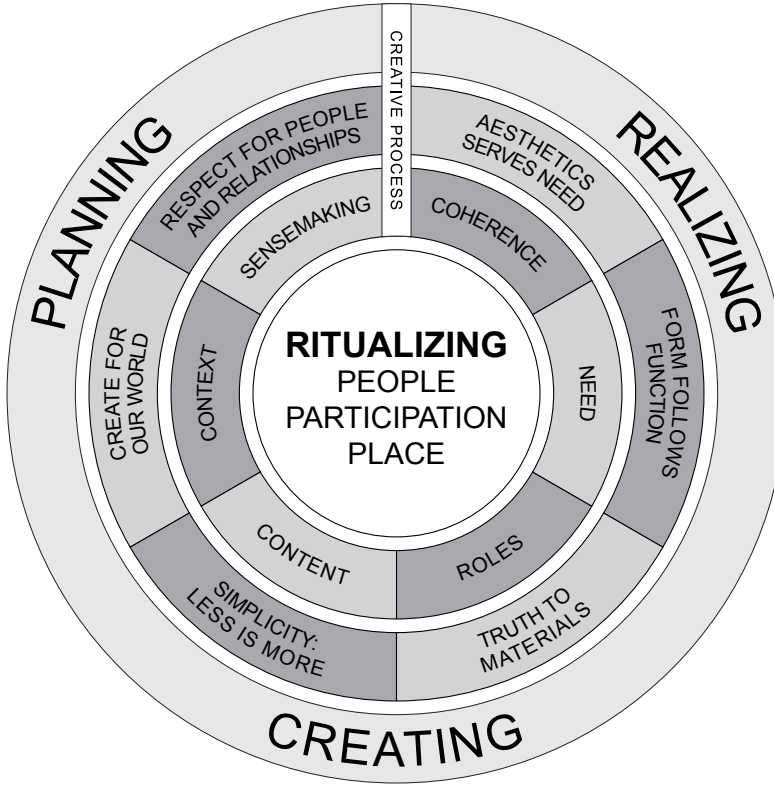

Figure 4.2. Creative process

Figure 4.2 illustrates the application of the creative process to the creation of secular ritual. The threefold process involves planning, creating and realizing (see the outer ring). The six basic rules of ritual design form the acronym CRAFTS (see the second ring). Ritual design is buttressed by six supports: need, roles, context, content, sensemaking and coherence (see the third ring). At the heart of each ritual is a person or people, an event, a transition or an occasion (see the centre). These concepts are developed more fully in my book, *Crafting Secular Ritual: A Practical Guide* (2016).

RITUAL AS A CULTURALLY STRATEGIC WAY OF ACTING IN THE WORLD

Ritualizing is a social activity that contributes to our capacity as human beings to celebrate joyful moments and spring back after hardship. 'Unlike in recent centuries, in which rituals [were] set by hierarchical societies,' Levine observes, 'we moderns need to participate directly in the creation of our own transformational experiences through ritual' (2005, p.xvii).

The function of traditional ritual

Traditional ritual brings people together for a ceremony; the social gathering that follows is just as important. Our sense of taste enhances a sense of belonging and conviviality. When people first feel that traditional rituals are no longer appropriate, they typically try to get their institution to adapt its rituals to suit their needs. Fiancés ask their religious leader or mayor to do or add 'something special' so that the traditional wedding ceremony has meaning for them. Upon the death of a non-religious relative, families request that there be no mention of religion or god during the funeral. As a rule, traditional ritual is designed to take people smoothly from the planning to the realizing phase. Established ritual components were created and then evolved over a period of time; they require participation but no creative input from the adherent. The desire to actively create one's own transformational ritual experience is at cross-purposes with the institution's function as guardian of ritual tradition.

Ritualizing in multicultural contexts

Another common reaction to the sentiment that traditional rituals are unsuitable involves borrowing or stealing – depending on one's perspective – rituals that seem to work for other cultures.[9] This is not a new phenomenon. Throughout the history of humankind, ritualmaking has been enriched by cultural exchange. Sinologist Nicolas Standaert

9 Many indigenous peoples are insulted by Westerners' appropriation of their rituals. Ironically, appreciation for tribal rituals increases at a time in human history when it is rare, if not impossible, to find people who remain unscathed by the impact of Western culture.

explores a 17th-century example of cross-cultural ritual exchange between Europeans and Chinese people during the funeral of an Italian Jesuit priest called Matteo Ricci (1552–1610). Ricci's funeral lasted well over a year, as traditional Christian rites were grafted onto established Chinese practices to reinvent funerary rituals. Standaert's analysis of the mechanics of two-way cultural interaction exchange[10] is pertinent, not only for Ricci's colleagues and their Chinese converts, but also for 21st-century contexts where people also find themselves 'in-between' traditions. Standaert stresses the importance of 'the internal coherence of rituals that are created anew as a result of [cross-cultural] encounter… By "coherence" is meant that in the eyes of [the ritualmakers], the new creation fits internally together, makes sense, and is considered effective' (2008, p.212). Without a doubt, throughout the ages, creating rituals that fit these three conditions has always required time, skill and rigour.

The risks of do-it-yourself ritual

The fanciful, copy-paste approach too often associated with emerging ritual is rarely satisfying and not without risk. Ritologist Ronald L. Grimes observes:

> Like traditional rituals, do-it-yourself (DIY) ritual can result in complicity, empty gestures, people having to do something they resist doing. In either case, deep-seated resentment can lie under the surface of ritual acts. If DIY rituals are really going to meet our needs, they have to be made up out of the familiar, not the exotic: metaphors that make sense to us, language that reflects the way we see the world, and symbols with which we have a history. Start with your own broken teacups, the stuff in your backyard, keepsakes in the backs of drawers. Begin there, not with someone else's rituals. (Grimes 2016)

10 Standaert presents four analytic frameworks for understanding the role of cross-cultural exchange in ritualmaking: transmission, reception, invention and interaction, and communication. He describes the fourth framework as 'not a *radical* alternative to the other frameworks, but rather it builds upon those previous frameworks…it helps to reveal the internal coherence of rituals that are created anew as a result of the Chinese-European encounter' (2008, p.212).

SENSEMAKING[11] IN RITUALMAKING

The couple who believe that they must *give meaning* to their wedding ceremony may spend hours trawling the internet, sifting through wedding vows, ready-made poems or readings; they may take symbols from cultures that are foreign to them. Most find it more rewarding to sit face-to-face, perhaps over a glass of wine or on a sunny terrace, in sincere discussion about what the transition means to them separately and as a couple. The real challenge they face is how to nudge out what being married means *to them.*

One newly married couple I worked with told me:

> We had little idea of the work involved when we contacted you. But, what we do remember about our wedding was the ceremony: the preparation was crucial. For us, it meant an eight-month long process that gave us the opportunity to ask ourselves questions and put words on how we experience our relationship. Pronouncing the vow we wrote ourselves in front of our nearest and dearest made it official. The symbolic gestures of our promise were meaningful because they made sense to us and to our guests. When we left [the place where the ceremony was held] we felt married. When we got home, it felt real. Now, we cannot imagine having done it any other way; it was so right for us.

This couple made their personalized wedding ceremony 'from scratch', yet it was not *creatio ex nihilo*. The process involved setting aside time to explore the meaning that is tucked away in the nooks and crannies of their own lives and cultural traditions. The values they share were 'decoded' into words and gestures. The couple negotiated the wording of their commitment to their common goals in a joint wedding vow. Every aspect of their ceremony communicated these shared values to their guests: vow, words spoken, symbols, choice of guests, venue, decorations,

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11 Sensemaking is the process by which people experience and make sense of their experiences. While the search for sense has been studied by several disciplines under a number of names for centuries, the term 'sensemaking' has marked scientific research since the 1970s.

food and drink. It was the coherence of these elements that rendered the wedding ritual meaningful for them and their entourage.

People with pluricultural origins may need to delve deeply into their multifaceted heritage and draw upon several traditions simultaneously to achieve a sense of wholeness in their ritualmaking. Since they belong to these cultures, their use of traditional texts or practices is not only legitimate but it is also meaningful, respectful and coherent with their identity.

Some occasions, such as when a newborn is not expected to live, leave little time for deep interactive planning. Yet even then there is no reason to resort to a chaplain or other people's rituals. I encourage young parents to consciously make this time special by being an island of safety for their baby. Leave no room for regrets. Touch, authentic words and taking in each other's smells contribute to savouring each moment. Clinical psychologist and rolfer (bodyworker) Pedro Prado affirms that meaning-making involves not only the mind and the body: 'Meaning is an individual and cultural factor. When we are going for meaning…we are also going for how the individual shares it with others' (Prado and Allen 2005, pp.25–28). Even an ephemeral 'community' composed of a nurse and a parent contributes to humanizing a tragic situation. One couple held their newborn, shared their hopes and sorrows, and tied a colourfully braided ribbon to the baby's ankle to mark her connection to their 'clan'. It made more sense to them than a few drops of water sprinkled by clergy they might never see again.

Expectations for sensemaking and authenticity are higher for reinvented and customized ritual, observes sociologist Margaret Holloway. She quotes a mourner leaving a funeral as saying: 'Funerals aren't nice but it couldn't have been nicer' (2015, n.p.). Emerging rituals need to feel right to be right. In order to feel right, ritualizing must touch the body's 'felt-sense' and effect a 'felt shift'[12] (Gendlin 1962, p.44). Making ritual that

12 'A felt sense is not a mental experience, but a physical one, a bodily awareness of a situation or a person or an event. [It is] an internal aura that encompasses everything you feel and know about a given subject at a given time – encompasses it and communicates it to you all at once rather than detail by detail' (Gendlin 1962, p.44).

feels right involves *seeking*, *creating* and *taking meaning* (Holloway 2015). People *seek meaning* through their choices about the different aspects of the ceremony such as music, readings, dress and symbols. They then use these elements to *create meaning* for themselves and those present at the ceremony. *Taking meaning* from a ceremony marks the transition and anchors it in daily life.

Guidelines for repackaging ritual

- Authenticity, not parody of others' rituals
- Voluntary, not imposed
- Theatrical, not theatre
- Artistic, not Art
- Celebration, not a party
- Therapeutic, not therapy
- Playful, not a game
- Time-out-of-time, not time-out

THE SECRET TO REPACKAGING CONTEMPORARY RITUAL

Ritual needs to be repackaged today as an alternative culturally strategic way of acting in the world. The secret to making secular ritual that effectively meets our most profound human needs lies in a creative process based on coherence and authenticity. This calls for theory that focuses on the experiencing body. Ritual is not a game, but it can be playful; it is not therapy, but it can be therapeutic; it is not theatre, but it is theatrical; it is not Art, but it is artistic.[13] The process I use as a celebrant to ritualize lifecycle transitions can be summarized as personalized *accompaniment* that leads to the creation of ritual that makes sense because it is based on *authenticity*, *affect* and *coherence*.

13 While I have used these formulas for years with clients and in celebrant training courses, I was delighted to discover recently that Ronald L. Grimes presents his students with a table of similar formulations to stimulate discussion about ritual. See Chapter 8 'Mapping Ritual' in his book *The Craft of Ritual Studies* (2014).

CONCLUSION

We live in a dislocated society at the cusp of an era of inevitable change. The challenges of our ultramodern world require that people everywhere 'do something' to remain human and connected with others. Like the ancients, we do this by conscientiously engaging in playful, artistic and ritual pursuits. As a culturally strategic way of acting, ritual is basically communal and emotional: it makes us feel less alone, more supported, inventive, proactive, safe and alive. Fitting secular ritual represents a unique and profoundly humanizing and civilizing force that fixes us – individually and collectively – firmly in present reality.

We create and harness the power of ritual as we celebrate a marriage, welcome a child into the family, mark a youth's coming of age, a graduation, a birthday, a seasonal festival or honour the dead with a funeral. By acknowledging our joys and sorrows together, we strengthen our attachment and emotional attunement and fashion landmarks in time and space that help us make sense of our lives, our relationships and the world around us. To achieve this end, our ritualmaking must obey the highest laws: respect for people, relationships and the Earth. Body-based secular ritualizing is capable of enhancing our social bonds, transforming us into caring groups and fostering organic communities that promote social and even ecological and geo-political stability.

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Bjarni Jónsson became the General Manager of Siðmennt, the Icelandic Ethical Humanist Association, in 2015 when he was hired on as full-time staff. Bjarni joined the organization in 1990, the year it was founded, and has since served in several capacities such as board member (2000–present) and vice-resident of the association.

Lindy Mechefske is a former scientific copyeditor turned freelance writer. She has lived in England, the USA and Australia, but now resides, along with a big shaggy dog, in beautiful, historic Kingston, Canada. Lindy is the author of *Sir John's Table* (2015) and *A Taste of Wintergreen* (2011). You can find her blogging about her adventures in the kitchen at lindymechefske.com

Jacqueline Millner, PhD, is associate dean, Research, and lecturer in Critical Studies at Sydney College of the Arts, The University of Sydney, Australia. Jacqueline completed studies in law, political science and visual arts, before consolidating a career as an arts writer and academic specializing in the history and theory of contemporary art. Jacqueline wrote two books on Australian contemporary art, *Conceptual Beauty* (2010) and *Australian Artists in the Contemporary Museum* (2014), which is co-authored with Jennifer Barrett. Her latest book, *Contemporary Art and Feminism* (2017), is co-written with Catriona Moore.

Lene Mürer is Head of Ceremonies at the Norwegian Humanist Association.

Marie Louise Petersen is Vice Chairperson of the Danish Humanist Society (DHS). She also took charge of Ceremonies (2013–2016) and contributed to the development of programmes for funeral and confirmation ceremonies and has practical experience in both fields. She is currently developing a Humanist Chaplaincy programme for the DHS. Marie Louise lives and works as a trained teacher in Copenhagen.

Michael Picucci, PhD, is a psychologist, psychotherapist, Master Addictions Counsellor, Sexologist, Somatic Experiencing Practitioner and Organizational

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Isabel Russo, BA Hons, is Head of Ceremonies at the British Humanist Association (BHA). Isabel lives with her son and works in London, UK. She worked internationally as an actress in theatre, film and television for 20 years before becoming a humanist celebrant in 2009. Isabel was a funeral, wedding and naming celebrant for four years before becoming Head of Ceremonies at the BHA. The role of ritual and storytelling in shaping and influencing community has been a central thread throughout her working life.

Robert C. Scaer, MD, is a neurologist and psychologist, currently retired from clinical medical practice. Robert is the father of four children and has six grandchildren. He lives in Louisville, USA with his partner. He is the author of a number of books and articles on the effects of trauma, notably *The Body Bears the Burden: Trauma, Dissociation and Disease* (2001); *The Trauma Spectrum: Hidden Wounds and Human Resiliency* (2005); and *8 Keys to Brain-Body Balance* (2012).

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Gianpiero Vincenzo, MA, is a sociologist, art critic, novelist and specialist in Islamic studies. After several years at the University of Naples Federico II, in 2010 he was appointed professor of sociology at the Fine Arts Academy of Catania in Sicily, Italy. Gianpiero lives in Sicily with his wife and daughter. He has curated contemporary art exhibitions and published art catalogues, academic essays on Eastern religions and civil ritual and novels. His historical novel *Il Libro Disceso dal Cielo* (2005) was translated into six languages. His recent book, *New Ritual Society: Consumerism and Culture in Contemporary Society* (2015), is available in Italian and English.

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