

WITNESSING LIFE TRANSITIONS WITH RITUAL AND CEREMONY IN FAMILY THERAPY: THREE EXAMPLES FROM A METIS THERAPIST

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Ceremonial acknowledgment of significant life changes can offer support, connectedness, dignity and a sense of belonging. When the change involves loss, as in the case of separation and divorce, the grief can be witnessed ritualistically in ways that provide comfort and support for the shifts in social identity or status. While Western cultures hold traditions that mark many joyous accomplishments, there are fewer ceremonial opportunities to acknowledge sorrowful endings, particularly separation and relationship transition. Many Indigenous cultures mark transitional moments with ritual and ceremony. However, when rites of passage are lost due to colonialism, reinventing rituals and transitional ceremonies becomes more important and can be experienced with an added poignancy. This paper explores four aspects of ritual by offering: (1) a brief history of ritual in family therapy, (2) a discussion of what rituals consist of and how they can be applied, (3) three examples of developmental rituals from a Metis family culture, and (4) the significance of rituals from a Metis perspective. The creation of culturally inspired therapeutic rituals can offer richness in work with families and support the benefits of connection, belonging, spirituality and acknowledging achievement. These goals support therapeutic goals related to growth, change and transformation.

Rituals are an important part of daily life and ceremony is inherent to most cultures on the planet. In my Metis culture, rituals tend to follow a developmental chronology in which people may ceremonialize birth with naming ceremonies, puberty with adolescent rites of passage, marriage, and accomplishments as well as losses.

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With open arms, I embrace everyone who supported me through this transition, the folks who attended my transitional ceremony, and Elizabeth Gorla, who helped me through the hardest day. Much love!

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Rituals are enacted in community and invite contemplation, witnessing, acknowledgment, and feasting. They may also include spiritual practices such as singing, praying, offering blessings, and extending love. While this article is written for therapists, with suggestions about how to understand ritualistic practices and incorporate them into therapy, there is a part of this article that addresses broader human concerns, such as life's delights and its unpredictability, that sometimes leaving us feeling perplexed and unsupported. Rituals, at least Indigenous ones, are enacted in cultural settings to (1) promote a sense of connection, belonging and community, (2) acknowledge a particular life phase or accomplishment, (3) assign a challenge or task to be overcome, and (4) invoke *Kitchie Manitou*, the Creator or the spirit of life to infuse the group with wisdom and love.

In this article, I will discuss the following points related to ritual: a brief history of the use of ritual in family therapy, what rituals consist of and how they can be applied, three examples of developmental rituals from a Metis family culture, and the significance of rituals from a Metis perspective.¹ This discussion will provide therapists with examples that may inspire further creativity in regards to creating and incorporate ritual and ceremony into family and community work.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE USE OF RITUAL IN FAMILY THERAPY

In their efforts to assist families through separation, divorce and the accompanying emotional and social difficulties, some family therapists have noted the uncharted nature of various “endings.” For example, Evan Imber-Black and Janine Roberts write, “family members often express to us that they have no road maps for what family life should be like” (1993, p. 1). These authors distinguish between “therapeutic rituals” and “cultural rituals,” saying that therapeutic rituals are different from daily rituals “because they are less embedded in the ongoing history of the family” (Imber-Black, Roberts, & Whiting, 1988, p. 24). The authors state that this distinction “creates both advantages and disadvantages for the design of therapeutic rituals” (1988, p. 25), an advantage being that newly created therapeutic rituals are more flexible and are not embedded in the “weight of years of empty rituals” (p. 25). In addition, the focus can be directed to a specific area of suffering or accomplishment.

¹The Metis are one of the three Indigenous groups in Canada recognized in the Constitution Act (1982), along with the First Nations and Inuit. Generally speaking, the Metis are a people that lived together in Metis communities, such as the Red River settlement, and in Rupertsland, born of the liaisons between First Nations women (Cree, Ojibway, for example) and European men (typically Scottish or French fur traders). The Metis gelled as a distinct cultural group during the fur trade period and have a unique culture, language (Mitschiff), and traditions related to the land on which they lived.

A number of family therapy traditions were influenced by the work of prominent anthropologists (Bateson, 1958; Bell, 1992; Myerhoff, 1982, 1987). Also, various collective cultural practices, such as witnessing, sharing, and listening complement and influence systemic, second-order cybernetic interaction (Anderson, 1987; Bateson, 1972). Practices of weaving people together and highlighting relational interaction, often through the use of systemic questioning, are visible in the work of the Milan Team (Boscolo, Cecchin, Hoffman, & Penn, 1987). Clearly, the focus on the relationships between people, and practices that “uplift” healing, positive change, and new ways of being have been key in family therapy.

Taking from his reading of van Gennep’s *Rites de Passage* (1960/2004), narrative therapist Michael White used the term “definitional ceremony” to describe the use of the reflecting team method (1995, 1999) to mark important life events in the presence of important people. Barbara Myerhoff (1982, 1986) has informed narrative work and experienced her Hasidic Jewish community’s integration of ritual to assist her in her battle with cancer. Narrative practice and community work out of Australia have been deeply informed by the work of the Just Therapy team from Lower Hutt, New Zealand. This multicultural team comprised of Samoan, Maori, and Pakeha therapists, organized around specific structures for safety, gender, and cultural accountability, has helped narrative practice in the integration of culture and ceremony (Tamasese, Peteru, Waldegrave, & Bush, 2005; Waldegrave, 2009).

Another body of literature with expertise to offer in the area of ritual and healing comes from what I would call the Earth-centered, women’s spirituality movement. Teachers and community facilitators such as Joanna Macy (2000; Macy & Brown, 2010), Starhawk (1997), and Oriah Mountain Dreamer (2005, 2006) provide examples of supporting women to heal in community while focusing on a broader goal of honoring Earth and maintaining this holistic focus on the wellness of all beings. However, it is in looking to my/our own Metis and Indigenous ceremonies where I experience the most depth and profundity.² Indigenous authors offer scholarly examples of cases where Indigenous ritual has been applied therapeutically with the aim of healing the heart and the spirit (Little Bear, 2000; McCormick, 1997; Richardson, 2009). Other Indigenous counselors describe the benefits of family therapy with Indigenous families when the conversations are based on Indigenous values: Dene family counselor Susanne Stewart writes:

In Canada, Indigenous peoples lives’ are shaped by relationships with their families. These relationships are defined by traditional Indigenous conceptions of connectedness

²As a Metis woman with Cree and Dene/Gwichin origins, I have been inspired by ceremonies such as the Sundance, the Smudge, Women’s Circles, and Sweat Lodges involving talk, prayer, healing medicines, drumming, and singing. Trance inducement, similar to other meditative practices, offers an experience of connection, belonging, and respite from isolation.

with the earth, communities and the many relations that occur within these contexts, are based on what is termed Indigenous ways of knowing. (2009, p. 62)

As the former director of the Aboriginal Family Therapy Centre, I have been made aware by work in various Aboriginal contexts of the deep relationship to land, plants, water, spirit, and the Ancestors expressed similarly and uniquely in different cultural communities. Work in the Centre often involved the use of cleaning rituals such as smudging, prayers, clearing negativity with an Eagle feather, and the use of a drum for meditative and trance-related processes. At one point, eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) was adapted to serve Indigenous clients with the drum serving as the rhythmic function of the practice, together with the use of guided meditation to converse with spirit guides and loved ones for guidance, support, and an infusion of familial love. Much of my work has taken place in the Yukon with the Kaska community as well as in Metis and First Nations communities on Vancouver Island. Ritual and ceremonies constitute a significant part of this work with families and communities.

WHAT RITUALS CONSIST OF AND HOW THEY CAN BE APPLIED

In my work, rituals consist of a number of stages. These include: (1) deciding who will participate, (2) inviting people in and creating a sacred space (often with candles, a smudge, appropriate music, the setting up of chairs, and attention to comfort), (3) entering into a ritualistic purposeful task (perhaps involving movement, a gesture), (4) entering a deeper space, experiencing a collective deepening, personal insights, or “aha” moments in response to the process, (5) moving back into the daily reality, sharing or debriefing with structured conversation and reflections, (6) closing the circle, and (7) sharing food together.

In her article “Weaving Threads of Belonging: Cultural Witnessing Groups,” Vikki Reynolds (2002) applies activist and social justice informed witnessing processes in youth groups with gay, bi, and trans youth who are not experiencing safety in the world and rely on collective belonging for well-being and survival.³ In addition, Vikki uses “witnessing” with survivors of torture (Reynolds, 2002, 2008, 2011, 2012). I would describe aspects of Vikki’s approach to witnessing as similar to those used in Metis ceremonies, although not identical. Similar to Metis cultural practices, Vikki sets the stage by often working in a circle, setting

³According to Vikki Reynolds, 43% of transgendered people in Canada either end their life or attempt to their life as a result of hate (2012).

up collective safety, articulating commitments to group support and collective ethics, speaking and witnessing sacred conversations, and closing sessions with intent and discretion. For example, once an interview or a circle has been “closed,” group members are not permitted to reopen the content by asking questions or referring back to one person’s personal and confidential experience. One person’s experience is not opened for critique or group interrogation; rather, the conversation is witnessed. There is an implicit future commitment to social justice and social change in return for the gift of the learning. Similarly, with a Metis infant’s naming ceremony, the participants are then spiritually bound to assist in raising and caring for that child.

Vikki sometimes refers to the groups cultural witnessing groups, or solidarity groups, depending on the sites of belonging of the group, and depending on the contexts of the work. She describes the steps in her witnessing approach as follows: (1) structuring safety, (2) collective and cultural accountability, (3) collaboration, (4) honouring resistance, (5) belonging, community, solidarity, (6), witness not gossip, and (7) immeasurable outcomes.

Resonating with my understanding and application of Metis rituals, Vikki writes, “I understand sustainability as an ongoing aliveness, a genuine connectedness with people and a spirit of spirit” (2011, p. 159). Contextually, this work is applicable to Indigenous families because of the colonial history of state-supported violence against Indigenous families (Adams, 1989, 1995; Churchill, 2003; Little Bear, 2000; Richardson & Wade, 2008), making it necessary to resurrect and reconstruct aspects of traditions and creating added relevance to contemporary settings.

THREE EXAMPLES OF DEVELOPMENTAL FAMILY RITUALS IN MY METIS FAMILY

In this section, I will present briefly aspects of an infant’s naming ceremony, a teenage girl’s “coming of age” ceremony, and a definitional ceremony to acknowledge a significant relationship transition after marital separation. Before entering into these examples, I will comment briefly on the theory behind these practices, what I will call “ceremonial praxis.”

While theoretical approaches to ritual use in therapy have taken an anthropological or “outside looking in” orientation, I tend to work from an “insider” perspective of applications of ritual and ceremony. Strictly speaking, rituals and ceremonies evolved in relation to the particular land and the particular language(s) used in specific areas. For example, prairie traditions involve medicines such as sweetgrass and songs in the prairie language, while coastal ceremonies reflect the songs, protocols, and witnessing traditions of the coast, such as the longhouse. However, creative therapists can incorporate, with integrity, spiritual and

ceremonial processes based on knowledges from their own cultural and spiritual communities and, in consultation, based on those of the family with whom they are working. Theoretically, rituals and ceremony center on practices and methodologies such as Indigenous storytelling methodology (Richardson, 2004; Thomas, 2005). They may incorporate aspects of shamanic practice, although many Indigenous families now practice Christianity and may recite Christian prayers. In reality, a mix of traditions is in effect. Metis rituals are examples of an orchestrated positive social response to suffering, which has been shown in the literature to promote recovery after adversity (Andrews, Brewin, & Rose, 2003; Richardson, 2009; Richardson & Wade, 2008).

When my youngest son reached approximately two months, a “welcoming circle” was hosted for him at a Metis community agency where I had worked. The circle consisted of about 22 community members. We joined together in a circle, which was opened by prayers and a cleansing ceremony. Words of rejoice and welcome were offered to Rupert, who was tucked snugly in a cradle board made in the Cree community of Onion Lake, Saskatchewan. This little bundle was passed around the circle four times; everyone looked into his eyes, offered blessings to him, and infused him with love. It was noted that he would live to at least the age of 88, due to his rotations around the circle. Earlier, Rupert had been given the affectionate name “Handsome Boss” by the Cree women in Onion Lake, after they had spent some time with him. He would later receive another spirit name in a sun dance ceremony, at the age of 11. After a song was sung, the circle was closed and everyone had a meal together. In this way, those who participated were then tied energetically to Rupert’s life and heart, with an intention to be available for him in community throughout his life.

When my daughter turned 13, with the intention to acknowledge the crossing from child to young woman, I arranged a Metis ceremony for her. As a mother, I was deeply grateful that my daughter had reached this threshold in her life untouched by violence or the vileness that so many young women face . . . a victory for her beautiful young spirit. To this point, she had experienced only minor inconveniences and had been spared by the hand of trauma or even grief. Until the time of her parents’ separation (which would come later) and apart from the grotesque verbal jousting with her younger brothers, her life had been blessed with gentleness.

Together with many of her favorite girls and women, we set off on a pilgrimage to a dramatic beach on the west coast of Vancouver Island. In this ceremony, my daughter and three other teenage girls performed a number of tasks resonant of Metis culture and coming of age. These gestures included the acknowledgment of reproduction in its sacred responsibility and receiving teachings from the women in this community. The girls served food to guests while nestling under one arm heavy beach logs wrapped in baby blankets. They performed the lighting of a

fire, its challenge or ease symbolizing the nature of the transition to the next life stage. That went smoothly, happily. They listened to the words of their guests who offered insights, blessings, recipes, and unsolicited advice about getting older. Then we all danced in a circle and then a line, celebrating music, movement, and womanhood, which seemed a bit threatening for some of the onlooking tourists who had approached thinking it was some form of exotic hotel entertainment. They looked uncomfortable to find that many of the Aboriginal women were not wearing the expected native costumes.

We had a feast, which began with the girls presenting a plate for the Ancestors in a protected natural area. While the event was joyful in all ways, my daughter was in awe and wonder that all this was taking place in her honor. She had not been in any rush to take the next steps into adulthood. In a therapeutic sense, this ritual can be considered an antidote to the kind of loss of self lamented in *Reviving Ophelia* (Pipher, 2005) as well as an antidote to the destruction of Indigenous family traditions and the banning of ceremonies through colonization (Anderson, 2000; Smith, 2005). This kind of strengthening also serves to counteract the racist experiences that harm the dignity and development of Metis children in Canada (Carriere, 2005; Richardson, 2004). There are a multitude of Indigenous rituals, such as the Berry Fast, the Moon Lodge, and the Sun Dance, that reinforce the important role of teenage girls in their community. Although these ceremonies were outlawed by colonial laws, they are being practiced today in many communities across Canada.

A few years later when my marriage had ended in a particularly painful way, a few thoughts persisted inside my mind. I believed that an age of innocence for my children had ended and that we had been flung into a new kind of unpredictable existence together. We had become metaphorical travelers, disoriented and unsure of our level of comfort and provisions along the way. Ethically, I felt uncomfortable about leaving a once-made promise intact while the vestiges of a marriage were dangling in the recent past. In a church, in front of all those witnesses, I had been bonded to my husband in a lifelong promise. And even though the priest was later fired for impropriety, I felt that the vow still carried a life of its own. I noticed that while there are church-sanctioned rituals for the “doing” of marriage, there seemed to be no parallel spiritual process for the “undoing” at a time when I felt almost completely undone. Separation and the dividing of a life did not offer the same cadre of happy witnesses.

I began to put thought to the choreography that would become the ceremony of my undoing and my undoing of an expired ceremony. As with all liberatory practices, my goal was to set my heart free and to feel unburdened, to experience a release and a new beginning.

While thinking about recent events, my mind traveled to the people who had been loyal to me, steadfastness in their friendship and open concern. I visualized

in a circle those dear ones who would be my witnesses. I reflected back to my wedding and the role of the witnesses in that process, wondering why so few had actually been present to offer support during the life of the relationship.

In the spirit of creating something more meaningful for myself, I thought about the people I most wanted around me, to witness my undoing. It happened that a number of folks were therapists and activists by profession; some had been friends for a while and were aware of my journey through heartbreak. In their presence, I would “tell my story,” the story of my unraveling marriage as well as some of the sweeter parts of this union, including love’s beginning and the births of my three children.

As mentioned, my goal was to experience multiple forms of liberation but with a greater end in mind. A noted Indigenous philosopher, Leroy Little Bear, writes that “if a person is whole and balanced, then he or she is in a position to fulfill his or her individual responsibilities to the whole” (2000, p.79). In my hopes of moving beyond my personal pain and becoming more helpful to my community, I constructed this ritual by following these steps: (1) envisioning the ritual, (2) identifying and inviting the witnesses, clarifying the intention, (3) hosting the event, (4) structuring the space for a safe and sacred sharing and reflecting, (5) telling my story; going around the circle inviting reflections, (6) performing a ritual, prepared by a Metis healer, to undo the vows and realign the relationship with my former partner, (7) closing the circle with poems, some written by the witnesses, and (8) celebrating with a glass of champagne and a song by Mercedes Sosa, “Gracias a la Vida.”

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RITUALS FROM A METIS PERSPECTIVE

One of the main goals of ritual and ceremony is to reduce isolation and create a positive social response to the person who is suffering. Rituals incorporate various phases of a therapeutic session, such as opening, structuring safety, exploring content, exploring and setting goals, and determining a process for evaluating success and identifying supports, allies, and available resources. There is a powerful sense of solidification by adding a spiritual component, so that the experience feels blessed or sanctified in a way that is personal for the participants and particularly for the person who is centered in the ritual. Rituals tend to acknowledge and dignify, restoring dignity in response to previously humiliating situations involving abandonment, loss, deception, or cruelty. There may be an act of reconciliation, in terms of restoring what was once whole. Micro-aspects of the experience may offer acts of strengthening that become the difference that makes a difference (Anderson, 1987).

A few weeks after the completion of the ritual, I wrote to the witnesses and asked if they would mail me a written reflection of the experience from their perspective. I received several letters that kept the ritual alive for me and took my thinking to a new level in relation to what my ceremony had meant for others in their own lives. This was truly a group project, and most witnesses reported something being different for them afterwards. I also sent a narrative letter to each of them, thanking them for their participation and elaborating on some of the ways I was feeling better because of it.

CONCLUSION

What resonates for me in these responses is the shared nature of life experience. I can look around me and see friends and colleagues who are in the midst of particular phases in their relationships, some ending, some beginning, and some in the middle with comfort and continuity. Most relationships do not end; they just change in form. Creating and enacting rituals in a community of concern or a therapeutic environment may serve as a blessed reminder of our connectedness. We are often “belonged” (Richardson & Reynolds, 2012) in a circle of care but need to be reminded of this when we are feeling most fragile and irrelevant. As therapists and community workers, we can offer this sacred reminder to clients, colleagues, friends, and family at those crucial and painful times that often go unmarked in the midst of busy lives and the fear of endings we sometimes possess. And, in terms of clinical and life supervision, it is important as therapists that we work through our own suffering. I am inspired by the words of Joanne Macy: “The heart that breaks open can contain the whole universe” (2012). With the correct structures of safety and reverence in place, rituals such as witnessing can serve as powerful processes of change and repair for individuals, families, and groups of various cultural affiliations.

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