

Moving Into Sacred Realms

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Ritual Definitions

Attempting to define ritual is like trying to define poetry. As I write, I have surrounded me a wealth of phrases, thoughts and definitions from a variety of anthropologists, psychologists, poets, dancers, ritualists of different sorts, not to mention the dictionary, and each of them has something important to add; each captures something of the essence of ritual. According to a few of these sources, ritual is:

. . . the ineffable structured into an event, an interaction of forces by which something else arises (Highwater, 1977).

. . . a sequence of events that allows communication with the collective unconscious and hidden portions of self to take place (Adler, 1979).

. . . any ordered sequence of events, actions and/or directed thoughts, especially one that is repeated in the same manner each time, that is designed to produce predictable altered states of consciousness within which certain magical or religious (or artistic or scientific?) results may be obtained (Bonewits, 1979).

. . . any practice regularly repeated in a set, precise manner so as to satisfy one's sense of fitness (Webster's Dictionary).

Each of these definitions or descriptions contains elements of what I am referring to when I use the term ritual, but it is very difficult to synthesize them into a complete definition containing all of them. The Webster's definition, focusing as it does on repetition, would include many activities that do not fit my working definition of ritual. Apart from that description, the common theme seems to be reference to an event or sequence of events that is set apart, considered special. Roy Rappaport (1975) emphasized this quality of specialness in his description of what he calls "conventional display" in ritual:

Display . . . would seem to include the assumption of stylized postures, the use of stereotyped gestures, presence at special places at special times, dressing in special costume, the manipulation of special paraphernalia, and so on. (p. ?)

All of these modes of display are characterized by their specialness, but the function of display is not merely to set apart ritual events from any others. The forms of display used in ritual may determine the specialness which classifies it as ritual, but their purpose is communication. The term "display," as Rappaport uses it, indicates the mode of transmission of information in ritual. His description here mentions forms of display that can all be considered under the category of physical display (although verbal display often plays an important role in ritual as well).

Physical display is closely associated with indexical information (about the current social, psychic, or physical state of the organism transmitting it) (Rappaport, 1975), and is our strong link with animal rituals (animals for the most part not having access to verbal display). In addition to props, costumes, and environment, this category contains dance movement as well as special postures and gesture. Why bother with bodily display - essentially an inefficient and awkward way of transmitting information - when we have access to language? Rappaport's response: "How could information concerning some state of the transmitter better be signalled than by displaying that state itself?" Words are slippery; your connotations for the word "anger" may not correspond to the feelings I associate with it. Demonstrating how I am, how I move,

what sounds I make and the expression on my face when I feel anger will give you more information than the word itself can.

The impulse behind physical display is most likely not reasoned out in such a manner. Much of physical display communicates its messages without ever surfacing into a conscious and purposeful decision, and the receiver of the information may be absorbing it on an unconscious level as well. Ray Birdwhistell, researcher in kinesics, stresses that “like other events in nature, no body movement or expression is without meaning in the context in which it appears.” This implies that the information encoded in physical display is part of a gestalt and cannot be understood without viewing it within its larger context.

Part of that context consists of verbal display, which involves more than just words. Ritualized words can be powerful, with their formal, stylized phrases and passages precisely repeated in specific, usually familiar circumstances. One of the powers of words is their ability to evoke other times and places, both through content (imagery conjured up by description) and through memories of hearing the same words in times past. This connection to the past is beyond the scope of most physical display. Memory and associations can trigger kinesic memories but words have the ability to create images of a time and place never experienced before.

Essentially, the physical and verbal aspects of display act in a complementary fashion, each transmitting the sorts of messages most appropriate to that means of communication. The messages communicated are multi-layered: indexical, ceremonial (symbolically encoded information about the social order, providing a sense of certainty, a sense of an enduring order), and sacred (eternal verities and meta-order messages, conveying a sense of timeless cosmological order) messages as well as the relationships between these three (Rappaport, 1975).

To communicate a message of higher order, a meta-message, requires the integration of all of the modes of transmission. In fact, Rappaport believes that “the meta-message into which all of the lesser messages . . . are combined by the integration, even orchestration, of the various modes of communication and of discursive and non-discursive responses to them, is one of integration itself, one of unity or wholeness” (Rappaport, 1975). We are coming close now to the concept of grace as Gregory Bateson used it (and Abraham Maslow and Aldous Huxley): integration of the diverse parts of the mind, specifically “those multiple levels of which one extreme is called ‘consciousness’ and the other ‘unconsciousness’ (Bateson, 1972).

This concept of grace - integration - is essential to aesthetics as well (which is, perhaps, why aesthetic and religious experiences are linked). Art can act as a unifying and integrating factor by providing a common form and label for experiences that cannot be expressed in discursive, linguistic messages. It allows us to have a consensus experience of what are ordinarily varied private experiences, thereby reinforcing the unity of those receiving the messages.

The ritual aesthetic is multi-media and contextual. The information presented comes from an integration of all the elements mentioned in the description of display (postures, gestures, places, times, costumes, props, etc.) with the message to be represented. In the integration process we are immersed in a multi-media, multi-leveled experience; to understand the meta-message, we must absorb it rather than attempting to think it through based on ordinary constructs of reality.

The multi-media effect is part of what produces the state of consciousness necessary for this kind of absorbing process to take place. The ritual context tends to induce an altered state of consciousness, enhanced by components of the ritual that are geared specifically towards that goal. These components may include specific techniques for altering consciousness by

means of physiological effects on the brain and nervous system. Rhythmic music and chanting, drugs, sex, mantras, concentration, breathing, hell-fire preaching, jumping, dancing; all of these induce various alterations in brain activity as well as being hypnotic induction techniques. There is not enough known about hypnosis and trance states to say whether the physiological changes and the hypnotic state are inseparable, but certainly their interaction is part of the powerful effect of ritual.

One means of inducing trance as well as communicating ceremonial messages is the use of repetition, both within a given ritual and as a link connecting separate events. Performing the same actions with the same words, costumes and paraphernalia, with perhaps a few minor changes to adapt to the particular season, holiday or other occasion in question imparts power to a ritual by virtue of the memories it triggers and the sense of stability, the sense of certainty, that are the main thrust of ceremonial information. This element of repetition is another common denominator of many of the ritual definitions I came across; it is, in fact, the main issue in Webster's definition.

Some rituals may be repeated within a given cultural group though each individual experiences the ritual in a particular role only once. Puberty rituals are a classic example; a Jewish man may attend many bar mitzvahs in his life, but he is bar mitzvah himself only once. The knowledge that this ritual has been done again and again and that every Jewish boy experiences it grants the ritual a power that it might not have if a bar mitzvah was an isolated event without its history of repetition.

Repetition is not an essential element of ritual to the extent of defining it, however. There are events that would have to be classified as ritual that are one-time events, planned for a particular occasion or purpose, perhaps never to be performed again in the same manner. These rituals are more frequently seen in the contemporary scene than in traditional tribal settings. Perhaps in a changing environment lacking stabilizing elements, the creation of an appropriate ritual serves as a centering device, a method of stepping outside the chaos of today's constant changes to a haven of timelessness.

Rituals do seem to serve as a source of stability, on an individual as well as a community level. This stability, communicated through ceremonial information, forms a foundation from which some rituals propel the participants into change and growth. Our bar mitzvah example will serve here: while acknowledging his connection with his community, his tribe, our young boy is also experiencing an important change in his status in that community as well as in his perception of himself in relationship to the community and to the general world around him. On a deeper level, the bar mitzvah boy who takes seriously the religious connotations of this ritual may also experience a change in his relationship with whatever transpersonal realities he identifies as God.

This balance between the stabilizing influence of rituals and their ability to induce change seems to occur on three different levels: personal, interpersonal, and transpersonal. My understanding of ritual includes all of these factors, but the final defining element concerns its specialness. Many events are set apart, special, perhaps even repeating events. In this paper, I reserve the use of the word "ritual" for those events imbued with the consciousness of seeking the sacred.

STABILITY

CHANGE

Personal

finding one's center
the still place within
physical balance

changing self-image
seeking self-knowledge
exploring
(emotion, thought, physical
embodiment, dreams, motivations)

Interpersonal

finding one's place in community
group balance, unity

exploring interaction
changing roles, relationships

Transpersonal

being one with the universe
sense of wholeness
participation in cosmos

exploring boundaries of self
changing understanding of divinity
changing relationship with divinity

Dance & Ritual

Dance and movement appear in many forms even within any given culture. How can we determine when dance and movement should be considered ritual? The most obvious sort of ritual movement occurs in traditional ceremonial situations where everyone agrees that what is happening is ritual. For example, marriage is considered to be a traditional ceremony that can vary in complexity and formality from a simple exchange of vows in the office of a justice of the peace to a large, well-planned affair including formal religious traditions and/or innovations developed by the couple or clergy. The formalized movements of the ceremony - placing rings on each other's fingers, kissing, etc. - are ritual movements.

In addition to the movements of the formal ceremony, the celebratory dancing that occurs along with the feast at the reception afterwards can be considered part of the ritual. The music and the dances may be the same as those done in an average evening at a nightclub, but in this context they are being performed with thoughts of bringing good will and blessings to the marriage by offering the energy produced by celebration; in other words by having a good time in honor of the occasion.

Movement and dance can become ritual in less traditional circumstances through the intentionality of those participating in them. For example, a group of people who have been meeting to develop their creativity and explore their inner thoughts and feelings may decide to create a ritual movement sequence for the beginning and ending of each session. It may be as simple as holding hands in a circle and breathing quietly together, or it may involve more active dancing and chanting to a drumbeat; either way they have defined their ritual and they perform it with a particular consciousness.

There are times when an activity begins to take on the qualities of ritual independent of any declaration of intent, either for an individual or an entire group. For many people, a dance class or other physical activity (even a sport) can become a time of working on themselves, a meditation in action. For me as a dance teacher, classes are often ritual experiences, sometimes

just for me but often creating a strong enough atmosphere to carry the entire class into that altered state we call ritual.

The actual movements in ritual vary from wild and intense chaotic dance leading to eventual physical collapse to formal and sedate: sitting in a pew unmoving except for the “All Rise!” and bowings of the head. Whatever the movement, the functions that they serve fall into two main categories: establishing a ritual state of consciousness, and communicating ritual messages. Sometimes the movements serve to bring a group together in an experience of cooperation and unity, sometimes they communicate indexical messages involving little more than acknowledgment by the participants of their membership in the group. Most movement in a ritual context serves multiple purposes within the complex process of establishing the appropriate state of consciousness and carrying on many levels the significance of the event.

Ritual dancing, as understood by Maria-Gabrielle Wosien, “is never aimed at an audience, but rather involves all those present; the rite itself is addressed exclusively to the divinity . . . but there is also that in man which wants to put on show what is most sacred to him, dress it up and present it as a spectacle to an audience” (Wosien, 1974). Wosien views this tendency as a disintegrating influence which causes religion to separate itself from dance, as sacred dance becomes profane entertainment.

Jamake Highwater (1977), another theorist on the nature of ritual dance, is not as concerned with the religious purity of focus in performed ritual. He proposes that ritual is produced by all peoples still in touch with the capacity to express themselves in metaphor. He maintains that there are two kinds of ritual.

The first, studied by ethnologists, is familiar to us: it is an unselfconscious act without deliberate “aesthetic” concerns, arriving from anonymous tribal influences over many generations and epitomizing the group’s fundamental value system. The second form of ritual is new: it is the creation of an exceptional individual who transforms his experience into a metaphoric idiom known as “art.”

This division leaves much to be desired. It may be that the first kind of ritual described is indeed one kind of ritual, but there seems to be much middle ground not covered by either description. The second definition bears further examination before a judgment can be made.

In the eyes of a choreographer, his/her work of art may be ritual, but the performers are bringing to the work their own ideas about dance and its functions and their roles as performers. An example: a friend of mine directed Ambrosia, a dance company in South Florida. Her works are emotionally intense explorations of the human condition and its transcendence. One of her company members, technically the most proficient, had a major difficulty working with the material to be performed. She was certainly equal to the physical requirements, but her primary focus in dance was to show herself off to her best advantage. She was so involved with how high her extension was, so intent on commanding the attention of the audience for herself, that she lost the main focus of the work, remaining entrenched in her ego. She was beautiful to watch but what the audience saw was the high extension rather than a metaphoric presentation of an aspect of life.

Her attitude is the prevalent one in the world of dance as art. For a dance piece to work as ritual requires an appropriate attitude in the dancers as well as the creative metaphoric powers of the choreographer. Each dancer must be willing to act as a vehicle, a channel, for something transcendent to inhabit. This cannot happen where there is the inordinate ego-involvement that drives most performers.

Even if we could find a dance company composed of performers dedicated to the higher aspects of dance, there is still the factor of audience attitude and expectations. Most dance audiences outside of large cultural centers view performances of dance as entertainment. They are not looking for ritual, they are looking for an evening out, something enjoyable to distract them from their daily lives, a slightly more sophisticated version of television. They are not looking for a transformative or spiritual experience, and most often will not have one, regardless of the intent and quality of what is presented.

Of course, there are people in each audience who are open to a higher order of dance, and there are performance works of such striking impact that they touch even the most oblivious audience in some way. There may be sacred messages communicated, but the context remains two dimensional. The experience of multi-level integration is lacking. These same works performed in a more conducive environment might reach a level of gestalt qualifying them as ritual, but the real key is the consciousness of both performers and audience. In the appropriate setting everyone involved has that awareness that Wosien views as essential: the performance is addressed to the divinity rather than the audience.

Highwater's touting of contemporary ballet and modern dance as ritual is valid in the sense of being set apart, but whatever sacred messages are imparted are missed by most of the audience (and most of the performers). The situation is not one where meta-messages of integration and transcendence can be absorbed non-discursively. Nureyev, with his great flair as a performer and his high level of technique does not qualify as a sacred dancer, and Alwin Nikolais' choreography, even with its multi-media approach, doesn't quite communicate eternal verities. Ambrosia may come close with its intense content, but in a traditional dance performance setting, even higher order messages fail to make that extra jump in meta-levels required to communicate with the audience in ritual fashion.

What other approaches to presenting dance are there that might lend themselves to ritual that communicates sacred messages in an integrative manner? There seems to be an entire continuum of ritual styles that do not fit into Highwater's two categories at all. Certainly not all ritual studied by ethnologists is without deliberate aesthetic concerns, but usually the focus is towards the divinity rather than pure aesthetics for its own sake. Unselfconscious ritual still exists, but rituals are changing as living situations change and many current rituals, even those of tribal groups, have not been produced from "anonymous tribal influences over many generations."

David McAllester's examination of three genres of Navajo dance (McAllester, 1979) presents a perfect example of changing traditions. McAllester proposes that all three genres that he explores - Powwows, Ceremonials, and Rock - are sacred dance. Navajo ceremonial dances are clearly sacred, but the Powwows, with their elements of Hollywood Westerns and show business, do not fit Highwater's first or second definition of ritual, and young Navajos participating in rock and disco concerts by Navajo rock groups are even further from the parameters of the two definitions.

As McAllester argues, neat separations between secular and sacred are not a part of Navajo religious thinking. "Motion is a key to sacred power in Navajo thought," and that motion is experienced in rock and disco as well as in ceremonial dance. There are "symbolic representations of life, supernatural power and human relations with the natural world in every feather, every element of costume design, in the direction a dancer turns and in the music he dances to." Again it is the element of consciousness brought to bear on the event in a sacred way that grants these otherwise ordinary events sacred ritual status.

The Navajo rituals are participatory rituals. No one sits in chairs in a dark theatre and watches; even the spectators move around, are part of the event in a way that a contemporary dance audience is not. Evolving from the realm of modern dance comes another example of participatory ritual. Anna Halprin and the San Francisco Dancer's Workshop progressed over the years from traditional performance works through a continuum of dance ritual events involving more and more participation from those who attend. Many of their events, notably their CityDance in San Francisco (which occurred annually for several years) were planned specifically to involve as many people as possible in a variety of ways. Beginning with large group planning sessions that encouraged a group creative process in the beginning stages of the project, their efforts culminated in a full day of events in public places designed to involve not only those who came intentionally but also those who happened to pass by at the right time. Movement events at CityDance might be as commonplace as dancing to a reggae band at the City Center and as extraordinary as building a huge phoenix bird out of scraps of material and dancing fifty people around it to bring it to life with the spirit of the city.

Some SFDW events designated certain people as performers though all who attended were participants. Further along on the continuum of involvement there are rituals where everyone is performer, everyone is participant, there is no audience. Jean Houston's (1981) Dromenon events fall under this category. A Dromenon, according to Houston's definition of the term, is "a ritual pattern of dynamic expression, a therapeutic dance rhythm in which participants experience second birth into a higher order of consciousness with a new vision of the possible human; creative orchestration of mental processes; expansion from local to ecological awareness in preparation for unprecedented challenges facing future 'planetary man'" (Houston, 1981). A typical Dromenon may begin with a processional of everyone involved, followed by several hours of rhythmic music with a room full of people dancing together or alone or standing at the side swaying while they rest.

These sorts of participatory ritual events do not fit into Highwater's (1977) definitions of the two kinds of ritual, but they are most definitely multi-media, multi-leveled events and the consciousness of the participants is directed towards a transcendent experience. It is this consciousness that is the most essential ingredient of ritual. The ritual experience begins when the participants "prepare to enter the unknown, to give our ordinary lives over to the play of other more essential energies. This is where the revelations, transformations and integrations come forth and take hold."

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