



How Rituals Heal

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Rituals are healing, it is sometimes said. And indeed, healing is the specific aim of a ritual like reconciliation or anointing the sick. More often, however, we find healing grace unexpectedly in ritual moments that mark a major transition or traumatic event, or moments that define the daily rhythm of life and faith. The ritual may be as simple as coffee with a friend or prayer with a trusted spiritual companion and as complex as the Eucharist or a funeral liturgy. The healing that is effected may release the weight of guilt, mend a broken relationship, rekindle hope in the midst of a limited future, or transform terror into shared anxiety. Rituals provide a framework for celebrating success with gratitude and praise. When loss occurs, familiar daily rituals, family traditions, cherished celebrations, and life cycle rituals all provide opportunities to heal the hurt of grief.

RITUALS, STORIES, AND HEALING

All creatures make rituals for the sake of survival, order, or comfort. Human creatures create both personal and communal rituals to order and reorder time and to help us remember by recapitulating the past. *Ritual* is an interpretative act through which we express and create meaning in our lives. We employ rituals for establishing courtship, diminishing powerlessness, organizing the hunt, caring for offspring, sending children off, avoiding life-threatening conflicts, and closing the story of a life. Rituals often evolve in surprising ways and illumine aspects of our lives never before understood. Through story and ritual, we narrate our existence,

Rituals provide a framework for celebrating success and healing hurt and grief. To be effective, rituals must be carefully planned, scrupulously honest, and particular to the moment.

fashion an identity, and, individually and collectively, express and create a vision of life. In a way, we might say that rituals invent us as much as we invent them.

Just as we use playful and poetic language to speak about the mystery of God, we use symbols, gestures, and song to point to the unspeakable in human pain and make public what cannot be seen. Rituals express what cannot be captured in words. They make the invisible visible. What makes human rituals unique is that they are linked to story and make meaning. What makes human rituals so important, in our lives generally, and so essential for healing is that ritual is a vehicle for liberating us from narratives that confine and for retelling stories that liberate. We tell meaning-laden stories with our lips; we also perform them with our bodies in ritual form. We are storytellers who ritualize the stories we tell.¹

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A ritual, as I mean it in this essay, is a patterned activity with symbolic meaning. It is (1) an ordered sequence of intentional actions often occurring in relation to an event or circumstance. Sometimes the order matters a great deal because (2) a ritual must be dependable enough to order or reorder a universe of meaning. (3) A ritual involves some performance like blowing out candles, building a fire, eating and drinking, or kissing your spouse good-bye as you leave for work. (4) The purpose of a ritual is to provide a framework for transitions, help shape identity, and commemorate shared meanings in order to fashion a trustworthy world. One of the major purposes of rituals is (5) to regulate accessibility, making and keeping connections within communities of significance. By engaging the entire person or community, rituals (6) integrate past, present, and future into a seamless story and journey. Despite these commonalities, a ritual is an interpretative act that often means different things to different people.

Healing has many meanings. Healing is a process of restoring bodily well-being, emotional wholeness, mental functioning, and/or spiritual vitality. It may be understood medically as *cure*. When we speak of healing the broken world in which we live, the focus may be on establishing economic justice, eliminating racism, or ending poverty. Healing also has religious meaning that goes beyond physical well-being. For Martin Luther, healing was very closely linked to the forgiveness of sins. The God who creates all things good and who oversees creation through divine love will forever be a God of healing. God heals through the natural processes of the body, through developments in biomedical technologies, and through the skillful and careful work of people who care. God's work of healing also occurs

¹For a more thorough discussion of the connection between ritual and narrative, see Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998). For an extensive discussion of rituals in family living, see *Rituals in Families and Family Therapy*, ed. Evan Imber-Black, Janine Roberts, and Richard Whiting (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988).

through rituals that provide a protected space for remembering the past and rehearsing a new future in God. Healing begins when the wounding memories of the past are reached and brought into the light without fear or when wounds are intimately connected with the suffering of God. To heal, then, does not primarily mean to take pain away, but to reveal that our pain is part of God's pain and our sorrows are part of the greater sorrow of God.

STORIES OF HEALING RITUALS

While it is generally agreed that rituals heal, how that healing occurs in and through ritual is less clear. The aim of this essay is to explore how rituals become a healing resource in faith and life. Each of the following stories illustrates some dimension of ritual that enhances the possibility of healing. A brief commentary after each story develops the theme.

After the massacres in Rwanda in the early '90s, a woman psychologist was asked to visit one of the refugee camps in Tanzania because the women in the camps were not sleeping. The women, who had witnessed unspeakable atrocities, had been told not to speak of the rape and slaughter they had seen. Memories of the horrors haunted them, and they could not sleep. In response to the situation, the psychologist created a story tree—a place of safety where the women could speak of their experiences. Every morning, the psychologist went to the edge of the refugee camp and waited under the canopy of a huge shade tree. The first day, no one came. On the second day, one woman appeared, told her story and left. The next day another came and then another and another. Within the span of a week, scores of women were gathering under the shade tree each morning to listen and share their terrifying tales of violence and death. Finally, after weeks of the ritual of the story tree, it was reported that the women were sleeping.²

The ritual under the story tree promoted healing by providing a place to remember and to speak honestly about violence and suffering that was otherwise unspeakable. Mute pain does not heal. Suffering needs to be shared and heard for healing to occur. *For unspeakable suffering, we need story and song to give it voice.* Because ritual language is metaphorical, we are invited to say and sing what cannot be spoken otherwise. Rituals are more likely to heal when our remembering occurs in a witnessing community gathered by the ritual and infused with the compassion of God.

The anger that Karen and David had toward one another continued to sabotage their best efforts to achieve a divorce. In desperation, they asked their therapist to help them heal their anger. The therapist asked them to write detailed accounts of their anger. It took them about a month to fulfill this

²This story is told in Anderson and Foley, *Mighty Stories*, 3.

assignment. They were then asked to burn what they had written privately, mingle the ashes in a jar, and drive together without speaking with the jar of ashes to an old log chapel near a white pine forest. They were instructed to dig a hole, bury the jar of ashes from their store of anger, drop their wedding rings in the unmarked grave without speaking, and then return home without speaking. On the way home, they broke the therapist's rule and stopped at their church to arrange a service of reconciliation. They completed the divorce negotiations in a peaceable manner.³

Ordinarily, ritual is a symbolic reality that helps individuals forge commitments and construct a habitable world. The activity that Karen and David performed was a kind of antiritual that deconstructed a world the couple could no longer inhabit. The silence focused their attention on the physical action, and burning the accumulated complaints dramatized the need for both of them to disengage from lingering anger in order to be reconciled. Ritual action sometimes undoes patterns that no longer work so that something new might be born. In such instances, *honesty is essential if rituals are to heal*. The stringent action of this ritual process was necessary to disrupt a relationship that was stuck in a mutually re-criminating mode. They experienced the healing power of God through rituals that acknowledged the reality of hurting memories and suggested new behavior when the rituals were over.

Marlene was pregnant again after one miscarriage when she heard a lecture in a seminary class about the negative affects of buried grief on a family. Her husband Jeff agreed that they should plan some kind of ritual to mark the miscarriage that had occurred over a year before. Marlene's mother and grandparents joined them in a ritual planting of a walnut tree to mark the unborn child. Marlene wrote these words to begin the ritual: "We are gathered here to honor the sacred gift of life. We celebrate and value the child who was conceived in love. Although the life known as 'The Walnut' was never born, it was planned for, joyfully anticipated, dreamt of, loved, and is considered to be a member of our family. Because one child cannot replace another, we memorialize the life of our lost first child." Psalms were read, prayers were said, and a walnut tree was planted. And then the husband and wife said together, "We commend to the Creator our child, spirit to Spirit and loved to Love. Dearest Walnut, your home is the eternal God; rest in the everlasting arms."

I can imagine many occasions of grief after a sudden, unexpected, or violent death in which a survivor might pray for rest in the everlasting arms of God. *Rituals help to create public acts that bear witness to the reality of loss and death and, thereby, initiate healing grief*. The simple ritual of planting a walnut tree to remember an

³See *ibid.*, p. 135.

unborn child builds a new, shared narrative that moves from loss to healing. Something happened when the miscarriage occurred. A nascent life ended, and dreams stopped. The ritual must mark the reality of that loss. Forgetfulness is particularly common after miscarriage, and forgetfulness is an impediment to healing. Witnessing the reality of a loss, like miscarriage, is central to healing grieving because it makes a memory public enough that it will become part of a family narrative rather than a family secret.

RITUAL HEALING OF MEMORIES

In each of these ritual moments, there is a healing of memories. People are often in bondage to feelings of guilt, loneliness, hurt, separation, anxiety, fear, or suspicion linked to memories of the past. These memories continue to wound because they are often hidden deeply within and difficult to reach. Healing from wounding memories begins by making them available in the present, leading them out of the corner of forgetfulness, and by relocating them as past or reframing them as part of our life stories. People trapped in forgetfulness need reminders of both pain and hope. Because pastoral ministers are “living reminders,” as Henri Nouwen once observed, then our task is to offer the space in which the wounding memories of the past can be recovered and brought into the light without the restrictions that fear often brings.⁴ Rituals create such a safe setting to remember what we have forgotten or would like to forget, hold those memories in grace, and then let them go.

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Robert Schreiter has described what a memory might look like when healing has occurred: “A healed memory does not disappear or lapse into oblivion. It can remain troublesome. But it has lost its toxic character, its capacity to poison the present and foreclose the future. The wounds remaining can even become sources of healing for others.”⁵ For the women of Rwanda and for David and Karen, the wounds remained, but they were free for a new future because their memories were no longer held captive by pain. In the appearance of Jesus to the disciples after his death and resurrection, we are reminded that wounds remain even after restoration to new life has occurred. When Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene outside the tomb, he forbids her to touch him. When Jesus talks to Thomas, he invites the doubter to touch his wounds so that Thomas might be healed. We know that our

⁴Henri Nouwen, *A Living Reminder: Service and Prayer in Memory of Jesus Christ* (New York: HarperCollins, 1977).

⁵Robert J. Schreiter, CPPS, in an unpublished address. Used by permission of the author. For further discussion of this theme, see Robert J. Schreiter, *The Ministry of Reconciliation: Spirituality and Strategies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998).

wounds have begun to heal when we can allow others to touch them. For this reason, there must be a public dimension to ritual healing.

There are at least six things that rituals do to enhance the work of healing:

- Rituals *contain* intense emotions we might easily ignore. When our emotions are hidden or our stories are not honest, it is difficult to fashion rituals that heal.
- Rituals *console* by bearing witness to the wounds that hurt most and to the traumatic memories that are often beyond words. Rituals of lament heal because they provide a language that makes visible the deep wounds of loss and absence.
- Rituals *connect* people to communities of care and to the earth. The experience of community softens the isolation that lingering pain generates. God's healing is the work of restoring and redeeming the whole creation.
- Rituals make a *correspondence* between intense emotions or painful memories and words or images to express those emotions. The words and images of Christian rituals make explicit the link or correspondence between God's story and our stories.
- Rituals create a safe, holding environment in which to discover that *contingency* is an inevitable dimension of life because human creatures are fragile and finite.
- Rituals foster *coherence* of meaning in spite of inevitable mystery because the deepest truths of life and faith are hidden in God.

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Ritual honesty facilitates healing. Authentic rituals provide the occasion, the language, and the gestures for us to encounter realities and truth that, left to ourselves, most of us would choose to avoid. Rituals enable us to tell, to hear, and to act out the truth about ourselves and our world, and the truth about God, whose ways are not our ways. If the stories we tell conceal more than they reveal, they foster dishonesty that, in turn, diminishes healing.⁶ When the stories we tell our children about our lives do not include instances of vulnerability, we fashion a mythic view of reality that is finally false. When they are honest, the stories we tell and the rituals we enact both express and create community. When our stories are not honest, it is difficult to fashion rituals that heal. Put positively, rituals build a fence around our fear and provide a container for honest grief—and honest grief heals.

⁶No one has written more convincingly about the need for ritual honesty than Elaine Ramshaw in *Ritual and Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987). See also Robin Green, *Only Connect: Worship and Liturgy from the Perspective of Pastoral Care* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1987).

Healing comes when we live in a narrative that is larger than the trauma or hurt we remember.

In fashioning rituals that heal, there are six simple rules that will enhance their effectiveness. (1) *Respect the chronological priority of the human story.* Let the whole story be heard. It is important to encourage people to wait with rituals they hope will heal until the story has been told as completely as possible. (2) *Invite the participants to be part of the ritual planning.* When critical details or significant people are inadvertently left out, rituals can hurt more than heal. (3) *Allow a significant role for nonverbal symbols.* There are times when words fail, and only symbolic gestures convey the depth of pain. Karen and David did not need to speak about all the heartache they had caused each other in the marriage or in the divorcing process. (4) *Resist the impulse to explain.* Learn to live in the ambiguity of both story and ritual. In the midst of the ritual, people may be experiencing a baffling array of emotions and thoughts that could not easily be explained or even said. (5) *Attend to the particularity of the moment.* While a variety of ritual patterns can be employed across a variety of situations, it is also important to improvise in response to the specific human need. (6) *Beware of overcomplicating the ritual.* Less is more. A single act of blessing, laying of flowers, cleaning a closet, giving shoes to the Salvation Army, burning a document, or handing over a gift may be far more effective than piling a number of ritual gestures together.⁷

HEALING RITUALS AFTER PUBLIC TRAGEDIES

In our time, the spread of indiscriminate violence not only destroys innocent lives; it challenges our notions of invulnerability and threatens to destabilize societies. When public tragedy or violent death occurs, not only have we lost people we love or respect, but the world we thought was safe is not. Any death may become a public tragedy when it destabilizes one's view of self or the world and when the inability of an individual or community to function effectively or relate constructively persists over time. The sudden or premature death of a beloved public official may be regarded as a public tragedy because of the social consequences of the loss. Public tragedies warranting lament include the dissolution of a rural town or the disruption to a community when a major employer or political leader resigns. The challenge is to reweave the fabric of our lives when the threads that we want to use for the reweaving may not be strong enough to hold us together.

The unspeakable tragedy in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, when ten girls were shot in a one-room school and only five survived, remains a haunting story. It is also an astounding testimony to the healing power of forgiveness. As devastating as this event was, before the week was out, dozens of Amish neighbors gathered to mourn their dead and forgive the quiet milk driver

⁷For further discussion regarding planning healing rituals, see chapter 7 of Anderson and Foley, *Mighty Stories*, 125–148.

who had killed five girls in this unfathomable rampage. On the day of the shooting at Nickel Mines, Lori Mackey was interviewed by the *San Francisco Chronicle* about what happened seventeen years before at Cleveland Elementary School in Stockton, California, when Patrick Purdy unleashed one hundred rounds from an AK-47 automatic in the school yard, and five children were dead and thirty injured before Purdy killed himself. Lori Mackey was a teacher at that school that day. Here is what she said: “It is something that changes you forever, and in ways you maybe can’t explain. It takes away your blind faith. I know this: No one can tell me anymore that nothing is going to happen, that everything will be fine.” Forgiving is not forgetting.

Rituals that heal after public tragedy require honesty about the impossibility of restoring things to the way they were before the tragedy. In order to fashion a restorative narrative, we need to visit the moments and memories that are most painful. Consolation for both individuals and communities depends on the freedom to attend to the wounds that hurt the most. “Ritual is a privileged place for appropriating [God’s] redeeming narrative because it honors diverse stories within a community of shared values. It also provides a setting in which to explore the darkness and name the demons without mythologizing or secret keeping. Such communal gatherings have a particular capacity for embracing personal tales of violence and destruction.”⁸ Ritual honesty does not mean that all secrets must be publicly revealed, but it does mean that the ritual is not used to hide the truth. Ritual honesty is mandatory if our lament is to identify painful topics that a community must address in order to heal.

The effectiveness of a public ritual after a public tragedy is determined in part by the clarity of the ritual aim. Sometimes the rituals are political because they seek to reestablish the values of the body politic. Those rituals are in tension with rituals that seek to heal a community or a nation wounded and disordered by an invisible enemy or an uncontrollable force. Ritual theorist Catherine Bell has made a useful distinction between these two ritual aims. Rites of affliction, she suggests, demonstrate “people’s persistent efforts to redress wrongs, alleviate sufferings, and ensure well-being” and “redefine the cosmological order in response to new challenges and new formulations of human needs.”⁹ Political rites seek to order a community around shared values and invite people to trust political leadership in their exercise of power for the common good. In a political ritual, we must provide an interpretation of what is going on in the world that is simplified enough to be understood. People who claim power will seek to demonstrate how their interests are in the natural, real, or fruitful order of things.¹⁰ While both ritual forms are necessary for social order and the common good, rites of affliction are the most effective re-

⁸Ibid., 172.

⁹Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 119–120.

¹⁰Ibid., 128–135.

sponse to public tragedy and violent death. Rites of affliction acknowledge and deepen the ambiguity of a situation in order to identify the complexity of grief after violent death.

Rituals of lament, as one expression of rituals of affliction, provide an opportunity to refashion a view of the universe in response to new challenges and new forms of human need without oversimplifying the deep underlying issues too ambiguous, too awkward, or too painful to address in political rituals. We cannot hope again until we have visited painful moments, and memories from the past are reconstructed in a new narrative. Rituals of lament reflect that belief. We cannot fashion restorative narratives or healing rituals without visiting the moments and memories from the past and the present that are most painful. Lament is a cry that gives voice to the dread of abandonment and the terror of emptiness that often accompany deep loss. It provides a language for our pain that makes it possible to share what we might otherwise hide, and then fashion a new narrative around the terrible death.¹¹

Lament holds pain and hope in respectful tension. The existing order of things is not the final reality.

When our pain makes us mute, we are isolated in our grief, convinced that there are no words that can express the grief we feel. Hence, we believe that there is no way to convey to another human being our anguish. The psalms of lament become a resource for healing when they give voice to pain that is otherwise unspeakable. It is a hopeful form of prayer because it juxtaposes the present horror with a future unknown. Lament holds pain and hope in respectful tension. The existing order of things is not the final reality. What is happening in the world can be named and described clearly because it will not be forever. “The communal psalms of lament,” Michael Jinkins has written, “cry out from the prophetic soul of our communities of faith....The implication remains that only the people who can lament together can remember and hope, can give thanks and praise.”¹² Individuals who lament are never powerless in the face of irrational violence and meaningless suffering. Because we can name the pain, we know that our present anguish is not the last word.

Rituals of lament are particularly effective in giving expression to rage that we might not otherwise express. As long as we keep lamenting, the need for justice is

¹¹Herbert Anderson, “Violent Death, Public Tragedy, and Rituals of Lament: An Interfaith Agenda,” in *Ordo: Bath, Word, Prayer, Table*, ed. Dirk G. Lange and Dwight W. Vogel (Akron, OH: OSL Publications, 2005) 188–200.

¹²Michael Jinkins, *In the House of the Lord: Inhabiting the Psalms of Lament* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998) 69. For further discussion of the power of lament to heal, see *Rachel’s Cry: Prayer of Lament and Rebirth of Hope*, by Kathleen D. Billman and Daniel L. Migliore (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1999), and *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square*, ed. Sally A. Brown and Patrick D. Miller (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

never out of sight. Lament rituals foster hope by calling evil, injustice, violence, and irrational suffering by their proper names. Lament also diminishes isolation by making sorrow public. In rituals of lament, the community is formed into a safe container for the chaos of grief. Communal lament helps to make the crisis bearable and manageable when the assembly is refashioned into a community of the suffering ones. Public rituals of lament also help a community maintain continuity in a chaotic time of grief by integrating past experience, present circumstances, and future hope. Communal lament names problems, seeks justice, and hopes for God's deliverance. It is a prelude to justice. The possibility of authentic hope for individuals and communities after meaningless suffering and tragic or violent death is determined by the way we connect suffering to hope. For that reason, for this time, we need rituals of lament that will renew our communities and strengthen our resolve to stand together in hope. ⊕

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