

Ritual as a Resource

In Addiction & Trauma Recovery

By Michael Picucci, PhD, MAC, SEP



Could human beings, faced with a rapidly changing world full of trauma and distraction, ever develop an art for filling the mind and spirit with light instead of darkness? Could we learn an art that speaks to our desire for inner peace and our need to bring happier circumstances into our outer world as well? Indeed, such an art is within our grasp, and its name is “ritual”!

“Ritual” is a challenging word to define, since, at its heart, it is about experiencing something. Ritual usually refers to “rite,” an action sanctifying a certain process. For our purposes, let us expand the meaning of the word “ritual” to include not only physical actions, but energetic, nonphysical dimensions as well, such as intention, visualization and realization. With ritual we seek to illuminate our spirit, and, if we are to see and experience light, we need assistance from soulful sources—for healing both our inner and outer existences. Through a contemporary understanding of ritual, we can discover that assistance, allowing the healing arts—and the art of living—to gracefully merge.

Ritual, partnered with scientific understanding of energy fields, gives birth to a new context in which to live a fuller and richer life. That context opens the way for techniques so powerful that, had I not learned them, I would be dead by now. In fact, the approach outlined in this article is inspired by encounters with death, both others’ and mine. These approaches developed not only out of a need to survive, but also from a need to live energetically and fully expressed. A Somatic Experiencing® colleague, Diane

Poole Heller, states, “‘Resource’ is any positive memory, person, place, or action that creates a soothing feeling in our body.” Many therapists now use these “resources” to help clients deactivate the nervous system, bringing forth a response of relaxation to their states of being. Ritual also has been a key to unlocking incredible resources, healing and more joy in living.

Somatic Experiencing (SE), originated by Peter A. Levine in his book *Waking the Tiger*, offers a unique and accessible way of working with (and releasing) trauma energy in the body. The transformation is profound and must be experienced to be understood, much like getting sober or giving birth. I was so captivated by Levine’s work that I completed his three-year intensive training at an age when I thought I had finished my last training program. It has transfigured my practice, my research and my writing in a very good way. In my experience, every SE session is a sacred ritual, in addition to being a refined clinical tool.

Ritual is not the only form of energetic healing. The new clinical field of Energy Psychology (EP) is a moving force traveling through constructs of mental health, physical health, organizations and transformational processes. Building upon both newly emerging and conventional therapeutic methods, EP utilizes techniques from a variety of forms of energy medicine and body-mind therapies, along with ancient traditions. EP applies the knowledge and uses of energy and energy fields to cure illness (dis-ease) in body, mind or spirit. We know such methods as Somatic

Experiencing, acupressure, acupuncture, yoga, qi gong, many body-mind therapies, and ritual, the central focus of this article.

As a practitioner (and so-called “wounded-healer”), I started out with a focus on addiction recovery, a field that later propelled me into the healing of trauma as well as the relational and sexual challenges of our time. So I’m particularly pleased to see SE and other energy methods becoming the new centerpieces of healing at cutting-edge addiction and trauma treatment facilities such as The Meadows. In time, this evolution toward energy healing will provide us with a larger understanding of (and greater compassion for) those of us who have, or have had, serious addiction, mental health or emotional challenges. In fact, it will give us a greater understanding of life itself. We are entering a time in which the exploration of energy medicine and the field of psychology are becoming one and the same. Perhaps the word “psychology” itself is gradually being transformed by our new understandings of human energy.

Rituals address: (1) the urge to comprehend our existence in meaningful ways; (2) the search for a pathway as we move from one stage of life to the next; (3) the need to establish secure and fulfilling relationships in the community; and (4) the longing to know our part in the vast wonder and mystery of the cosmos.

When I began to write a book on ritual, I was reminded of predictions made by Joseph Campbell in the 1980s. (Campbell was one of the most influential cultural anthropologists of the 20th century.) Just prior to his passing, he offered two central messages that still resonate in my soul. Both are at the core of what I mean by “ritual as resource.”

Campbell’s first message was that various forms of ritual-like behavior developed by the American Colonialists (such as regular church attendance, big-game hunting, fist-

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fighting over “love,” marriage, the work ethic, etc.) no longer work for us today. The mythologies connected to them are outdated. These rituals and myths grounded our grandparents, but times have changed. They don’t ground us. When I say “ground,” I mean to provide a feeling of being part of something larger than oneself—that one’s life is on the right track. Campbell said that the world had changed so fast in the past 60 years that we had outgrown our own mythology—and that we were without sufficient grounding. Compared to previous generations, we are adrift! Not only had we lost our anchors, but there had been no time or opportunity for new grounding mythologies and rituals to develop, take hold and replace the old.

Campbell predicted that new mythologies emerging in the 21st century would involve consciousness. “Knowing oneself,” and bringing with that a wealth of new rituals unleashing new sets of energies, is what this writing is about. The knowing of the self will bring us the peace and equanimity that the mythologies of the past once provided our forebearers. The new mythology will tell us how we learn who we are in a swiftly changing spiritual, material and scientifically manipulated reality. Ritual in an expanded sense will be a doorway to this journey of knowing.

The second message I internalized from Campbell is a bedrock of contemporary ethos: “Follow your bliss!” You will discover that ritual is a place of incubation—far from newspapers, fears, money concerns and all other attachments to everyday life. Ritual can be what Campbell would call a “bliss station.” From that “station,” we can explore new inner landscapes, discovering a wealth of resources to help us realize what is most true and potent about whom we are—and what is most meaningful.

Ritual as resource, and healing as an art, are bringing us the medical tools of the future: light, belief, self-love and imagination. The resources that ritualize practices, such as SE,

are not about wishful thinking or the denial of reality. In fact, they allow us to face the traumas of pain, hardship and sexual “splits” in our selves, eyeball-to-eyeball, and to respond to such challenges in ways that are fundamentally transformational. The sexual-spiritual (love) split is a deep psychic schism within almost everyone in our culture; it prohibits loving relationships from forming, enduring, remaining sexually alive and growing. The schism between sex and spirit is caused by generational, cultural, religious and early programming that plants seeds deep in the unconscious (and central nervous system), which makes merging the two energies, after bonding, virtually impossible without the specific healing that erotic ritual offers.

Once we bring addictions and unseen traumas to light and break down the binary psychological logjams (and other patterns) that lock us out of our lives, we begin to make better choices. Better choices help bring about happier circumstances, as we more fully contemplate the good lives we want for ourselves. You will notice that recovery programs are rich with rituals, and now we can expand on what “ritual” means, participate in new energetic modalities, and create our own rituals. I invite you to explore these ideas as a foundation for “vibrant living.” †

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