

# The Power of Ceremonies and Rituals in the Transformation Process

Approximately 4.5 billion years ago, scientists tell us that the universe spit out a relatively small blue planet and, from a miracle of events, forms of life appeared. Some eventually appeared as our ancestors 6 million years ago. The marvel of creation began as human forms began to populate this globe only 200,000 years ago, and these beings began some form of creativity themselves. Art forms appeared 40,000 years ago and agriculture was evident 10,000 years ago. It has only been 6,000 years that we have lived in what could loosely be described as civilizations spread across the globe.

All of these conclusions are amazing in themselves, but even more remarkable is that each of the 7.125 billion human beings presently populating the world appear to be different in personality and structure. Most of these beings have a personal sense of mission for their life purpose. Perhaps by design, all of these individuals go through struggles of development in their evolution. These challenges are not uniform, yet all of these individuals create stress at their core which often yields personal existential questions. A client enters therapy to do more than just heal, they come to find a deeper life meaning and purpose.

For many generations, humans have been undertaking rituals to make meaning out of their lives. Underneath the practices of these rituals are beliefs that the universe has order and that each life serves some purpose that is important for both the spiritual evolution of the individual and for their relevance to the rest of the community. Looking for this relevance has been the challenge of the ritual masters who applied a wide variety of methods including insight, altered states of consciousness, and seeking answers through nature.

## **Ritual Factors**

The ritual process gives clients identity and order, clarifies values, and offers opportunities to face their personal challenges with community support. Beyond finding a space between ordinary reality and altered states of awareness, the transpersonal space in rituals offers opportunity for transformation.

A common set of questions presented to clients that come to therapy are: “What do you want to let go of?” “What do you want for yourself in this life?” “Can you identify what is toxic in your life?” and “What barriers can you recognize in your life?” With the answers to these questions, the ceremonial process begins. The client is asked to reflect on these questions and to journal on the introspective process that occurs when asked. The client is asked to take these reflections into meditation and to connect with their higher power for insight. From this point forward, there is deeper connection and involvement and the progression tends to unfold steadily.

A common use of ritual has been to celebrate stages of life and maturity, such as birthdays, promotions, achievements, and meaningful events. Births and deaths have been ritualized. States of transition fall into this, such as weddings, engagements and induction into societies and fraternities. It is rare that we celebrate other important milestones in our life- such as making a commitment to live a different way, honoring a characteristic of who we are, letting go of a toxic relationship, or letting go of barriers that no longer serve us.

## **The Nature of Rituals**

The purposes and symbols of rituals must be consistent with the values of the individual and community. When the client begins to set up the ceremonial process it is important that they

pick symbols that they relate to and have understanding to the meaning of their particular symbols. We can use animals and nature as symbols that we relate to in order to deepen understanding and insight about ourselves, as well as to gain perspective about our purposes in our lives. To be clear, this is *not* worship of animals and nature as substitutes for supreme religious symbols. Rather, animals and nature symbols are used as avenues of communication within ourselves. Symbols speak to the soul of the person who is making transformative alterations.

Animals and natural features, such as the sun, the moon, and water, have long represented messages through their qualities. By identifying with some aspect of the universe, we can better relate to a greater sense of how we participate in our communities as well as how we conduct our responsibilities. The associations also bring us closer to our connection with nature and communication. We all can recognize the traits and habits of animals and nature within our personal psyche.

There is a structure to most rituals, a process which can be categorized into five stages:

The **first** is the statement of understanding the intention of the ritual. The whole structure is based on the agreed-upon purpose and participation in the progression. There is a transpersonal energy in group intentions and expectations of outcome. For example, an intention of a client may be to let go of a toxic person's negative messages that have been occupying their mind.

The **second** stage could be best described as "entry" into the structure of events. This might include a stated commitment or change of clothing before engaging in the events. Most often there is a relaxation phase, a change into meditation consciousness with silence. Very often

there is a verbal announcement that describes the purpose, instructions to be followed during events, and participation rules. The facilitator of the ceremony will ensure this stage takes place.

The **third** stage is the “severance” phase, in which individuals separate from their previous state, such as leaving childhood thinking patterns by letting go a symbol that represents this such as a stuffed animal. In military rites, this phase is giving up civilian clothing and stating commitments. This could also be letting go of a toxic relationship by departing with a symbol that represents the type of relationship. For instance, I once had a client relate to a piece of coal that represented the torment she experienced during the particular relationship.

The **fourth** phase is quickly moved to the “transitions” stage when individuals enter their new status or intention. This can include recovery from the past or celebration of a new phase in life. This phase can be represented by a poem, a commitment letter, or piece of music. The client is asked to pick a symbol that represents what they want to attract into their lives. The client usually keeps this symbol as a reminder of their ritual.

The **fifth** stage returns the individuals to ordinary life, perhaps with new faith, hope, and status. This is often a celebration with the community and family as each individual is accepted in a new light and with renewed hope.

## **The Imagery of Ceremony and Ritual**

The use of animal and nature imagery is popular among many tribes and civilizations. With symbols, there appears to be a subconscious awareness that is inherent within the image, in its expression of behaviors and strengths. By designing a ritual around a particular animal, abstract symbol, or nature entity, clients can become more aware of their intentions in their quest for clarity about life struggles and missions. While similar animal and nature rituals are practiced, they must all be respected for their unique cultural and individual power for transition.

The intention of ceremonies and rituals are to enrich a person's life and serve as sources of guidance for reaching goals and life milestones. Ceremonies and rituals provide a safe space for powerful transformation to occur. At the level of the brain, ceremonies and rituals provide a sacred platform for neuroplasticity to occur. With a clear and concise commitment that there needs to be a neuropathway in the brain that needs to change, ceremonies allow new neuropathways to form in the brain that are healthier and serve as motivational forces. These practices are not intended to substitute for any innate life path or belief; they aim to nurture the joy and fulfillment found in each person's authentic self.