

Ceremonial Work for Change, Integration and Transformation in Psychotherapeutic Practice

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by**

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Rituals and ceremonies are used in all spiritual traditions to connect with the divine and the sacred. Ceremonies and rituals are an enactment of an intent or purpose, using symbolic elements to represent different aspects. Traditionally, in indigenous cultures, ceremonial and ritualistic work has been used for millennia to mark the cycles of life, for celebrating the seasons, for rites of passage, for life transitions, for blessings, initiations, dedications, cleansing, for healing, for the shaman's flight and journeys, for giving something back to the earth, for expressing gratitude, for divination, for quests and more.

Once we enter ceremonial space, we sharpen our awareness of the different energies and aspects in and around us. In this sense ceremony is a vehicle to make us aware of - and integrate - aspects of our multi-dimensional selves, whilst forming a bridge between ordinary realms of perception and the realms of the 'unseen'. Or, as C.G. Jung points out: "Through the ritual action attention and interest are led back to the inner, sacred precinct, which is the source and goal of the psyche and contains the unity of life and consciousness." (1)

It is this 'being led back to the sacred inner' that makes us feel nourished when participating in a well constructed ceremony, as it touches effortlessly a deeper level within us, which we can call the soul, and helps it to remember itself, because "the soul has a drive to remember ... to remember the inner, sacred precinct, which is the source and goal of the psyche" (2).

The words ritual and ceremony are often used interchangeably, although, strictly speaking, rituals follow a set pattern and are repeated over time, while ceremony, being less formal, allows us to be creative and spontaneous. A ceremony can of course turn into a ritual, when repeatedly used.

The ceremonial work I will be focussing on here is based on a creative act, in the sense that we decide for what purpose we want to create a ceremony, and when and

how the ceremony is performed. This way, ceremonies can be created with individual clients or with groups to suit therapeutic purposes. They can be turned into rituals if the client utilises them repeatedly, but should not be confused in any way or form with 'pathological compulsive ritualistic behaviour' that is based on fear and used to reduce and/or avoid anxiety.

The Effects of Ritual and Ceremony

Ceremonial work is the enactment of an intent and uses symbolic elements, which are charged with meaning and memory, a combination which elicits powerful psychological responses. Besides of Jung's assertion mentioned above, several contemporary psychologists and therapists have explored and described those responses. According to Griffith and Griffith (3) authentic ritual stimulates creative expression, personal growth and connection. Rossi (4) asserts that ceremonies create whole brain responses, which can reach as far as to modulate alternative gene expressions facilitating health, rehabilitation and healing. According to Rossi, this could mean that they can switch genes on or off .

Roger Walsh (5), professor of psychiatry, who studied indigenous shamanic practices over many years, proposes cautiously that, at their best, shamanic ceremonial healing rituals probably induce the full panoply of healing responses simultaneously:

1. Cultural therapy: they heal and create community
2. Socio-therapy: they repair relationships, harmonise social structures and stabilise society
3. Psychosomatic therapy: they diminish disease and its complications
4. Gene therapy: they modulate gene expression
5. Psychotherapy: they heal the subjective dis-ease of illness
6. Spiritual therapy: they relieve a sense of alienation and estrangement from the universe, create a sense of connection and alignment with the sacred and foster a transpersonal/transegoic sense of identity

However we define and rate the effects of ceremonial work, for therapeutic purposes following aspects are significant:

1. **Wholeness:** ceremony is a vehicle to make us aware of – and to integrate – aspects of our multi-dimensional selves, our conscious self and our unconscious patterns with something deeper, which we can call our soul, as well as with something greater than ourselves. With that, ceremonial work helps us in our quest to become more whole.
2. **Bridging:** ceremonial work helps us to create a bridge between the sacred and the mundane. In fact it helps us to turn some of the ordinary into something sacred. Once we enter a ceremonial space, we get reminded that the line between our everyday world and the world of our soul, or even the divine, is fine and easily crossed. Some, an African shaman and doctor of anthropology echoes this by defining the purpose of ritual as a way “...to create harmony between the human world and the world of the gods, ancestors and nature” (6)
3. **Change / Transformation:** ceremony and ritual can have transformational effects through creating a desired, positive whole-brain experience. In therapeutic terms, we could say that ceremony provides us with a positive experience that our brain interprets and stores as being meaningful and then acts upon it. Every time we participate in a powerful ceremony, we create a drama that expresses ritually and symbolically our gratitude, or how things might change, or how we want things to be at their most healthy, harmonious and beautiful we create a memory of that experience; a memory that will not only affect our future, but can change our view of the world and ourselves.
4. **Overcoming emotional/mental blocks:** ceremonial work is emotionally moving. Created and executed well, ceremonies can touch even the hardest sceptics, as they seem to re-awaken something deep within us, almost as if we all carry positive ceremonial memories.
5. **Brings us into the ‘now’:** Sobonfu Some (7), a female African shaman from the Dagara Tribe of Burkina Faso, whose name means ‘keeper of the ritual’, echoes my own observations by stating that in a ceremony we suspend the normal time and space continuum and enter fully into the present, as all that seems to matter is happening ‘right now’ within the ceremony. With this, it

brings all participants into a 'higher place of consciousness' within themselves.

6. **Positive influence of the 'collective pool of consciousness'**: if we take the concept of collective consciousness seriously – namely that, as humans, we create and tune into a pool of all human ideas, dreams and activity – then we will understand the idea that, when we conduct a powerful and beautiful ceremony, we are feeding dreams and experiences of beauty and harmony into the general pool for all to be touched by them.

Traditional Ceremonies and Rituals

There are many well-known indigenous ceremonies: the sweat lodge ceremony, the pow-wow, the fire ceremony, the Navajo healing sand-painting ceremonies, Celtic ceremonies to honour the cycles of nature (such as solstice or full moon ceremonies), ancestral ceremonies and many more. Some of those traditional ceremonies are ritualised, in the sense that they are formal rites, representing traditions that have been practiced repeatedly and over time in the same form, following a set pattern.

Before we look into how to create and structure a ceremony in a therapeutic setting, let's look at a few well-known shamanic ceremonies, to develop a feel for ceremonial work. Many traditional ceremonies are substantial, long, drawn out affairs, such as the Gabonese healing and initiation ceremony or the sweat lodge ceremony that takes at least 12 hours and the vision quest ceremonies, that can take a few days and nights (all of them are described in my book). The following ones are shorter and therefore elements of them can be adjusted to work in a consulting room.

The **fire ceremony** is probably the best-known ceremony of all and can be found in many indigenous cultures. I have participated in traditional fire ceremonies with Quechua shamans in the Andes in Ecuador, where I spent some time learning. This family of Yachaks, the Quechua word for Bird Shaman, is one of the powerful circles of indigenous shamans who live in South America, including in the Ecuadorian Andes and the Amazon. Their fire ceremony is created to offer healing to the land, the community and Pachamama (the earth) as a whole. I have also participated in various

fire ceremonies in North America and in Europe, all created with different intents, and although each was slightly different, the ceremonies had some ingredients in common:

The first step is to create an offering. Each participant crafts an object, which can be as simple as a stick, decorated with yarn, or a letter, a drawing or a bundle. It is vital that the offering is constructed with focus and intent and in the right spirit. Then the wood is collected in a 'sacred manner'. This means that we understand that we take something from nature and use it for a sacred task, so we collect it with attention, focus and intent. In most traditions, thanks are given for whatever is taken from nature and we therefore give thanks for the wood. A sacred circle is created around the fire and, when the fire is lit, often in a specific way, spirits are called in, either by the ceremonial leader or by each participant. Often, sacred herbs or oils are put into the fire as offerings to the spirits of the four directions, or the elements and to Great Spirit or Pachamama or to all of them. Either chants or rattles or drums are used to connect with spirit. After this, each participant puts into the fire an offering crafted to hold his or her intent, such as gratitude, giving something back to the earth or calling something in. Often the intent is spoken aloud whilst the offering burns. After giving the offering, the participant puts their hands through the fire, bringing the smoke first to the belly, then to the heart and then to the third eye. After each participant has completed the offering, the ceremony finishes by thanking the spirits, by more rattling and chanting or drumming.

The **Navajo healing ceremony** has been used and adapted to different needs over time. The basis is formed by a sand painting, similar to the mandalas created by Asian monks, which is created with the intent of achieving balance. The Navajo sand painting expresses perfect balance and therefore the healing ceremony is usually about balancing. Indigenous people have special chants and songs that call in spirits to help restore balance.

I have experienced sand painting ceremonies in different forms and they are also used to release. If created for release, a mandala is created. One can place items around the outer edge to 'catch spirits'. Then something, which can be a simple stick or an elaborately crafted object, is used to represent what needs to be 'let go'. The intent of 'letting go' is held throughout the period of crafting the object. The object is then,

with intent, placed into the centre of the mandala to allow whatever needs letting go to be released into the earth. The release takes place by scattering everything back into the earth. Additionally, the object can be burned, which is again done ceremonially. It is important to hold the intent of 'releasing with love' in mind during the entire ceremony.

Mandals, created collectively or individually, with different materials or as paintings, are used in many different cultures to capture the energy and symbolise different life aspects. I have seen them created to symbolise life cycles (e.g. birth, childhood, adulthood, elderhood, death), to mark transitions, to express gratitude and so on. Anything that seems important, or is wished for, is included in the creation of the Mandala. The creation of a Mandala takes time, is done with focussed intent, the presence of spirit and is then offered to spirit in different forms (e.g. fire ceremony, buried in the earth, kept on altar).

The **pow-wow** is another well-known ceremony. A circle is formed, spirit is called in and a talking stick is passed round. The person who holds the talking stick speaks, whilst everybody else listens, respectfully, with the heart. The talking stick is passed round for as long as it takes, until every person in the circle has spoken all the words he or she needed to speak.

The basic aspects of all **seasonal ceremonies** that mark the beginnings and endings of nature's seasons are rooted in indigenous, shamanic traditions. For instance, the various winter solstice celebrations amongst the Siberians, the Saami in Lapland, the Altaic and others focus on the shaman leaving his body and being guided to the Northern Star, via the Sacred Tree or the Pole of Ascension. The winter solstice ceremonies centre around moving from the 'dark night' into the lighter days of spring, into revealing, growing and receiving the gift of blessing. The shaman flies to the Northern Star, carrying the burdens of the Souls – the Soul essence of each participant – with him and returns with blessing for each of them. In more modern terms, the winter solstice is a time to let go of old grudges, struggles and negative feelings, to unburden, forgive, give thanks to the blessings of the year left behind and call in the new, opening to the light of spring.

Gates are used in ceremonial form in many cultures as well. Gates, to step or crawl through, are usually crafted, with focussed intent and 'spiritual presence'. They should be fairly elaborate hoops that include symbolism in accordance to the enacted intent. Gates are used to step into something, be it dark or light, to go through something, to go 'down' into something and more.

Adapting Ceremonial Work within a Therapeutic Setting

In a contemporary therapeutic setting, ceremony can be used to mark transitions, to resolve, celebrate, embody or let go of something or to call something in. One can use ceremonial work to resolve an issue, celebrate an achievement, let go of something that doesn't serve any longer in life, or express something that one would like to manifest. Ceremony also lends itself to speak or to hear the truth, to finish unfinished business, to give thanks, to send out wishes and prayers or to release or give away fear, anger or grief.

Ceremonies are fun to create, but unfortunately they lend themselves more to working with groups than with individuals, and to a less time restricted setting. Nevertheless, one can use them in one-to-one sessions, as they don't have to be elaborate and can involve any number of people. You can also advise clients to do ceremonial work at home, between sessions, to consolidate change, turning over time a ceremony created in the consulting room into a ritual for the client. There are three vital components to every ceremony:

1. There must be a clearly defined and stated intent
2. Spirit must be invited
3. A symbolic representation and/or enactment must take place.

I have created many ceremonies over the years and have used them with individual clients and with groups. With individual clients, I usually keep them brief and to the point. The one I use most with individual clients is an adaptation of the fire ceremony, usually in the last 30 minutes of the session. If I use the medicine wheel, mandalas, gates or other more complex structures as a basis, I do schedule a whole session for it. I also sometimes give ceremonial work as homework. The intent is usually

determined by the outcome of the session, such as to let go of something, or to call something in, or integrate something. If I give it as homework, the client and myself define the intent, which comes out of the session we just finished, and we also decide on a rough structure and whether or not the ceremony should be attempted repeatedly.

How to Structure a Basic Ceremony

Before I describe some examples, I want to explain the basic structure of a ceremony.

1. Find the intent with your client or with a group of people
2. Decide how you want to create the ceremony. Once the decision has been made, spend time to craft a piece that symbolises the intent (there is more about this in my book in chapter 8: Giving it form: creating objects to bridge intent and energy into reality). The creative act should be done with focus and intent, in meditative silence and, preferably, with the help of 'spirit'.
3. Define the space: I usually use stones to create a circle. The ceremony takes place inside the circle. Anything that is available can be used as long as it clearly defines/marks the space.
4. Call in spirit in a way that is comfortable for you and the people you are with. Do this aloud: for example, 'I am calling in spirit to bless the ceremony we are about to do and to help us with it.' (This is the simplest form, but of course you can elaborate – calling in ancestral spirits, the spirits of the four directions and also specific guides).
5. Transform the space into 'sacred space'. Cleanse it by walking around it with smudge or use sound in form of a Tibetan bell, a singing bowl, a drum or rattle. Build a little altar. A simple cloth on the floor will do. Then put on the cloth a centrepiece that represents the intent of the ceremony... a candle, some flowers, a stone or whatever else feels appropriate. When you put it on the altar, speak the intent aloud. If you work with a group, have every person place an object on the altar. They can say whatever they want to say while doing that. Last, but not least, put something there to represent the spirits you want to be present. I generally use fire, water, earth and air as well as something that represents 'spirit in general'. What you use must relate to the

intent, the people involved and the spirits you want present. It is important to create it as 'beautiful and harmonious' as you possible can with the means you have available as beauty brings us closer to the sacred.

6. Call in spirit again. State your specific intent and ask for help to achieve the intent.
7. Do the ceremony/ritual, involving everybody as much as possible in a structured way. There are many ways, besides of the examples I give, and the more you and your clients or participants use their imagination, whilst keeping the intent and purpose of the ceremony in mind, the better the ceremony will be.
8. When your ceremony is finished, do something to mark the completion, for example, drum, rattle, chant or meditate for a few minutes. Do whatever feels right and supports the people and the intent. Give thanks to the spirits you have called and to other helping energies.
9. Clear the space.
10. Walk away! It's done. Go back to normal reality (it is important not to discuss or rationalise the ceremony immediately after it is completed).

Examples of ceremonies with individual clients

The fire ceremony: To create this, I use simple things, such as pieces of paper and colouring pens or small twigs and wool, which I keep in a box in my consulting room. I ask my client to use whatever they fancy to create something that symbolises what she wants to let go or call in or integrate. This can be a small drawing, a twig decorated with some wool, or some writing on a piece of paper. I set a time limit for the creative task, as this focuses the mind, and the client is instructed to hold the intent during the whole process of crafting. We then build a circle, using stones (in my room, there's a bowl filled with hand-sized stones). The stones are chosen by the client and laid down by me. I might burn some incense, dim the lights and light some candles whilst my client crafts the item. Then my client is asked to sit with me inside the circle and to close her eyes whilst I call in spirit with the help of a rattle or a drum or, if the energy feels heavy, with the help of a singing bowl or Tibetan bell. If you

don't like to use any of these, play some soft music in the background. I tell my client that she can call in spirit or spirit helpers silently, in whatever form she would like, according to her own belief system. After we have invited spirit, I ask my client to hold the object, to state her intent, to really feel what she wants to let go or call in or integrate, and then I instruct her to burn the object in a bowl with a candle, which has been placed in the circle beforehand. In winter, I often use the fireplace in my consulting room, having lit the fire beforehand. The client is encouraged to state the intent: for instance, 'I am letting go of (insert appropriately) with thanks, asking (insert appropriately) to help me' a few times whilst she watches the object burn. If there is more than one issue to address within a ceremony, make sure you allow more time, asking the client to create something for each issue. When the object has burned – fast if it's a drawing or a letter and a bit more slowly if it has been made of another material – I ask my client to close her eyes again and to imagine that whatever she has just worked on is already happening. I give thanks to spirit again, encouraging the client to do the same, silently or aloud, if that feels right. We then put the stones back into the bowl and finish the session by thanking spirit.

Affirming and honouring aspects of ourselves: This ceremony will take a whole session and needs some preparation. You might be familiar with the 'wise woman or wise man' visualisation, where clients are asked to imagine meeting a wise person and asking for their advice. In more shamanic-orientated work, we would set it up in a more ceremonial way, rather than involving only the visual.

This ceremony around the wheel is to meet and to honour four aspects of yourself: the magical spirit child in the East, the inner man or woman in the west, the wise adult in the North and the trusting, creative playful child in the South. The client is 'the witness' in the centre of the circle. I have used it when we were at a stage where a client needed to get to know and honour inner aspects of herself.

Firstly, again build up a circle, using bigger stones for the four directions, South, West, North and East. The space has to be large enough for the client to be able to sit in each direction, facing the centre. Call in spirit.

The first round: your client sits in the middle, facing each direction in turn, beginning with the East. Ask your client to imagine her 'inner spirit child' in the East, stressing that the spirit child can come in all shapes and forms, but that it is magical, spirited. Ask your client to describe whatever image comes to her. Take notes. Do the same for the other three directions, stressing that these are positive aspects, not influenced by life events.

The second round is the more powerful one. This time the client will sit in each specific direction, facing the centre. You can sit in the centre, being the witness. Ask your client to begin in the East, closing her eyes, taking a few deep breaths and then remembering the image. Now ask your client to begin to embody the magical child, feeling as if she were this magical, spirit child. Ask your client to nod her head when she has a sense of being the spirit child. Now ask your client to speak starting 'I am Rosie's spirit child... I am ... [whatever comes out]' Encourage your client to speak feely, letting come what wants to come. Sometimes it is one sentence; sometimes clients speak for much longer. It is important not to ask for more, not to comment and especially not to judge, neither positively, nor negatively. When there is silence, ask the client to let the magical spirit child go and, in her own time, open her eyes, coming back to the circle.

Then proceed to the South, repeating the exercise until your client has completed the circle. When the client has completed the circle, and has embodied all four aspects, ask her to come back into the middle, close her eyes and silently reflect, honouring and giving thanks to her beautiful inner aspects.

It is important to give thanks to the spirits you have called in and also to clear the space together with your client after the ceremony. It is advised not to discuss the ceremony and what happened afterwards so as not to intellectualise what should be left to work its way through the system, unless you feel that there is some integration work to be done. After a ceremony such as 'honouring the four aspects', it might be beneficial to give homework that refers back to the aspects and then, should this be the client's need, to discuss whatever needs talking about in the next session.

Examples of ceremonial work with groups

All traditional ceremonies described, including the ones I have outlined for the use with individual clients, can be used with groups. The possibilities with groups are endless and, of course, the energy of the group will make the ceremony more powerful.

Tree ceremony: A ceremony I have used in an adapted form, mainly with groups, but also with individuals, is ‘the tree’. This ceremony works beautifully inside or outside, if the group is larger than six people. I either collect big branches beforehand or send some group members out to collect them. I use a big container that is filled with sand. The branches (about 1 metre in length) should ideally be from trees. They need to be cut ceremonially – asking permission and giving thanks – or collected from the ground. The ‘branch tree’ is put in the middle of the room and I put a tray with different coloured wool and scissors, ready prepared for the ceremony, next to ‘the branch-tree’. The group forms a wide circle around the tree, sitting down if it’s a big group or standing up if that feels better. I call in spirit, encouraging the group participants to do the same silently, with their eyes closed. We then chant or rattle or drum for a while, if that feels appropriate. Then each participant takes it in turns to walk around the inside of the circle – clockwise or anticlockwise (it doesn’t matter which as long as every person walks in the same direction) – to build up an energy field. When they reach the tree, they cut a piece of wool and wind it around the branches, stating their intent out loud.

Let’s say we create the ceremony to give thanks. In this case, each participant would take a piece of wool, wind it around and state ‘I give thanks for my health, I give thanks for having a loving family, I give thanks for having a job I like and that sustains me, I give thanks for my children, I give thanks for having the means to participate in this workshop’ and so on. People will give thanks until the piece of wool they have cut has been wound around the branches. Some of them will cut a long piece; others will cut a short piece. It is always right. In a big group, you will end up with a bunch of beautifully decorated branches, usually astonishingly harmonious in shape and colour. When all participants have finished, we thank spirit, and drum or

rattle again. This time I take the level up, rattling faster and louder, until it subsides by itself. We thank spirit, put the tree onto a table in the room outside the circle and usually have a break, to break state. The branches will be either ceremonially burned or buried at the end of the workshop.

This ceremony can be used with any intent. I have used it to ‘call in blessings’, ‘let something go’, ‘call something in’, ‘remember something with love’, ‘forgive someone’, ‘honour ancestors’, ‘tell my story’ and many more. If conducted in a group, it is always moving. It opens participants’ hearts, they get to know each other on a deeper level, it builds community and connects them on a level of soul.

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