

Creating New Rituals to Strengthen Constellation Work

Rituals have been part of our collective cultural experience for as long as we have human records. All societies have rituals as part of their structure. Rituals are used in many different aspects of our societies, including religious ceremonies (such as masses, temple services, and praying to Mecca), sports events, and political rallies.

Although many rituals are enculturated in a set format, and older rituals are wonderful, they can be adapted to new circumstances, and new ones can be created. If we consider the field of music, we love Bach, Beethoven and ancient chants, but we also make and listen to new music. In the same way, we have old rituals, but we can alter those rituals or make new ones. Old music was once new music, and old rituals were once new rituals.

Constellation work has always had a ceremonial or ritual component to it, especially when practiced in a group setting. Most workshops and constellation groups have some type of opening and closing ceremony. The circle is often used; “circle technology” has been proven to be highly effective.

We are in a time of great change, as pockets of information once isolated from each other become available to almost everyone. Old indigenous traditions and large scientific modern states, countries and institutions are meshing together. All these wisdoms are merging and sometimes clashing. There is a need to honor this great change and adapt old rituals or create new ones.

If we look at constellations practices, one common part of the work is healing statements. They create an image of healing that the client can take with them. I consider these statements (“I am big and you are little” “I give you my blessing”, “I take full responsibility”, “I look to the future”, etc) to be miniature rituals. I have witnessed their power and how they can profoundly affect the person whose constellation is being facilitated. And as this work evolves, one main question has been: how can we strengthen the impact of the work?

I have been fortunate to be part of a group of facilitators holding monthly workshops in the Rockville, Maryland area of the United States for the past 8 years. We have always used healing statements as part of our constellations. We have also tried different simple openings and closings. Over the past year, however, I have been taking a closer look at how to make our work more powerful using openings, closings, and the equivalent of healing statements in these openings and closings.

While attending a constellations intensive in Bernried, Germany in April and May of 2015, I saw the power that a new ritual can convey. Jane James from the United Kingdom presented a ritual in one of the smaller sub-groups of the intensive that met in the afternoon. The issue of belonging is a central issue in family constellations, and it applies to any group. It is very easy to feel that you are different from everyone else in the group, because we are all different in some way. So the ritual was very simple. The group formed a circle, and one by one people stepped into the center of the circle. They said their name and something about themselves that they especially felt blocked their connection with the rest of the group. In my case, it was that I come from a mathematical background and sometimes feel like I don't belong in the constellation community, which to me seems to be made up largely of psychotherapists, body workers, and others dedicated to healing. After the person spoke, the group said “You're one of us”. It was very powerful and created a palpable sense of belonging, and the group

bonded at a significantly deeper level after this. Because the result was so powerful, the ritual was adapted for a closing ceremony for the entire intensive, with representatives from all the different countries stepping into the circle, saying where they were from and why they felt different, and hearing from the entire intensive “you’re one of us”. I have since seen it adapted in constellations in my home area of Washington DC, to equally powerful effect.

The strength and power of this ritual opened my mind to the possibility of creating other new rituals in the evolving discipline of systemic constellations. Most workshops and trainings have some sort of opening and closing ceremony. It can be something simple, such as a guided meditation or a round of short words from each participant, or it can be something more elaborate. While taking a 21 day facilitator training for new and established facilitators later in the year, I was asked to present a ceremony or ritual for opening or closing a day of work. I looked at a lot of existing rituals (see Boring, 2012 for many good ones) but I remembered my Bernried experience and decided to create a ritual of my own. I wanted to symbolize two things: first, the work done within the field during a day of constellations to increase the flow of love, and second, to create a concrete symbol for the trainees that they were learning new knowledge. I call it the Stone and Feather Ritual. It symbolizes both accomplishment and movement.

We formed a circle around a small table in its center. I put pebbles in a bowl (one for each of the 30 people) and passed the bowl around the circle. Each person took one pebble. In the center of the room, on the table, was a cup with feathers. I put the empty pebble bowl on the table.

In turn, each person walked to the center of the room and put their pebble in the bowl, saying “I removed this pebble from the stream of love today to increase its flow.” They then took a feather, saying “I take this feather to represent the new knowledge I gained today.” I was touched by the positive response to this, and most people kept the feathers, which I found very touching. I have since used the ritual with just the pebbles in a workshop where the participants are not facilitators and the feather portion does not apply as well.



Photo 1: Table with Stones and Feathers

There were many other creative rituals demonstrated during the 21 days by the different participants, and they all cemented the power of the group.

In our monthly workshops Rockville, Maryland, I have continued to try new ceremonies and see if they resonate with the group. One especially powerful one involved the love of the ancestors, another central theme in family constellations. I have a Navajo rug that I inherited from my father when he died in 1998. It is shown in photos 2 and 3. This rug hangs on a wall in my house and it had special meaning for me before I ever discovered constellations work.



Photo 2: Navajo “ancestor rug”

You can see human figures in a line from left to right. The first figure has a white cloak. The next twelve figures have alternating white and red cloaks, and the final figure on the right has a brown cloak. When I first saw this rug at my father’s house, I immediately thought of ancestors. After his death, it took on added personal significance for me. I saw the first white figure as my father, then the next four figures as my grandparents, the following 8 figures as my great-grandparents, and the final figure on the right (in brown) as the rest of my ancestors. (My mother is still alive, and hopefully will remain so for a while, so she is not excluded.)

I brought the rug in to one of our workshops, and for a closing I put the rug over each person’s shoulders one by one. They first said “I receive the love of my ancestors”, and sat with that for a period of time while absorbing that. Then, when ready, they took a few steps forward and said “And I take that love with me into the future”.



Photo 3: Rani George in an ancestor ritual

Rituals need not be standalone ceremonies such as openings and closings. As mentioned earlier, the healing statements in the constellations are a sort of mini-ritual. Part of the art of a good facilitator is adapting the appropriate healing statements into the fabric of a constellation as it unfolds, to symbolize the unraveling of entanglements and movement in previously frozen systems. As both a facilitator and as a representative in a constellation, I have learned to honor the phrases (sometimes not the traditional healing statements) that sometimes seem to whisper to me in the flow of the field. When expressed appropriately, they often seem to add power to the process, and good new ones can be added to the toolbox of healing statements for the future.

This is by no means an exhaustive treatise on rituals. It is just my own personal experience with it. I hope it will stimulate discussion (and other new rituals).

Older, classical rituals are great. They would not have been passed down from the past if they were not. But this is the present, and we are co-creating both it and our future. I would strongly encourage anyone who feels called to create new rituals, or adapt old ones, to give it a try. Trust yourself. Trust the field. As our cultures change and merge, new rituals may be more powerful in some instances. There are always new challenges to be met. Both tradition and vision must be honored as we move forward.

References:

Boring, F.M., "Connecting to Our Ancestral Past: Healing through Family Constellations, Ceremony and Ritual", North Atlantic Books, 2012.