



Messaging the soul

William Ayot brings the lost art of ritual and embodiment to the corporate sector. Working with leaders, he outlines how ritual can offer a spiritual homecoming which could transform the culture of work

We live in a world of ritual deprivation. As our rich, metaphorical language has been reduced to business speak and buzzwords, so our ancient rituals of initiation and belonging have been discarded in the name of 'reason' and progress. This is no one's fault – no one sets out to impoverish our lives – but the absence of ritual diminishes us all and involves a loss of humanity. The new workmate who irritates people by always referring to their previous organisation as 'us', or the recent retiree who has no identity beyond their job and falls into premature decline, are both lacking the deep shifts and embodied transitions that only ritual can bring. My belief is that we need to rethink our relationship to

the value of each other's practice, I hope that my experience as a ritualist might be of use.

When I moved from working in rehab and personal development to leadership development, I was told that I could never create rituals on a business programme, that I couldn't use words like soul, death or grief in a corporate setting, and that I would do well to stay away from poetry. I was also told that I should always wear a tie.

Two decades later I'm poet-in-residence at a top business school and work for other organisations too. I write poems for practically every group I meet, and I talk about grief and soul incessantly. I have held hundreds of rituals for individuals and groups across four continents, and re-opened doors to an inner life for untold numbers

of overstressed and alienated executives. What's happened in the interim?

Firstly, I think the success of arts-based organisational development has helped, to the point that most of the top business schools, and most forward-looking organisations, acknowledge the value of the arts and personal development in leadership coaching and teaching. Secondly, I think the financial

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On that basis I'm going to lay out a few thoughts on my practice and the uses of ritual, which may hopefully spark a few questions and open some doors to different ways of working. I'm not a therapist; I'm an artist; but, in the way that artists and organisational leaders have begun to see

All this is very encouraging, but then the multi-addictive, materialistic, celebrity culture that we are



growing has us in a vice-like grip. So much so that I think one of the greatest challenges facing us in the workplace these days is that of simply being present, of meeting each other in an embodied and attentive fashion, without either vanishing up into our heads, or hiding behind false personas that bury us in increasingly impenetrable layers of insincerity. In leadership development in particular, the demand is for ever more candour and authenticity, which calls for an unforced and embodied 'real-ness'. This flies in the face of our increasingly disembodied, left-brain, managerial culture. That said, all is not lost: one of the most effective ways for individuals to 'get real' and get back into their bodies is to experience the animating power of ritual.

Defining ritual

For the sake of clarity – for the purposes of my work – I define a ritual as a symbolic action through which one can give the soul, or psyche, an important message. This comes from the simple fact that the soul (or psyche) can't count. It can't manage data. If you want to speak to the soul, you have to speak in pictures. Since the earliest days of humanity, the soul has dealt in images. Thus it is that the bestowal of a wedding ring delivers a powerful message to anyone who gets married. There is a before, and an after – and the ring delivers an indelible message.

This notion of symbolic action gives us a vast array of tools if we wish to help people to change, or heal. I have found myself, again and again, creating short rituals for people that alter their perceptions of the world by the use of symbols. This often involves the making of a ritual object – what anthropologists would call a fetish – that represents something to be parted with, or acknowledged. This use of ritual objects is a common practice among indigenous ritualists. It also brings us to another phenomenon that we might call the ritual shift.

The ritual shift comes at the high point of a ritual, when the completion of a fetish, or a coup-de-theatre, brings a sudden realisation or understanding that involves a physical, visceral acceptance or learning that, because it enters the body, cannot be unlearned. This ritual shift has all the intellectual weight of a Gestalt, being more than the sum of its parts, but it has the added heft of physical activity too – of shredding a piece of cloth to symbolise a separation, or burning some object that stands for something lost. In theatre terms – and it's at times like these that we come to appreciate the common roots of theatre and ritual – the ritual shift comes as a climax, or tragic catharsis, like the climactic moment of any drama.

The parallels between ritual and theatre are there for all to see, and it is often wise to think of a ritual, like a well-made play, as having a beginning, a middle, and an end. Most importantly, like any play, a ritual only succeeds if it delivers on its premise or intention.

Setting and holding an intention is the core of any ritual, and it is wise to ask ourselves a few searching questions before we begin. This saves us from floundering around later, trying to make sense of a ritual that has lost shape and gone flat. In considering our intention we need to become clear about the purpose of our ritual and what has moved us to perform it. Only when we have determined and clarified our intention can we start on a ritual in earnest.

Ritual at work

The panelled room grows quiet and half a dozen executives lean in as (fictionalised) client, Michael, a newly promoted Vice-President for a global corporation, begins to unpack his tale of drive, desire, and debilitating self-doubt. It's a grey, wintery morning at an up-market corporate venue in the South of England. You wouldn't expect to be listening to intimate sharing of this kind in such a place, but we're all totally rapt, helping Michael to work through a major life change – and doing it through a ritual.

There's no hocus-pocus – no drums, no smudge-stick, no rattle – just an intense concentration and a palpable wave of feeling as Michael tells how he grew up in a poor dysfunctional family; how he fought his way to the top, raised the money to put himself through college, and rose to reach his ultimate dream of company cars and expense

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accounts — all the while shamed by the ghosts of his past, and a toxic sense of his own inadequacy. It’s this shame that eats away at his confidence, and fuels his rage. Deep down, he knows that it could derail him.

Carefully we begin to create a ritual that Michael will experience as a profound transitional move from one state of life, that of his pre-vice-presidential self, to that of a Vice-President. More importantly, we are helping him to make the transition to *fully accepting* himself in his new role (and as we know, promotions involve much more than a simple change of title). Such a ritual is commonplace in tribal cultures but has been largely forgotten in our sophisticated society. A tribal elder would call this an initiation, an anthropologist would call it a rite of passage.

Arnold Van Gennep,¹ the ethnographer who first identified these ancient indigenous initiations, described the three stages of a rite of passage as *pre-liminal*, *liminal* and *post-liminal*.² This has come down to us through various anthropologists and mythologists as *separation*, *transition* and *incorporation*.

In Michael’s case, the separation phase arises through the very fact of his going on a corporate programme – in this case, a three-day residential – which provides the ideal distance from his day-to-day existence, and prepares him for entry into ‘liminal space’, the traditional initiatory space of deep change and soulful re-ordering.

The *transition* phase of Michael’s ritual is flagged up by him volunteering his story. This brings us to an unspoken acknowledgement that we have arrived in liminal space. The evident sincerity and emotional discomfort of Michael’s tale not only confirms my sense of him as ‘ripe’ and ready for a ritual but induces a sense of deep attention and care among his colleagues. This is the unlikely phenomenon of *communitas*.³ This term of anthropologist Victor Turner, refers to either a community that has shed its structures and hierarchies, or to the very spirit of community. One might think this improbable in a business context, but my experience is that even in ‘high-octane’ corporate settings, the performance of rituals allows for a common experience in which the walls of our social and business preconceptions are broken down, moving us from internal isolation to a kind of ‘ritual belonging’. It also

brings us to a wholly natural humility, opening us to the gifts of empathy, understanding and kindness, all three of which are at a premium in the workplace. Michael’s ritual takes no more than about 20 minutes.

Having isolated his shame as the cause of the negative behaviours that might derail him, I ask him to speak of the rage that he feels so uncomfortable about. I then link this to the shame he visibly expressed as he spoke about his poor childhood, and his sense of ‘worthlessness’ among his peers at work. Having got behind the rage and volatility, I ask the group to circle up and individually feed back to Michael in word or gesture what they admire about him as a leader and why they think he’ll make a good VP. At this point Michael wells up as he receives the benign attention he so clearly lacked in his early years. Seeing this moment come to a gentle fullness, I step forward and acknowledge his ritual shift, quietly anchoring what has been effectively a group blessing of Michael in his new role and status.

In doing this, I am moving us into the *incorporation* phase of Michael’s ritual. This is about assimilation and embodiment – allowing the change to percolate down into his body. At this point, while getting him to make an anchoring gesture in order to help his body remember the moment, I point out to him that he has made a profound transition; that he has got there by merit and that he has the skills and the attributes named by his colleagues in the circle. I also name the volatility and rage as something he might like to take to a coach or counsellor. Finally, I suggest he is gentle with himself, that he takes a while to absorb the deep shift he has experienced.

The following day, Michael is comfortable in his skin and enjoying the winter sunshine. He’s grateful for the experience and is happy to action plan a future meeting with a coach to discuss his volatility. More importantly, he’s talking about his kids and how he’s going to spend more time with them at weekends and during the winter holidays. As a VP, he confidently says, he needs to get his priorities right.

Ritual for retirement

Another area of working life that begs for the application of timely ritual – perhaps more urgently than others – is that of retirement. As a culture, we are desperately in need of proper initiations into elderhood. The baby boomers are aging rapidly, and it is apparent that they are going to be living longer and more healthily than any previous generation. Quite apart from any financial implications, they are likely to be looking at 20, even 30 years of retirement. And yet a majority of them have no sense of what they are going to do in their retirement, still less any sense of purpose. Many see themselves as empty and discarded husks. Others face a dwindling of self-worth, or worse, a complete loss of identity. Ironically, in indigenous cultures, such people are just coming to the most effective and fruitful time in their lives, when their skills and experience are most valued by others.

The fact is, there is a vital and fulfilling role for the elderly in our culture: that of the elder – and in particular the ritual elder. We need people of all walks of life to develop their skills as holders and designers of ritual, so that they can mature into ritual elders. This is done by doing and experiencing more rituals, working with peers to create the initiations they need to bring themselves and others through to elderhood. We may not have had ritual elders ourselves, but we can restart the age-old processes of initiation that lead to ‘elder-making’. The ‘me generation’ are at a point in life where they can give up their supposed selfishness and provide a ritual grounding for their peers, and those who follow. For the most part, they have the money and/or the leisure, to re-enter the world of ritual, spend some time in enjoyable learning, and take up the challenges that only they can address. As Robert L Moore, Professor of Psychoanalysis, Culture and Spirituality, at Chicago Theological Seminary, writes:

*‘The human need for ritualization in many areas of life has not diminished. What has diminished is the availability of knowledgeable ‘ritual elders’ who understand the archetypal human need for ritualization throughout life, and who are prepared to respond competently and effectively by providing ritual leadership to those who need it...’*⁴

This is a clarion call for artists and healers, poets and painters, therapists and counsellors to offer their services more publicly – to take up the ancient Bardic role of the

scops⁵ and the skald,⁵ the völva⁶ and the wise woman, and to lead and hold the rituals that we will be needing as the world continues to change around us. Between the unthinking degradation of our environment and our plundering of the planet’s finite resources, we are coming to a crossroads where the choices are stark and clear. Whatever happens, we are going to need people who understand ritual.

References

- 1 Van Gennep A. *The rites of passage*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 1961.
- 2 *liminal* – from the Latin word ‘limen’, meaning the space before or after a threshold.
- 3 For a brilliant anthropological take on liminality, *communitas* and rites in general, see Turner V, *The ritual process: structure and anti-structure*. Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press; 1969.
- 4 Moore R. *The archetype of initiation: sacred space, ritual process and personal transformation*. Bloomington; Xlibris Corp; 2001.
- 5 *Scops and Skald – ancient Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian storytellers and poets*.
- 6 *Völva – a Norse seeress or sibyl*.



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William Ayot is an award-winning poet, international teacher and ritualist. He leads workshops on the uses of ritual and poetry for therapists, and in a corporate setting leads arts-based leadership seminars and coaches senior executives. His latest book, *Re-enchanting the Forest: Meaningful Ritual in a Secular World*, was published in October 2015 by Vala Books. www.williamayot.com

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