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## Psychotherapy As Ritual

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### Abstract

Ritualistic enactment and symbol have long been used to aid persons who are experiencing separation from their society and often to induce separation and mark transitions in life. Whether a rite of passage as a means of moving from one state of being to another or a clinical mental health issue that subjectively separates an individual from their community, the experience of separation and state of “liminality” are for the person a place of ambiguity and holding. It is in this state that therapists are giving the opportunity to explore meaningful symbols and meaningful interaction through intersubjective experiences and mimetic enactment. Current research and theory on intersubjective and mimetic processes is lending support to the physically embedded nature of these processes, highlighting the necessity of therapeutic work that is both dynamic and embodied. I would like to argue that through the exploration of myth and symbol in the clients own language the therapist-client dyad moves the client towards communal health.

“In its cultural aspect, the community is an order of memories preserved consciously in instructions, songs, and stories, and both consciously and unconsciously in *ways*. A healthy culture holds preserving knowledge *in place for a long time*. That is, the essential wisdom accumulates in the community much as fertility builds in the soil. In both, death becomes potentiality.” (italics his)

Wendell Berry  
People, Land, and Community

### Introduction - Ways of Living and the Liminal Process

We are constantly moving between structural and communitarian ways of viewing, living, and contributing in meaningful ways to society. Structural societies consist of both open and closed systems that over time become ritualized and institutionalized as a means of social order or a “contract” akin to John Locke’s idea on the subject. The anthropologist and ethnologist Victor Turner notes that the communitarian way, or the Latin *communitas*, often works with and against structural methods by calling attention to the tensions that arise through in- and out-group dynamics, which then themselves become integrated in structural society - and the process continues. Turner highlights that within *communitas* there subsist the existential or ideal view of what a community should be and the practical or pedagogical view of everyday life in a community. This idea goes well beyond a simple understanding of community as a place of dwelling to include the concepts of equality, justice, peace, and a general “sentiment for humanity” that are embodied by a people group.

Within this interplay of structure and *communitas*, people transition to different stages of life using ritualistic enactments incorporating mimetic behavior and widespread symbolism (i.e. the birthday cake and accompanying song). This state of transition is what Victor Turner calls the state of liminality and represents a “separation, margin, and/or aggregation” from one period of life to another. While the state of liminality occurs in various contexts, it is not bound to ritualistic celebrations. Further, Turner notes that the inception of liminality rites often goes unknown and simply operates at the level of the unconscious.

When crises arise as one navigates life in any society an individual may enter into a liminal state and experience a place of margin and/or separation. For the therapy client, this state may present in any number of ways depending on how an individual deals with a conflictual psyche in their given social or cultural context. The mental health field is historically grounded in aiding people “disconnected” from society, whether diagnosed with de-pression (unattached from society), anti-social (against society), psychosis (break from society), and the list goes on.

Therapist's work is grounded in aiding those in liminal states considered pathognomonic to reintegrate into the social fabric. In Jung's *Man and His Symbols* (1964), Joseph L. Henderson writes that the ritual aids by "forcing a symbolic death...the ritual insist upon this rite of death and rebirth... [providing] a rite of passage from one stage of life to the next." (p. 123) The liminal state in this context presents the therapist and client an opportunity to reflect upon the ritualistic activity and symbols that make up the client's own context with the hope of bringing to conscious awareness the conflictual psyche and aid in reentry into community.

### **Ritual Process**

In studying indigenous African communities, Victor Turner highlights several ritual processes of life and tribe transition and notes the importance of symbol use within this framework. Quoting Monica Wilson on rituals, Turner notes, "Rituals reveal values at their deepest level... men express in ritual what moves them most, and since the form of expression is conventionalized and obligatory, it is the values of the group that are revealed" (Turner, p. 6). Turner goes on to highlight that while it is one thing to observe rituals in performance, it is a very different thing to find out what rituals mean to them. In order to do this, Turner notes, one must find out what symbols mean for both the culture and the individual. "Any analysis not based on some translation of the symbols used by people of that culture is open to suspicion" (p. 9).

Turner's work highlights the similarities between the liminal process and therapy as similar "sacred" spaces – allowing for deep change and exploration of deep personality structure. As noted above, the liminal process provides an "in between" state from which to work with a client in exploring their understanding of the rituals and symbols that make up their social fabric as they navigate structure and *communitas*. Through exploring the dialectical nature occurring between structural and *communitas* and the rituals that accompany them, it becomes possible to bring to conscious awareness those symbols and experiences surrounding meaningful events that are important for the client.

After 60 years of studying human nature and the process of therapy, Carl Jung noted that, "It all depends on learning the language of the individual patient and following the gropings of his unconscious toward the light... this is especially true when one seeks to interpret symbols." (1964, p. 55) This process of learning language and symbol implies a certain amount of time spent together as well as bidirectional participation. A seminal proponent of the unconscious, Jung further noted that because of the limited ability of the conscious to process all that is happening, there are "innumerable things" that move beyond the range of human understanding to lie stored in the unconscious. We therefore rely upon "symbolic terms to represent concepts that we cannot define or fully comprehend." (p. 4) Symbols thus connect what is implicit or unconscious and beyond pure reason to conscious, explicit experience.

### **Knowing and Recalling**

There is a growing body of literature regarding the unconscious and/or "tacit" ways of knowing that challenge Enlightenment ideals regarding epistemology and how we know and understand our world, including symbols and rituals. Writing in the 1950's Michael Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge* was one of the first to call attention to the subjective-personal processes that often guide "empirical" research, striking a major blow to logical positivism and the New Positivist (1962). Polanyi's task was not to undercut or discount the use of empirical science, but rather pull off the covers of our presuppositions regarding the way scientist study any phenomena. "Complete objectivity," Polanyi notes, "as usually attributed to the exact sciences is a delusion and is in fact a false idea." (Polanyi, p. 18) Although Polanyi is writing as a philosopher and chemist, his thesis and ideas relate to epistemology in a very broad sense and are quite relevant for the field of psychology. As Polanyi writes elsewhere, "For, as human beings, we must inevitably see the universe from a center lying within ourselves and speak about it in terms of a human language shaped by the exigencies of human intercourse." (p. 3) While Polanyi does not seem to be espousing a complete relativism, he is highlighting the subjective and embodied nature of human discourse, knowing, and interpretation, and the utter reliance upon human interaction and community to form and sustain that process.

Newer texts, such as Raymond Gibbs, Jr.'s (2005) *Embodiment and Cognitive Science*, brings together the growing theoretical knowledge relating to the tacit knowing (i.e. "embodiment") and modern advances in the field of cognitive science. In experiencing everyday life, Gibbs suggest, we use our entire physical body and "embodied" understanding, as opposed to an abstract understanding "separated" from the body and located in the "mind."

Even the way we describe mental and/or emotional experiences makes use of embodied-physical terms – "I stand for something," "I was being flexible," "I'm a balanced person" (Gibbs, p.2). Much of Gibbs research

on this topic has revealed the way our cognitive processes such as memory, mental imagery, and problem solving are not simply grounded in an internal computer or body-separate mind, but rather are closely linked to sensorimotor simulations. And based upon this embeddedness of knowing, Gibbs suggest that, “Bodies are not culture-free objects,

because all aspects of embodied experience are shaped by cultural processes. Theories of human conceptual systems should be inherently cultural in that the cognition that occurs when the body meets the world is inextricably culturally based. (Gibbs, p. 13)

In desiring to understand any one person’s understanding of themselves and their environments, it is necessary to know their culture, their language, and how the two intermingle. Not only is language tightly bound to one’s experience of reality, but language is dynamic and interactional and coincides with and shapes our unfolding experience as well as how we interpret our past.

Gibbs work on the processes of memory are also relevant. The concept of memory and how experiences get encoded have gone through many changes based upon research, imagining techniques, and neuropsychological studies. Once thought to act as a storage center that encoded experiences for later retrieval akin to a computer (with the exception of “procedural” and/or motor memory), Gibbs describes a deeply embodied basis for memory that is reliant upon both internal association areas and external cues within the environment.

Gibbs uses the case of a bartender to explain the embodied nature of memory. A bartender is inundated with multiple orders requiring varying amounts of liquids, different shaped glasses, and other garnishes and “dress-ups.” Further, he or she must perform these precise actions and recipes with speed and accuracy. Studies that have compared novice and expert bartenders (Beach, 1988) demonstrate that as one progresses to an “expert” level of bartending there is a more “delicate interplay between internal and environmental factors.” (Gibbs, p. 143) Expert level bartenders use persistent external cues at the time of making the drink. When the variety of glasses are replaced with uniform glasses, expert level performance drops, while the distinction between a variety of glasses and uniform glasses does not effect novice bartenders at all. Based upon this research, Gibbs concludes, “The expert has learned to transform the working environment to simplify the task that confronts the body in action.” (p. 143)

Other researchers highlight similar patterns of memory. James Brewer, *et al.* (1998) demonstrated that recall of objects in a room was based upon the proximity of the objects to one another rather than their semantic relatedness. Of this study, Gibbs notes that, “People’s memory for places is grounded in their embodied experience, as a perceptual symbolic form, and not in some abstract, amodal, schematic representation.” (p. 143). What these researchers suggest is that memory for objects, events, faces, rituals, etc., is not a dis-embodied encoding phenomenon that is later conjured up like a computer, but rather an in-the-moment environmentally and physically mediated process that it strengthened through procedural action.

So how is this relevant for psychotherapy? Here is posited thus far; First, humans move through a life marked by rituals and symbols that provide a lexicon for meaning and communal connection. We are constantly navigating the “interplay” between in-group and out-group dynamics. Social norms are re-incorporated into the fabric of society, we learn to navigate these norms, yet feel the tension of competing or different norms (e.g. “what does it mean to be a Christian today?”). The state of liminality acts as a separation of sorts from one’s context, even if sub-consciously, allowing for reflection in a time of transition and later reintegration back into ones respective society. This process is ongoing and never static. As Victor Turner writes, “each individual’s life experience contains alternating exposure to structure and communitas, and to states and transitions.” (p. 97) Within this state of transition symbols and meaningful rituals are learned and processed, becoming part of the dialectical interplay of structure and communitas.

The learning of symbols and rituals does not happen in a schizoid fashion, detached and in isolation. Rather, as I’ve suggested, symbols and rituals are learned through an embodied nature that presumes human society and interaction. The phrase, “because we are, I am” hints at this. Therefore, if we want to learn what symbols and rituals are important for any individual, we have to as both Jung and Turner suggests, learn the language of the individual in light of the society and context from which he or she is embedded through an embodied and tacit experience with the client themselves.

Further, if a goal of the therapist is to understand the deep personality structures of the client and all that comes with it (including meaning making symbols, idols, rites, etc.), she would work to create an environment and culture that allows for enactment of behavior and allows for free association with interpretation.

### **In Therapy**

In the area of psychotherapy, Efrat Ginot's (2009, 2011) exploration in the area of mirror neurons and intersubjective processes is beginning to reveal some of underlying brain mechanisms of the interpersonal communication process. Through the use of clinical research and case studies, Ginot has demonstrated that the brain's mirror neuron system aids in mediating physical-action-understanding, imitation, and empathy and highlights that these three phenomena taken together constitute the "intersubjective building blocks of attachment." Through attunement to the analytic process, Ginot goes on to describe how it is possible for enactment of implicit emotions and embedded ways of living in the world to come to consciousness and that the analytic environment allows for reflection and contextualization of those shared experiences. Through the process of bringing the unconscious to awareness the therapist and client move one step closer to understanding the symbols and ritual processes that make up the client's ritualistic world.

"Self-narratives" Ginot writes, "can be seen as part of neuropsychological schemas that originate from the child's efforts to give meaning to his or her interactional experiences." (2011, p. 2) Occurring in pre-verbal states for the child, intersubjective emotional states arising from the interaction of the child-caregiver relationship are encoded and provide an associative basis for self-narrative understanding (see Beebe & Lachman, 1994; Cozolino, 2006; Siegel, 2007). With the onset of language, emotions and states are embodied through interaction with others, such that "words and sentences that construe self-narratives become the cognitive representations of the implicit intersubjective world." (Ginot, 2011, p. 2) While this process is not reduced to physiology, anatomy, or biology, the process is deeply embedded in human experience and by extension deeply physical.

One of the main links of the attunement and intersubjective process is found in the neuropsychological research on mirror neurons. Although research on mirror neurons is fairly young, researchers suggest that the mirror neuron system acts as a mediator of understanding action, imitation, and empathy and does so in such a way that the brain interprets the actions through "off-line" physical action. This means that when I see a person move their hand, in understanding what it means to "move a hand" or what any particular motion means, mirror neurons are responding along with motor and pre-motor areas to give that action meaning. As mentioned, researchers suggest this process is similar for empathy. The word "empathy" literally means to not only be able to know what someone is feeling, but actually take those emotions and make them your own.

Ginot goes on to note that based upon the research of Gallese and Lakoff (2005) it is suggested that "key aspects of social cognition have become linked to brain mechanisms that evolved to enable sensory-motor imitation, namely, the mirror neuron system," thus, providing a basis for mimetic ritualization of behavior through social interaction (2011). This would also include language itself, which researchers have suggested is learned through mimetic processes and includes the neural influence of the mirror neuron system. "One can conclude, then" Ginot writes, "that language (in the form of words, concepts, images, or metaphors) derived from intersubjective attachment situations will inevitably be suffused with a wide range of sensory and affective messages." (p. 9) In therapy, this process takes time and is rarely conscious.

Ginot adds, "As automatic verbal narratives are experienced, identified, and reflected on within repeated therapeutic interactions, there is a chance for integrative and regulating processes to develop." (2011, p. 3) With verbal identification of emotional states, one is able to begin to identify those rituals, symbols, and patterns that shape who they are. This process almost never goes smoothly, Ginot adds, almost always conjuring pejorative and negative emotions. Yet, it is the "intersubjective processes embedded in the psychoanalytic process that will enable narratives to surface and repeatedly become an object of reflectiveness within a safe environment." (2011, p. 3)

Another interesting hypothesis about the mirror neuron system is that it also has the potential to "mirror" non-conscious processes. While humans are able to learn quite a bit about one another through verbal discourse, many aspects of social interaction and the intersubjective processes are deeply rooted in "unmediated affective information." (Ginot, 1998, 2001, 2007) This has implications for the therapeutic relationship.

Up to this point it has been argued that an embodied-process oriented therapy provides the means of understanding the culture of the client. Research in the area of cognitive science and mirror neurons lends support to the power of the embodied interpersonal interaction as a means of bringing to light un- and preconscious processes. But, we need be careful as to the guiding principles and unfolding myths in the therapy room, as both client and therapist come to the ritual of therapy with often divergent symbols.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, rituals and symbols play an important part in the lives of all people. As persons navigating the structures of a larger society and *communitas*, we all are capable to entering a liminal state that represents a painful disconnection with society. This in-between-place offers the therapist a place to explore with the client the rituals and symbols important to them, in their own language. To do this I posit deeper analytic techniques be used to aid in bringing to conscious awareness the implicit and often unknown ways of living in the world and the symbols that hold meaning for that client. This process is deeply embodied, having the potential to alter meanings, both symbolic and ritualized, and ultimately feeds back into the very society from which the liminality state emerged.

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