

Co-Created Ritual: Exploring the Potential of
Ritual Drama as a Therapeutic Tool

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Abstract

Co-Created Ritual: Exploring the Potential of Ritual Drama as a Therapeutic Tool

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A process of heuristic inquiry, this paper documents the author's adaptation of a Neopagan approach to ritual for appropriate secular use with clients in a therapeutic setting. Two groups are discussed. The first group was comprised of the author and two fellow creative arts therapy students who were also practicing Neopagans. The second was a client group of three women that the author designed and facilitated for a bilingual community mental health centre. The same retrospective open-ended questionnaire was used after both groups to elicit members' responses to the ritual experiences they shared. Complete results from each group are included as appendices.

Related areas of literature reviewed by the author include the following: ritual in theatre, ritual in drama therapy practice, ritual and the Sacred in therapy, as well as a contextual overview of common Neopagan beliefs and ritual practices. The peer group that served as inspiration to the author is described and the adaptation process is discussed, including various challenges as well as an examination of the role of the therapist. The structure and unfolding of the client group are documented in detail, as well as the life-death-rebirth theme that shaped its culmination. Photographs of group sculptures related to this theme are included. Questionnaire results are discussed separately for each group and a synthesis of common themes is included in the final chapter.

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My thanks to Alison Fox and Kazimea Sokil, my colleagues, who generously agreed to share their thoughts on our ritual encounters and without whom I may never have been inspired to do this work with clients. Our conversations about what made this process successful for us (or not at times) were priceless resources for me.

My thanks to the women in my client group who honoured me by sharing their stories and allowing me to witness a very profound and meaningful process of transformation. It was their enthusiasm for the work we were doing and their desire to have it known and replicated that inspired me to document it.

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Finally, my thanks to Sherry Diamond, my second research advisor, who saw me through to the end, above and beyond her time at Concordia. Her warm encouragement and brilliant editorial support helped me to get the process flowing again after a long hiatus and made the final stretch of writing a delight (well most of it, anyway). We made it!

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Statement of Purpose

The journey that led me to this topic of research began with an awareness of the power of ritual drama from within a spiritual frame. In December of 1998, two of my fellow students and I began creating rituals together to celebrate the Neopagan religious holidays, share our personal and spiritual needs, and explore ways of honouring and expressing common themes in our lives. We used symbols and creative activities, often improvised, to support each other in metaphorically experiencing and moving through these themes. This experience was very deep and meaningful to me and it had a transformative impact on my life and the issues that I was facing at that time. As our time together came to an end, I found myself wanting to find a way of adapting our shared ritual experiences so that they would be appropriate for work with clients. Improvisational ritual had been a part of my spiritual practice for some time, and the main question for me in the beginning was how to secularize it for clients without losing the essence of an experience which had its roots in the Sacred.

In his introduction to *The Glass of Heaven*, Roger Grainger (1995) writes that drama therapy "not only *lives* spiritually in the moment of encounter, it *speaks* spiritually in its mode of communication - but without being verbally explicit or doctrinally precise" (p. 2). Grainger thus inspired me with the idea that the sacredness of this work could be preserved without any specific religious or spiritual frame being imposed at all. Some of the earlier work of Steve Mitchell (1992) took me another step forward by rooting my ideas more solidly in theatre. He also provided me with some possibilities for ways clients themselves can directly connect issues from their own lives to the creation of collective ritual experiences. Integrating these influences with my previous interest and exploration of the

connections between ritual, shamanism and drama therapy, I went on to successfully lead a ritual drama therapy group of my own design.

In this research, my purpose is to document this evolution, from its beginning in my own process of personal and spiritual growth, through my research into existing uses of ritual in drama therapy, to its actualization in my practice with clients. My formal research question, within the richness and limitations of my own experiences, is thus: How might a personal and spiritual approach to co-created ritual be successfully modified for appropriate use with clients?

Definition and Clarification of Terms

My working and evolving definition of co-created ritual is comprised of several elements. The ritual context itself is established by the intentional, conscious and creative use of various symbolic media to signal transitions in and out of a liminal space. This conscious process is then continued within that space where themes common to a group of people are explored metaphorically via improvised dramatic enactment. These enactments are designed and carried out by group consensus within a consistent, organic structure. By intentional and conscious I mean that participants start from their real life experiences and then choose ways to work with them symbolically and metaphorically. By liminal space I mean a constructed container for experience within which actions are both real and not real at the same time, thus touching both the actual world of the participants and the potential world of dramatic and artistic representation. By organic I mean that, as much as possible, the participants themselves evolve a structure for their experiences within the group as opposed to having a structure imposed upon them.

This paper will also be frequently engaged with the concepts of sacredness and spirituality. For my purposes, sacredness denotes a positive connection with something holy, divine or archetypal and either inspires or requires honour and

respect. What one recognizes as sacred and how one demonstrates that honour and respect are highly individual. Spirituality, then, is the unique embodiment of one's personal relationship to whatever one holds to be sacred. In my writing, I use the terms "Spirit" and "the Sacred" as general referents to the many potential manifestations of sacredness with which we as human beings can be in relationship.

It is important to note that I draw a clear distinction between spirituality and religion. Religion involves a set of beliefs, usually shared by a group of others, declaring what is to be held sacred and outlining the appropriate actions of honour and respect. Although one's religious beliefs may provide the forms or structures within which one seeks connection with the Sacred, spirituality is the subjective, intimate and often internal relationship with the experience of sacredness. As such, spirituality does not require external guidelines or regulations to facilitate its expression and may occur in the complete absence of a religious frame.

Research Model and Perspective

I have chosen to use heuristic inquiry as my research paradigm. This is a conceptual framework where the subjective is valued as a legitimate path to knowledge. Heuristic inquiry begins in the self, in the passion to know and understand. The researcher's own experience as well as the process through which she formulates questions and understandings about the area of inquiry are the central focus of the research. Unlike phenomenological research, where the ultimate goal is to discover the essence of an experience distilled from and transcending its personalized manifestations, the essence one seeks to understand in heuristic inquiry is instead "the essence of the person in experience" (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985, p. 43).

This model is well tailored to my research question because the process I wish to explore has taken place almost entirely within myself and is thus by nature

highly subjective. It would be quite difficult to document objectively and, even if this were possible, such an analysis would lose the very essence of that which I want to convey. I believe that the experiences we make use of as personal coping skills often have the potential, with careful thought and research, to be used to create appropriate clinical tools. It is my hope that the documentation of one example of how this has been done might inspire others to explore how they might do the same, thus broadening the resources available to us as therapists and consequently to our clients.

Another perspective that has influenced my research is constructivism. Neimeyer (1993) states that the central premise in constructivist theory is "a view of human beings as active agents who, individually and collectively, co-constitute the meaning of the experiential world" (p.222). From a clinical point of view, this is a basic premise behind my use of co-created ritual to work with people's issues and life themes: ritual effectively becomes the medium through which meaning can be explored, created and re-created if necessary or desirable. In my choice of research methodology, the inclusion of my participants' voices was strongly influenced by the fact that I view these experiences as having been collective constructions. From this perspective, I am only one knowledge-holder among others and thus cannot accurately portray what passed between us without eliciting the input of my fellow creators.

Structure and Methodology

As this paper unfolds I will be retrospectively describing and analyzing two different sets of ritual experiences that I have shared with other women here in Montréal. The first was an informal leaderless group made up of two of my colleagues and myself who met together from December 1998 to May 1999. The second was a ritual drama therapy group I led with clients from September 1999 to

May 2000. The initiative for the inclusion of these two groups of people has come from their own interest in the documentation of the work we have done together.

The tracing of my ideas and inspirations to their experiential and academic sources has been an important part of my heuristic inquiry. This has been made possible through source material taken from my journals, my previous academic writing on ritual, my personal response to various related texts on ritual and the process notes I kept for the ritual drama therapy group I led. The informal discussions I had with my two colleagues about how we might envision this adaptation happening have also contributed to the formation of my ideas. However, I chose to formally embark upon this inquiry almost a year after our experiences together and thus must rely on memory to supply the influential links. I will make the best effort possible to allow my colleagues' questionnaire results to elucidate their contributions.

Since my research revolves around my own journey in the development of this specific ritual drama therapy group, the questions and insights I have explored in the process constitute the central focus of my heuristic inquiry. Some of the questions I have explored on this journey follow. How can I bring the richness of my own personal tools and resources to my clients in an appropriate way? What space is there for the Sacred in therapy? How can I hold that sacred space without imposing my own religious or spiritual beliefs on my clients? What are the essential elements, if any, that distinguish what I am calling ritual from other drama therapy processes? How is what I am doing similar to and different from the work of other drama therapists who identify themselves as working with ritual? What is the relationship between the space of ritual, both physical and non-physical, and the therapeutic concept of the container? What is my role as a therapist in this model?

In addition to my own experiences and insights in relation to these questions, I will also be documenting the voices of the women who have shared this journey

with me through a retrospective questionnaire I have created for this purpose. While Alison Fox and Lisa Kazimea Sokil, my above-mentioned colleagues in art and drama therapy respectively, have requested that their identities be preserved, those of my three drama therapy clients will be protected by pseudonyms. I have chosen to use the same questionnaire for both groups of people because I want to consider similarities and common themes in response to specific questions related to my own explorations of this topic. When analyzing these ritual experiences, I will be using the written responses to the questionnaire as a source of direct quotes from my participants about the ritual process.

I acknowledge that when reporting and analyzing data gathered for research, what I choose to leave out speaks as much to my potential biases as that which I choose to include. I have a deep desire to honour the voices of my fellow participants as much as possible within the limitations of this paper. As its length will not allow me to conduct an exhaustive discussion of all results, I have included the full questionnaire results as an appendix to provide a more complete context for the reader. This is of particular importance for the second group because the group members responded to a French version of the questionnaire and I will be discussing their responses in English.

Chapter 2: The Context of Ritual as a Therapeutic Tool

Ritual is a very broad subject about which entire books are written. I cannot by any stretch of the imagination pretend to do it justice within the limitations of this paper. My sources are mostly secondary, which is to say that I have not investigated the anthropological dimensions of ritual firsthand but rather through the writings of others in various disciplines more intimately related to my own. Due to the limitations of length and the exploratory and descriptive nature of my research, I have chosen to restrict my literature review to sources that have had a direct influence on my work in some way as opposed to attempting to carry out a general historical review of writings on the use of ritual for therapeutic purposes.

Ritual and Theatre

Ronald Grimes (1995) includes an entire section in his introductory reader, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*, devoted to ritual and theatre. Grimes participated firsthand in Grotowski's experimental theatre workshops and describes Grotowski's work in great detail as a representative of the "ritualizing ethos" of postmodern drama. He identifies six crucial principles of Grotowski's approach to training actors:

- (1) quest for contact; (2) avoidance of mental rehearsal and planning; (3) insistence on a concrete, associated image at the moment of execution; (4) adaptation of the whole body and psyche to every movement; (5) action from bodily centers outward to extremities and voice; (6) surpassing fatigue, chatter, self-indulgence, and masks for the sake of revelation. (Grimes, 1995, p. 172)

Thus spontaneity, embodiment and authenticity in the moment would seem to characterize this dramatic experience. Grimes (1995) further describes walking, running and stumbling through the forest as part of the Theatre of Sources activities as a kind of "meditative stalking" that has as its focus "the self/other nexus," that is to say the point of encounter (p. 181). This fits well with Steve Mitchell's (1992)

description of Grotowski's work as being focused on disarming the individual in order to allow a clearer, more direct meeting with the other.

Often, ritual is defined as either being a repetitive pattern of behaviour, possibly even compulsive, or as being something strongly tied to the traditions and practices that help to define a culture. At the end of a chapter on Grotowski's Poor Theatre, Grimes postulates that "If we do not insist that rites, by definition, arise collectively from cultural consensus, we must admit that Grotowski is doing what some religiologists and psychologists, Eliade and Jung, for example, seem to think is impossible, namely, discovering and creating rituals that are not mere private obsessions or means of cementing culture into a whole" (p. 176). This comment by a prominent theorist in ritual studies brings another possibility: that individuals can create rituals that are neither of these. The creative rituals of Grotowski's methods serve specific functions (e.g. the stripping away of defences) and carry or evoke meaningful experiences through encounter.

Ritual and Neo-Shamanism in Drama Therapy Practice

Though Steve Mitchell refers to some of his earlier work (1992) inspired by Grotowski as a para-theatrical model, in later articles (1996 & 1998) he explicitly identifies his model of drama therapy as being centred on ritual. In the first article, Mitchell (1992) clearly describes a ritualized structure in which he used candles to define the therapeutic space; movement, rhythm and journeying techniques to explore group members' here and now associations and emotional experiences; as well as metaphoric work with representational items and actions given meaning by group consensus. He explains how, in the second half of group sessions, he invited clients to make propositions of ways the group might use these ritual tools to explore a given issue they were struggling with. Mitchell (1992) identifies this model of drama therapy as a process by which clients are supported in creating their own healing

rituals and where "the ritual is not the change itself but the preparation for change, the container for ventilating and letting go of negative emotions. It is also a symbolic process which offers the client an image of change that will inspire continued work outside the group" (p. 67). In this way, the element of liminal space creates the potential to view old assumptions and patterns from an entirely different point of view as well as the freedom to experience new ways of being.

In a more recent article, Mitchell (1998) describes his use of initiatory rites of passage that allow for the letting go of old patterns and the integration of new potentials explored in the dramatic reality. He uses a 14-step process to create transformational rituals whereby clients can prepare for such transitions through psychological purification and grieving of past attachments, exploration of new ways of being, consideration of obstacles, ritual enactment of some form of ordeal, the "death" of the old parts of the self and the celebration of the emergent new self with new resources and abilities.

Meaning seems to be a critical element of ritual for Mitchell. He emphasizes the importance of the client creating the ritual structure for him or herself, as well as the idea that rituals are made up of conventions which are accepted by the group or individual as being culturally meaningful (1998). He views this process as one of "active preparation" (Mitchell, 1996, p. 72) and espouses a model of therapeutic theatre where there are no passive observers, only participants (Mitchell, 1992).

The role of the therapist in Mitchell's model is thus one of service to the activities and metaphors that provide meaning for the client and to the facilitation of the client's own self-healing. Mitchell (1998) also speaks repeatedly of the importance of here-and-now focus and identifies one of the key facilitative roles for the therapeutic process as "being present with as much of your being as you can muster" (p. 5). His work has probably been the strongest influence on my therapeutic approach with the ritual drama therapy group.

Other drama therapists who may not make ritual their primary therapeutic tool, nonetheless acknowledge its importance. Jennings (1994) speaks at length of the value of ritual drama in integration of the physical and metaphysical realms of the client's reality, more specifically those of thought and emotion, and asserts that ritual should be a multi-dimensional experience. She emphasizes the shift our culture has taken away from ritual and suggests that this may be contributing to "identity and role chaos" (Jennings, 1994, p. 93). Phil Jones (1996) also discusses both his work involving the reframing of societal rituals as well as the creation of new rituals unique to a given group or individual. Renée Emunah (1994) includes an entire phase of her model that is set aside for ritual. Like Mitchell (1998), Emunah (1994) emphasizes the importance of ritual as a tool for closure and transition, as well as a way to transpose work done in therapy to clients' everyday lives. She uses rituals to acknowledge and honour the connections between group members. As part of the closure process, she uses ritual activities to review the course of therapy sessions and frame the process, thus facilitating the assimilation and integration of the therapeutic experience.

Another related area that many drama therapy practitioners integrate with theory and practice is that of shamanism. Snow (1996) asserts that drama therapy itself can be seen to have its roots in shamanism and ritual. Penny Parker Lewis (1988) discusses her experience of the role of shaman-therapist staying rooted in the earth while maintaining a connection, almost as a channel, in relationship to the world tree, a traditional shamanic symbol of the centre and a bridge between realms. Pendzik (1988) explores the relationship between the stage and sacred space and also discusses the shamanic concept of using the symbology of the centre as a definition of sacred space and as being related to the archetypal concept of a mandala.

Ritual and the Sacred in Therapy: a Jungian Perspective

Like Sue Jennings (1994), Jungian analyst Bani Shorter (1996) identifies our culture's move away from ritual and symbolic exploration of meaning as a key factor in the prevalence of depression, identity confusion and meaninglessness in contemporary society. Shorter views modern media as particularly problematic because it presents us with a continuous and unidirectional flood of manufactured images, often emotionally charged, that we have little time to process and integrate, let alone challenge. She asserts that, in part because of this bombardment, individuals in our society often lack a positive relationship with the creative and imaginative skills required for the discovery of their own guiding images (Shorter, 1996).

The development of meaning through the exploration of one's guiding images requires more than just imagination. According to Shorter (1996), it also requires tolerance for ambiguity, opportunities for reflection and a willingness to enter into a dialogue with the symbolic and irrational parts of ourselves. She notes that symbols take their power from their connectedness to the whole and thus bring us into relationship with the sacred and archetypal. Ritual, which speaks in the language of symbols, creates "a two-way mirror, exposing the soul of a person to the Sacred and revealing the reality of a sacred presence in the human soul" (Shorter 1996, p.26). It is through this reciprocal relationship that we discover the "seedbed of the psyche" and the source of meaning in our own lives.

According to Shorter (1996), ritual is about transition and transformation. One of its most valuable functions is to act as a bridge between worlds, allowing us to mediate between a litany of contrasting realities: the Sacred and the secular, the conscious and the unconscious, the literal and the symbolic, the personal and the archetypal, the traditional and the unconventional. In times of change, this liminal

space can provide us with access to resources and potentials that we might otherwise have difficulty reaching. In times of transformation, ritual “reinforces an intuition that in endings, there are also beginnings... It expresses a deep-seated human longing for continuity and significance to outlive that which must die, give way in preparations for what is waiting to become” (Shorter 1996, p. 121).

Shorter (1996) makes a strong case for the idea that it is our deep human needs for meaning, transformation and connection to the Sacred that bring us to ritual. We turn to ritual when our everyday reality can no longer adequately describe and contain our experiences, in moments when we feel lost and confused. Ritual is often precipitated by “a sense of aloneness so bewildering and hazardous that one will sacrifice a previous identity in order to make contact with something more and a strength that resides elsewhere” (Shorter 1996, p.21). We seek ritual at these moments because it provides refuge and sanctuary for “souls besieged,” a place where we can find validation for our struggles and assign meaning to the trials and frustrations of our lives (Shorter 1996, p.63). “In the [ritual] act, the prevailing reason of someone’s life is opened not just to question or affirmation but to confrontation, choice and regeneration” (Shorter 1996, p.31).

Shorter (1996) sees ritual as a natural and organic process, an instinctive longing common to all people; as a result, when our social contexts lack ritual forms that speak to our experiences, we will create our own – healthy or not.

Many of the rituals, sacred or mundane, that do remain in our culture have become rigid and unresponsive to changing social realities. Shorter (1996) observes that “alienated and estranged from time-honoured services, many people have taken refuge in communal forms of worship that are infused with strong ingredients of animism and paganism” (p. 37). She sees this as part of a movement in our society toward spiritual pilgrimage and expresses concern that there are few sources of solid, grounded guidance out there to facilitate this process. According to Shorter,

"the question becomes how we can consolidate exposure to such rites within a psychological and religious framework that is therapeutically relevant, honest and theoretically tenable" (p.37).

Shorter's writing is rich with useful guidelines for the use of ritual as a therapeutic tool. Like Mitchell (1998), she speaks repeatedly of the value of 'presence', of listening and waiting patiently for meaning to resolve. She counsels that those who facilitate ritual must prepare themselves to contain and nurture what arises within it and bear in mind that "both aspects of the priest and the role of the therapist will be demanded of them" (p.114). Not surprisingly, Shorter (1996) also stresses the importance of the therapist cultivating a creative and conscious relationship both with him/herself as well as with the Sacred before trying to guide others. She cautions the therapist to amplify insight with a minimum of direction, to beware of reaching for integration before contemplation and wonder are given space, and to guard against becoming caught up in the shadow side of authority (Shorter 1996).

It is perhaps worthwhile to note that I only happened to come across Shorter's *Susceptible to the Sacred* (1996) after both ritual groups had ended. Shorter's writing was tremendously validating of the work I had just completed with my clients and has contributed greatly to my reflection upon and analysis of both experiences.

Neopagan Uses of Ritual

The final area of study that I must recognize is the Neopagan movement. Neopaganism is made up of many different sub-groups, all of which practice some variation of a polytheistic nature-based religion. The neo- prefix is used to denote the modern interpretation and selective expansion of ancient (Paleopagan) practices about which we have limited historical knowledge. However, this prefix is often

dropped for simplicity's sake, with most Neopagans tending to refer themselves as Pagan and their religion as Paganism.

Paganism is not an organized religion; in fact, most Pagans seem to have an aversion to centralized authority. Perhaps in part a result of the pluralism encouraged by a polytheistic outlook, diversity of both thought and practice is valued and respected. Those who are considered to be leaders and teachers in the movement (including prominent authors) often disagree significantly, even within the same branch of Paganism. Margot Adler, granddaughter of psychiatrist Alfred Adler, was one of the first authors to publish a scholarly and comprehensive review of the Neopagan movement and its various subgroups. Updated twice since its original publication in 1979, *Drawing Down the Moon* (1996) remains one of the most highly recommended introductions to Neopaganism available today.

Although specific theologies, cosmologies and ritual practices may vary greatly from group to group, it is possible to construct a general Neopagan worldview. Adler (1996), who has surveyed hundreds of Pagans of different affiliations from all over North America and interviewed leaders from dozens of Pagan paths, devotes an entire chapter to the subject. Isaac Bonewits (2001), a scholar and leader in the Neopagan movement for over twenty years, has evolved a similar list of common Neopagan beliefs. In general, most Neopagans:

- centre their religious practice around some form of earth-based spirituality with central themes including but not limited to fertility, agricultural seasons, and natural cycles of life, death and rebirth,
- consider human beings, and often all living beings, to be immanently divine,
- assert that their religious practices and beliefs are inspired by or actually descended from pre-Christian religious traditions,
- worship deities from the pantheons of ancient and generally European cultures, though many believe that these are merely different names for or facets of the same male and female divine forces,

- perceive the world around them to include an interconnectedness between intention, belief, emotion, energy, spirit, and the physical world in which all of these elements can influence one another, and
- believe that human beings have the power and the tools available to them (often through some form of ritual) to have a significant and often transformative impact on both their inner and outer worlds.

With this context established, I will now provide the reader with a general description of Neopagan uses of ritual. Although there are those who have written about the Neopagan movement in general, there are few (if any) resources available in the community that provide a generic description of Neopagan ritual. Most information of this nature is provided from within a specific Neopagan tradition or as a contrast between the ritual practices of different groups. As creating a documented survey of Neopagan ritual traditions is far beyond the scope of this paper, I will describe Neopagan uses of ritual based on my own experiences in the community over the course of approximately ten years.

Within the Neopagan community, ritual is generally used as a way to step into another state of awareness, much like a shaman's journey trance. It becomes a container by providing a clear beginning and end, a boundary in time and space that limits the duration and physical scope of altered experience. The space within this ritual container has a liminal quality to it. It is real but the limitations of its reality are different. In this space, human beings have the power to turn the seasons, become the living representative of a deity, raise energy to heal someone through love and faith, transform fear into power, and plant the seeds of change for their lives. There is a perspective that is at once closer and more distant than that of daily life. It has the feel of magic and that is often how we name it. Ritual sets the stage for acts of intention that, with sufficient belief, will, or emotional charge, are potent enough to mobilize change or completely redefine the meaning of an experience in the mundane world.

Although not absolutely necessary, creative acts of all kinds are often used to facilitate the ritual process by consciously shaping a focus or container for the energy being invested toward a given purpose. Some common examples of this are poetic expression, dramatic enactments, handcrafts, movement, music, storytelling, and other experiential activities. These acts of creation are used to concretize abstract ideas, needs, or intentions and bring them alive through artistic symbolism. Once these abstract concepts are made concrete, it is then possible for one to interact with them in new ways, explore and create meaning, and actively transform the relationships between them.

Since Neopagan ritual space is intimately connected with a spiritual context, the Sacred can also be accessed there in whatever form is meaningful to the individual or group enacting the ritual. Ideally, one enters into the ritual space with a sense of openness, trust, and readiness to experience Mystery. Sometimes answers are found within as an individual is able to make contact with a deeper, less conscious part of the Self in the ritual context. Insight can also come through symbolic action that is undertaken intuitively and only understood after the fact. Everything that happens in ritual has the potential for meaning.

When the ritual is over, attention is given to making the transition back into everyday consciousness. Whatever ritual acts were used to define the space as sacred are revisited in order to return the space to normal. Often there is food to share that grounds the participants in the basic physical needs of their bodies and the normal social interactions that accompany eating. This also reinforces a sense of community and usually creates an informal space in which people can process whatever happened in the ritual.

This ritual process generally takes place at least once every six weeks: on the solstices and equinoxes and the days halfway between. Some Neopagans, Wiccans in particular, also celebrate ritual on each full moon. Rituals can be pre-planned and

led by one or more individuals, created in the moment through the consensus of those present, or improvised within a predetermined theme or structure. Over time, engaging in this process becomes a familiar tool that one has learned through repeated experiences and which is available whenever it is needed, either alone or in groups.

Chapter 3: Personal Experience: Ritual for personal and spiritual growth

The following is a description of the birth of this research, though I was unaware at the time of what it would later become. I have chosen to include the details of this first ritual between my two colleagues and myself in an attempt to provide the reader with an experiential sense of what our encounters were like. Following this description, I will discuss the group in more general terms and then report on our retrospective responses to these experiences.

Winter Solstice 1998

One evening in early December of 1998, I was preparing for the Winter Solstice. I felt the need to create a ritual to shed the last residue of a period of grief and depression from which I had emerged after three months of struggle. I was working with the metaphor of being wrapped up like a mummy with all the labels, roles, expectations and beliefs that had been attached to me by others and myself. The theme I connected with this at the time was one of purification, a stripping away of accumulated layers in order to remember and restore a more essential state of being.

I had been using ritual as part of my Neopagan religious practice for about six years at this time. In addition to designing, leading and participating in various formal celebrations, I had also created rituals to meet my own private spiritual and personal needs for healing, growth and transformation. Although I was prepared to work with this alone, I mentioned my intention to both Alison and Kazimea in separate conversations and discovered that purification was a theme that resonated with each of us. At that time, although both were friends of mine, Alison and Kazimea knew each other only peripherally. We met to discuss the possibility of doing this work together and eventually agreed that it might be a rich and satisfying

way to meet our mutual needs. Subsequently, we met once or twice to discuss how the theme fit into each of our lives and to consider how we might explore it together.

The concept of the self as a vessel was another theme that emerged during our early conversations. Each of us felt she was in a different state between fullness and emptiness. The metaphor of a vessel with its potential to be empty, full or anywhere in between created a way for us to take our differing emotional, spiritual, and psychological realities and express them within a common metaphoric frame. As a way to concretize this in the ritual, we each agreed to bring some small physical container, such as a cup, a bowl, or a jar, to represent our individual connection to the symbol of vessel. These items could then provide props for enactment as well as objects we could take away from the experience to carry the meaning and sacredness of our ritual explorations back into our everyday lives.

When the night came for our ritual, we first went together to a sauna for the physical purification of sweating, cleansing and enjoying the fresh aromas of the essential oils we used to scent our steam bath. Then, we returned to an empty and quiet apartment. Along with our personal vessels, we each brought candles that we lit to mark the change in the room that was now to be our sacred space. Though we were all practicing Pagans of one tradition or another, the three of us had never created ritual together. Alison suggested that we use silent collective movement to explore and negotiate the ways in which we might feel comfortable working together and to familiarize ourselves with our combined energy. We spent the next two hours in silence, communicating only through movement and mime.

We began by mirroring each other's movements and slowly shifted into a sort of dance with hands almost touching but not quite. As time went on, the dance began to take the form of symbolic gestures and we collectively created a cauldron and stirred it. We mimed putting things in the cauldron like laughter, smiles, tears, bubbles, and so on as the mood shifted in and out between playfulness and

seriousness. We offered each other sips of the imaginary brew we had made and eventually we sat down together and moved the candles into a tighter circle around us. We took out our vessels and began playing with filling and emptying them from the invisible cauldron.

Eventually, the flow of ideas seemed to slow and one of us quietly broke the silence by singing a chant that we all knew. Slowly, the others joined in and we continued to sing together for a while, taking turns initiating various chants. As the singing faded again into silence, we shared offerings of inspiring poetry, quotes and music that each of us had prepared in advance. Together, these activities provided us with a transition by facilitating our shift from the intensely sacred space of the enactment itself to an environment more suited to discussion and processing.

We spoke at length about what the experience had been like for each of us. We marvelled at the very magical and sacred feeling of the ritual and the way it had all come together smoothly in silence, without discussion or negotiation. My experience has been that it is rare to be able to have this kind of synergy the first time a group comes together to do ritual: I was awestruck. It was hard for us to let it end, but the potluck meal we prepared earlier in the evening was waiting and we finished with a celebratory feast.

Future Ritual Encounters

We created three more rituals together near the Neopagan high days of Imbolc (February 1), Spring Equinox (March 21), and Beltaine (May 1). On the day of the ritual, we would meet for an activity and/or improvisation centred on a common theme. In order to support a casual and unhurried atmosphere, we planned our ritual gatherings to last an entire afternoon or evening, usually between four and six hours. All or part of this time was spent at one of our homes with arrangements made so that we would not be disturbed. We always shared food at

some point, even when we celebrated our Spring Equinox ritual in the snowy woods. Getting together at least once or twice before each ritual was also a consistent pattern for all of our gatherings.

Invariably, there were more themes and needs between us than we could possibly explore in a given ritual. This made the discussions leading up to our rituals critically important. First, they gave us each a chance to feel heard and supported as we expressed our divergent feelings and spiritual needs. Second, the environment of respect and caring we had created between us enabled us to select only the common elements to explore as a group while leaving the rest to each member's individual process. Patience, trust and a little creative inspiration generally produced a metaphor flexible enough to be approached from many different angles, allowing us to weave a common theme from needs that may initially have appeared to be mutually exclusive.

Our preliminary conversations gave us a thematic context for our explorations and provided enough information about each of our perspectives that meaningful collective improvisation was possible. Presence in the moment, spontaneity and collective creation were always the norm.

In addition to the themes that emerged from our own lives, the three of us also shared a common set of seasonal themes associated with the Pagan holidays we celebrated together. There are many ways in which these themes can be honoured and explored, depending on the particular tradition of Paganism one practices. It is not uncommon for groups to interpret these themes differently based on their specific cultural focus or religious cosmology, for example. Even within the same branch of Paganism, one aspect of a seasonal theme is often emphasized more strongly than the others based on the interests and needs of the individual or group. I have included a description of some of these seasonal themes in order to provide

the reader with a sense of how they might have influenced the ritual work we shared.

Imbolc (February 1) is generally considered a spring celebration, the first of three. This may seem early, but most Neopagan traditions take their inspiration from ancient Indo-European cultures and the first signs of spring begin much earlier in Europe than they do in Montréal. As a result of this seasonal discrepancy, spring themes are often adapted to our northern climate, such as metaphors to do with seeds waiting quietly in the Earth for the melting of the snows. This high day can also be seen as a time for fires and purification, the blessing of new projects, craft making, and storytelling. At Imbolc, our triad painted small terra cotta pots and made candles in them. Kazimea brought some wax that had accumulated on her candelabra over the years and asked us to include it as part of a purification/transformation she needed to manifest. We mixed this with new paraffin and took turns hiding small objects as gifts for each other in the wax.

Spring Equinox (March 21) is the seasonal point of balance between the waning of winter and the waxing power of spring. Common themes for this time of year include fertility, gestation, and rebirth. There was snow in Montréal on the Equinox and, with all of us weary of winter, we focused on the promise that spring would indeed be arriving soon. We went out to a park in the woods and gathered natural objects we found to be meaningful. Then, we imagined these as part of a magical fire that would warm us and stood around it sharing hot tea and nourishing food.

Beltaine (May 1) is traditionally focused on fertility and romantic love and marks the beginning of summer. Fertility in this case can be used to refer not only to procreation but also to all other creative endeavours. As this would be our last ritual before we parted for the summer, we also felt a strong need for closure. At Beltaine, we used movement and touch to experience ourselves as seedlings growing

out of the supportive earth and preparing to become something new. It was a time of opening up and letting go as we celebrated our last ritual together in Montréal.

As a final note to this section, there was one other meeting that took place in December of 1999, a year after the first. Alison had returned home to Victoria, BC for Yule and I was visiting Kazimea who had moved back to the West Coast in the summer after graduation. We decided to have a reunion on the Winter Solstice in Victoria and to do another ritual together. The process did not flow as smoothly, however. Alison and I both commented specifically about this ritual. I will discuss it further in light of the questionnaire results at the end of the next section.

Questionnaire Results: Peer group

I completed the questionnaire as a participant for this half of my research and thus will be including my results with those of my colleagues in this discussion. I will explore the responses to individual questions when it seems appropriate, however some of the common threads in our responses only emerge when considering the questionnaire as a whole.

Previous ritual experiences and expectations

The first question was designed to elicit important contextual information regarding previous background in ritual: When you first began participating in this group, what kind of experiences, beliefs, concerns and/or expectations did you have related to being part of a ritual process? All three of us had backgrounds that included involvement with Neopagan religions and ritual practices. Kazimea and I belonged to the same spiritual community, Silver Fox Grove, which practiced a Druidic tradition involving a highly structured and somewhat hierarchical format. We entered this experience seeking something more collaborative. Alison, on the other

hand, identifies herself as a Witch and wrote of her preference for working with Witches experienced in her own tradition.

Alison and Kazimea had more experience with collectives and consensus based groups than I. Participating in a leaderless group was something new to me, but it was also something I had a strong desire to experience. Equal partnership, inclusiveness, collaborative process and connection were words that we used to describe our expectations for the experiences that we shared. Alison also emphasized "the quality of the relationship and the willingness to connect" as important factors for her when sharing ritual with other people, particularly in contexts where she is working with those who come from different traditions.

Kazimea and Alison both mentioned an initial awareness of ritual as connected to healing, therapy and the creative process. I did not. Although I had definitely used ritual for healing ends and was certainly aware of its creative and therapeutic elements, I had not connected ritual with potential clinical endeavours before this group experience. My mainstream psychology and social work training had led me to believe that my spiritual and professional worlds had to be strictly separated. The experience of this group, in combination with my reading about ritual and therapy, was to be a catalyst for these two worlds to be joined for me and made into a coherent and powerful whole.

Symbolic enactment

In writing about what really speaks to us about ritual as a tool for growth and healing (question #2), we all write about the importance of symbolic enactment. Alison writes about the power of symbolic enactment to connect the inner and outer dimensions of transformation: "it finds the ways the themes resonate at deeper levels within us and without." Kazimea describes her experience of symbolic enactment as follows:

Ritual is symbolic action on symbolic objects, which allows me to realize, rehearse, and commit to new actions, new choices in reality. In ritual, I create a metaphor, either assigning its meaning or not. Then I act, responding to the metaphor. I discover my attitude, intentions, fears and hopes toward the reality the metaphor represents.

I also noted the usefulness of symbolic enactment in making my inner world outwardly manifest as well as creating a certain distance that allowed me to view the elements I chose to work with from a different perspective. In addition, Kazimea and I both wrote about how our ritual actions seemed to commit us to follow through with intended changes in our lives.

Spirituality and sacredness

All three of us agreed that the central purpose of our gatherings was to work together in a sacred context with a spiritual focus. Alison spoke of making a place "for Spirit to enter and be welcomed and honoured" and Kazimea and I mentioned our intentions and hopes for meeting our mutual spiritual needs. In describing what made these needs spiritual in nature, Kazimea explains "It was spiritual because we sought meaning and perspective, wholeness and transformation - spiritual pursuits."

Alison and I also wrote about the spiritual pursuits of meaning and perspective. Both of us indicated ways in which the work we shared in this group reminded us of who we were in a broader sense than we were able to express in our everyday life as students. Alison describes how our work together "made life numinous... In the cold, dirty, crowded city where everything looked dead, there was life. There was purpose, spirit, magic, warmth." Kazimea explains how "through reframing my daily experience in a larger, spiritual perspective, I could look at things in a more balanced, objective, calm and patient way." Kazimea and I also spoke of the importance of cycles of growth (a common Pagan spiritual theme) in giving meaning to our life experiences at that time.

Creative expression

Each of us identified at least one element of creative or artistic expression as being of great importance to our work. One of the common reasons we offer for this is the role that our creative endeavours played in bringing the group together. Kazimea explains that "creative work was a critical way for the three of us to interact as a trio, in [a] way that allowed us all to participate equally." I identify music as something that helps me to have a sense of connection with the rest of the group and Alison mentions that "a group art activity saved our last ritual together – it was the only thing I felt able to take away with me." Alison also describes the importance of movement and silence in taking the experience of group ritual to a deeper level of experience.

Kazimea and I write about how creative work broadens the scope of ritual experience by opening up the space for expression that is less orderly and rational than our everyday experience. Kazimea identifies art as a "vehicle for chaos, for spontaneous actions and associations to emerge" and expresses her belief that "this is a connection to the spiritual, the collective unconscious." In my response, I explain that art gets me out of my thinking self and into my creative self, thus allowing me to access a different set of resources.

Community and connection

One of the strongest overall characteristics of our group was our sense of community and connection. As students in the same program, we had many common experiences and concerns and as Pagans, we shared similar spiritual beliefs. Kazimea identifies our "unity of needs" as having been a central factor in the success of our work together. She goes on to express the importance of "our clarity about defining our needs and accepting their diversity, finding the parallels and links when they were not obvious." When writing of connection as a component of ritual that

supports growth and healing, Alison says "There is something precious and vital about coming together to be, to witness, to encounter the unknown. Intimacy develops fast, as does a profound respect for those who participate with trust and authenticity." In her summary of the central themes of this experience, Alison includes "a sense of being gifted by each other... the richness came from us and from being in the world. Ritual gave us time to notice it."

We all wrote about the value we placed on our shared sense of connection. Alison notes that during this period of time, our group was the only place in her life where she was coming together with others "in trust and willingness to [be] open to whatever was there at the time between us." I spoke about how important it was to create and share meaning with others who could relate to my world and offer their unique perspectives. One of the benefits of the experience that Kazimea identifies is the "knowledge that I am not alone in my spiritual and creative beliefs, that others may compatibly share my eclectic spiritual culture."

Reunion meeting

As mentioned earlier, the reunion we shared in Victoria over Yule 1999 was quite different from our other meetings. We tried to negotiate our mutual needs and create meaningful ritual all in one evening after a seven-month separation. Looking back, I realize I had a strong fantasy that we would get together and the connection and flow between us would be more or less unchanged. Unfortunately, and perhaps predictably, that is not what happened.

We began with a misunderstanding about a ritual activity we had briefly discussed ahead of time that did not transpire in the end. Alison and Kazimea seemed to have had some common needs, but I couldn't find a way to connect with them as I had in the past (possibly in part because of the misunderstanding). What I perceived as the loss of this connection, the loss of our little community, caught me

off guard and I was overcome with feelings of grief and isolation. This took up a significant amount of our limited time together. Alison reacted with anger and resentment that she chose not to share in the moment and the process eventually broke down. With the time we had set aside for our meeting quickly drawing to an end, we agreed to shift away from talking and into art. We made snowflakes out of recycled paper, each of us cutting different shapes into three appropriately folded pieces of paper so that the resulting snowflakes we took home with us contained a something from everyone. This collective art project became the one thing that was able to tie us all together and, in our responses, Alison and I both note our gratefulness for that. Kazimea mentions this last meeting only briefly in her response with regard to our willingness to share each other's burdens, something positive that she carries with her from our time together

We didn't discuss what this experience had been like for us as a group, although I had separate conversations about it later with both Kazimea and Alison. I thought any lingering awkwardness had been resolved through those conversations, but in her questionnaire responses Alison shares the ongoing impact that this experience and her unspoken feelings about it had:

...when only part of what was [going on] was expressed, it was a disaster for me. The trust was betrayed and we have not recovered from it. My part in betraying that trust was not speaking my anger and resentment when I felt them, not saying what I felt and wanted. When the circle stopped being a circle and became a line, with the focus all on one of us. There is room for a circle to focus on one person, as in a healing circle. I guess we hadn't really formed a circle at that time and didn't.

I agree with Alison's perception that we hadn't formed a circle. The geographical distance between us as well as time constraints had prevented us from preparing sufficiently for the process itself to be a container.

This was a tremendous learning experience for me. Before the reunion meeting, I am not sure I would have considered the casual chats that led up to our rituals to be such an essential part of the process. I also learned the importance of

checking in with all members about how comfortable they are with the way things are unfolding and creating a safe space to receive negative responses. These factors later played important roles in my approach to the ritual drama therapy group.

Chapter 4: Discussion of Adaptations

Changing structure from leaderless to led

I was very concerned about the shift from a leaderless group design to a therapeutic setting in which I would be looked to as the leader. I found the experience of collective creation between equals to be very empowering and I wanted to create a similar environment for my client group. I was unsure of how I would provide the necessary safety, guidance and containment while still empowering the group members to create their own structure and ritual.

One of the big questions in the beginning was how involved I would be personally. I decided that I was willing to be included in certain elements of the work as a fellow participant. I did this in the opening and closing rituals and a couple of other times when I was asked to and felt that I could accept the level of self-disclosure involved. This occurred most often with activities that centred on musical or rhythmic expression. I also value authenticity and transparency in my role as therapist, which contributed to a higher level of involvement in the processing of ritual enactments. In these times, I openly shared my thoughts and reactions to our shared experiences.

Yalom (1995) writes of the important role that a group leader plays in the early phases of group development in establishing structure and safety in the group. I wanted to create a container that felt safe to my group members without imposing a structure. It was important for me to foster an organic process where structure was decided collectively by consensus and was open to improvisation from one session to the next.

As Kazimea noted in reference to the rituals of our shared community, Silver Fox Grove, "within a structured ritual, there can be openness which allows the

unexpected to enter, including unplanned contributions from members." This having been my experience as well, I designed an opening and closing ritual that would remain consistent from session to session, with the central focus and enactment left open to the members' needs and input.

Role of the therapist

I attempted to create an environment rich with toys and fabrics, art materials, musical instruments, and innovative ideas from my own experience. From the beginning, I decided that I would lead by holding the space, containing whatever came up and facilitating the process of connection between the members. I also knew I would have a lot of teaching and modeling to do in relation to the media of ritual and drama. I put together a mental list of some different ways I had seen ritual and sacred theatre used so that I could offer examples of what we might do together. Beyond this, I wanted to lead as unintrusively as possible. Ultimately, I hoped that the group would find enough comfort with the media and each other to take the initiative and guide the process with minimal input or direction from me.

I facilitated the check-ins, kept a watch on the time, and helped group members integrate the issues they brought into a common theme. Once we had settled on a theme, I structured a brief negotiation of what the ritual enactment would be like. Once the enactment was over, I facilitated processing of what had happened, made sure everyone was comfortable and that we hadn't left anything unfinished that couldn't wait until the next session. When members started to assume many of the facilitation roles themselves, I was present to intervene when the group seemed at a loss for what to do, but mostly I was a witness to the unfolding of the ritual process.

My role in the ritual enactments was flexible from session to session. After we started doing enactments on a regular basis, I asked the group what role they

wanted me to take in each ritual. In the earlier sessions they expressed concern about casting me in roles they found less than flattering and didn't seem very convinced by my reassurance that this was part of what I was there to do. Once they trusted my willingness to take on unpleasant roles, I was frequently cast as a monster or a part of themselves they wanted to relinquish or even destroy. After an enactment in which I had embodied this type of role, I usually initiated discussion about how their responses to me had shifted, strengthened or transformed my role. These discussions were often the source of new insights about both intrapsychic and interpersonal relationship dynamics.

In addition to casting me in the role of the antagonist, group members often asked me to play an anchoring role such as holding a continuous rhythm on the drum while they improvised with other instruments. Sometimes I was a companion or supportive double, sometimes a mirror, and once I was cast in a nurturing role. Eventually they began to play more of these roles for themselves and each other and I became more of a witness to their process than a direct participant.

Early Challenges

There were many challenges in the beginning of this group that made it difficult to get off the ground. I initially wanted to have a group of six to eight members but several potential members had scheduling conflicts on the days when I was available to lead the group. There were others who expressed an interest but never followed through. It took several weeks for the group to stabilize with three core members. Then, just as the group started to come together, one member's health declined and she ended up recovering from surgery for a month. These delays considerably extended the amount of time required for orientation and the development of group cohesion.

Once the group was underway, each of the group members revealed their respective associations with the word ritual that had to be talked through. Aware that the word 'ritual' often has a negative emotional charge in our culture, I had my own concerns about how the title and description of the group would be received. At the same time, I didn't have another word to use to describe the very specific kind of work I wanted to do, so I had prepared myself to receive negative reactions. Thankfully, each of the group members also came with an open mind. After some discussion and a few shared experiences, we were able to develop a flexible understanding of what ritual would mean for us in our work together.

Getting into action was an important goal for me in the beginning because conveying what ritual is and what I wanted us to do with it was difficult to do with words alone. I wanted the structure and themes of the ritual process to come from the group, but they didn't yet have the necessary skills to do that. I didn't want to control the ritual process, but it would be a long time before the members would be able to direct it themselves. I had to find some way to move through a progression from demonstrating to teaching to guiding to consulting and I had very few models to guide me.

In the end, I relied heavily on my ability to pull a common theme from a discussion and improvise around it. The first month or so didn't look anything like the kind of ritual work I was familiar with and in many ways I felt like I was fumbling about as much as my clients were. My site supervisor pressed me to articulate precisely what made the things I was doing in this group "ritual" and I found I had no satisfactory answer to give. The group format and activities were clearly dramatic in nature, so we agreed that I was functioning within my role as a drama therapy intern. Given this, my supervisor was willing to give me the space I needed to find the answers through the experience itself.

One of my favourite drama therapy quotes comes from Sue Jennings: "stay with the chaos and allow the meaning to emerge" (1987, p.15). This advice served me well during this time because it eloquently described both the faith required to believe that there is indeed meaning somewhere in the chaos and the patience to wait for that meaning to show itself. I knew that it didn't take much to create a ritual frame and I trusted that the chaos inside the container of that frame would eventually become organized in some meaningful way. This is consistent with the process of heuristic inquiry, particularly the indwelling stage where the researcher immerses herself in the experience being explored in order to develop intuition and tacit knowledge about the subject (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985).

Where Paradigms Meet

In retrospect, I believe that a large part of the difficulty I had articulating my work stemmed from the contexts in which I had been practicing ritual over the years. Most of the people I have created ritual with have had personal experiences with the process that were powerful and positive enough to keep them coming back for more. I had never been required to explain or defend ritual or its usefulness before. In the Neopagan sub-culture to which I belong, when people try something new and find something they think has value, they take it, use it and adapt it for as long as it serves them. Either it works for them and meets their present needs, or it does not. In this context, ritual lives mostly in its experience and the why of things is often less important than the how and what. Further, it is widely accepted and even expected that different people engaging in a ritual process together may have different beliefs about why it works.

It was very challenging to merge a tool from this flexible paradigm in which focus is on the present moment and validity is judged by personal experience with the more structured clinical model in which focus is on understanding the roots of

behaviour and intervening with that expertise in order to facilitate change. I found myself, quite unexpectedly, suffering from something resembling culture shock. Although I was quite comfortable functioning within either paradigm, this group required me to move with one foot in each world and blaze a path down the middle.

This blending was made more difficult by the fact that the centre's therapeutic orientation leaned heavily toward the psychodynamic. In other areas of my practice with clients, I was perfectly willing to inquire as to their personal and family histories, consider their motivations and transferences, speculate on the source of their difficulties and consider treatment goals. I was reluctant to do these things with the women in this group and I had a difficult time pinpointing the source of my reluctance to my supervisor.

Over time, I became more able to articulate the process I was attempting to nurture and explain my belief that these activities were not relevant to this group and might even be counter-productive. I was able to identify that the process was very existentialist in nature. It was about exploring what the participants had identified as important on the day of the session, in that very moment. My role was not to interpret, analyze or otherwise construct a meaning for what my group members brought to the circle, but rather to hold the space and facilitate their discovery of their own sense of meaning in the experience. It was a model of empowerment that left the authority with the individual as much as possible. My intention with these women wasn't so much to work through their psychological and emotional issues as to give them new tools and teach them how to apply those tools so that they might work those issues through for themselves.

My primary goal was always that group members would be able to integrate ritual as a tool for exploring and creating meaning in their lives, something that could serve them long after the end of our time together. The most triumphant day for me with this group was the day I realised that the members had begun to make

the ritual process their own. This was my cue to take a more peripheral role, supporting their process as a witness and occasional consultant.

Chapter 5: Clinical Application: A co-created ritual group

Choice of Population and Group Screening

The agency in which I was working was a community mental health centre providing services to a diverse clientele. Participants in the centre's activities could be coping with acute psychiatric illnesses such as schizophrenia, suffering from chronic mental health problems such as anxiety or depression, or simply working on personal growth issues. Although some of the centre's clients had been referred by a mental health professional or institution, most self-referred. The clinical team was comprised of professionals and students from a wide variety of therapeutic modalities, including the creative arts therapies.

Like many agencies in the community sector, the centre maintained a number of rather long waiting lists, both English and French speaking. The French list was longer because the area in which we worked was mostly francophone. As a result of the additional demand, I was asked to run at least one group in French and this was the one I chose. French is my second language and, though I had been speaking French for six years, I had done very little professional work in a French milieu. I chose to conduct the ritual group in French because I knew that I would be working primarily through metaphor and that a large part of my work would be in helping group members identify common themes and facilitating a collaborative exploration of those themes through ritual. As an anglophone, I felt more comfortable working in a second language when the cataloguing of details and the interpretation of nuance were less central to my therapeutic role.

Timetables of available groups were publicized three times a year and sent out to all previous members. I offered the following description for inclusion in the timetable:

Évolution Personelle par les Rituels Co-crétatifs

Les rituels peuvent être des outils très puissants pour la transformation, la valorisation et la création dans la signification de nos expériences de vie. Les rituels de notre société tels que: la remise des diplômes, le mariage ainsi que les funérailles nous donnent à tous des moyens de reconnaître le passage d'événements importants dans nos vies. Par contre, souvent nous n'avons aucun rituel d'établi à propos des expériences qui sont plus ou moins invisibles au monde extérieur mais qui peuvent être très significatif à l'individu même.

Ce groupe vous donnera l'occasion de faire des explorations dans le domaine du rituel par l'art dramatique et d'apprendre comment créer vos propres rituels qui auront de la signification à ce moment de votre vie. Les thèmes et les activités seront choisis collectivement par les membres du groupe. Les histoires, les mythes, la musique, les symboles, les métaphores et la visualisation seront des outils disponibles pour entreprendre ce processus. L'implication et la mise en commun des idées de chacun de vous seront essentielles pour la prise de décision du groupe.

Personal Growth through Co-created Ritual (translation)

Ritual can be a powerful tool for transformation, validation and the creation of meaning. In our society, rituals such as graduations, weddings and funerals give us the means to acknowledge significant life transitions. However, we often lack established rituals for experiences that, although invisible to the outside world, may be of great personal importance.

This group will give you the opportunity to explore ritual through drama and to learn how to create rituals that have meaning for you at this time in your life. The themes and activities will be chosen collectively by group members. Stories, myths, music, symbols, metaphors and visualisation are some of the tools that will be available to you in this process. Participation in the sharing of your ideas will be essential for group decision-making.

Thus, I set the scene from the beginning for the group to be a search for and creation of meaning. I also explained that there would be a significant amount of collaborative decision making because I wanted to be sure members were ready to participate in a process that wasn't entirely structured in advance. Identifying the group as focused on personal growth and describing the process in a fairly sophisticated manner deliberately targeted a high-functioning population. I chose to target this population because I wanted members to be able to work with their therapeutic material in a very conscious way and to keep it explicitly connected to the metaphoric work.

Moving down the French waiting list, I spoke to potential members over the telephone regarding the nature of the group I would be running. Many of the people I initially called were quite interested in the group and intrigued by the ritual focus. I used my group description as a guide to explain the ritual process in which I hoped to engage with them. It often took a while to convey that I wanted to help them create their own rituals to meet their personal needs. Once this was clear, however, many of them gave me examples of times in which they had already used a similar ritual process for themselves. One participant told me that she had thought she was the only one who did this sort of thing and was very excited to find that she might be able to do this with others.

While approximately a quarter of the names on the waiting list were men, the rest were women. It was not my intent to start a women's ritual group but that is indeed what happened. I mention this here because I believe that this was a significant factor in the work we did together. I am quite convinced that had either of these group experiences been of mixed gender the course of group development, the process of exploring thematic material, as well as the material itself would likely have been very different. Bani Shorter (1987) notes that male styles in our culture tend to be more analytic and consciousness-oriented, whereas female approaches are more about embodiment. Embodiment was definitely a central focus in both groups and discussion of embodiment vs. analysis will reoccur at other points later in this paper.

My final group composition was as follows. Madi, a 49-year-old single woman who wanted to be more in touch with herself and to develop confidence and trust in a group setting. She was nervous during our initial conversation and stuttered a bit. She told me that she had a tendency to lose contact with herself in certain circumstances and feel less present than she wanted to be. She frequently spoke of a sense of emotional abandonment and neglect that she experienced as a child,

though she reported no abuse. Midway through the course of the group, she returned to individual therapy with a Jungian analyst in addition to attending our sessions.

Gabrielle, a 40-year-old single woman, was looking for opportunities for self-expression and help managing her emotions. A single mother of a teenage son, she had been separated from the child's verbally abusive father for eight years but still maintained a significant level of involvement with him. She had a history of anxiety and panic attacks as well as depression and was taking sleeping pills at the time she joined the group. Gabrielle was in the care of a psychiatrist when the group began and she also saw an employment counsellor on a regular basis.

Dédé, a 49-year-old single woman, was seeking help to better accept herself and her chronic illness. She had been married many years past and had an adult son from whom she was estranged. In our initial contact, she also disclosed to me that she was a survivor of incest and rape. In the past, she had been seen for individual therapy on an outpatient basis and was taking medication for both depression and anxiety. Her health was quite poor at times and she underwent surgery halfway through the life of the group. After her surgery, she began individual sessions with a therapist at the hospital who specialized in working with chronic illness and mental health.

There was a fourth member, not participating in the research, who attended the group intermittently for a total of five sessions. Although she knew about the research and expressed an interest in being involved during her earlier sessions, she dropped out of the group before the end. Since the questionnaire was a retrospective process and she did not return my phone calls subsequent to leaving the group, she will not be included in my descriptions or analysis of the group process.

Session Structure

The group met weekly for a total of 25 sessions. Each session lasted for two hours and followed a consistent opening and closing ritual. We began each session seated on mats or low meditation benches that encircled a small grouping of candles. A large pillar candle on a cloth in the centre represented the group as a whole. Surrounding the pillar candle were several tea-lights, one for each group member and myself. Upon their arrival, I invited each of my members to sit down with me around the circle, light a tea-light and say a word that related to how they were feeling or what they hoped to get from the group that day. Then I asked for a volunteer to light the group candle. Although there were some additions as time went on, this ritual and the closing ritual of returning to the circle and blowing out the candles remained consistent from the first session until about the 21st.

During the second half of the group's life, we took two elements that started out as spontaneous activities in the earlier sessions and incorporated them into the opening ritual as part of our weekly routine. The first of these was the use of silence. In the fifth session, Dédé expressed to us that she was feeling anxious and needed some time to calm down. She asked for us to dim the lights and have some quiet time. This time for silent meditation was well received by the other members and, as time went on, became a consistent element of our opening ritual. In sessions 12-25, the group gave the conga drum a special symbolism as the "Tree of Life" and drumming subsequently became another regular part of beginning our sessions together. These additions to the original structure I offered to the group are good examples of the organic evolution of the ritual process that I mention in my definition of co-created ritual; they were initiated by and belonged to the members themselves.

Once we finished the opening ritual, the members usually took the opportunity to check-in with each other about the events that had taken place in their lives during the previous week. During this part of the session, I would listen to the members express their feelings and preoccupations and focus on eliciting common themes that might lend themselves to symbolic enactment. After about twenty minutes, I would begin to reflect these themes to the group and facilitate the process of coming to a consensus about which theme we would explore that session.

Once a decision was made, I would invite each of the members to consider which symbols and metaphors had meaning for her in association with the theme. To support this process, I provided a rich environment of toys, puppets, natural objects, fabrics, and musical instruments to inspire and facilitate symbolic expression. When each of the members had found some way of representing the theme symbolically, we would negotiate how we could combine all of the symbols dramatically in order to explore the theme together. This is where most of the variation took place from session to session.

Our enactments included a wide range of creative media. Group sculpture, musical improvisation, rhythm, movement, and vocalisation were some of the more common tools for our thematic explorations. Embodiment and transformation were also key components of the work. We always started with embodiment of the theme. Sometimes, an enactment would centre only on emotional expression and containment. At other times, we would negotiate a way to recreate a problematic issue symbolically and then take the experience of that dilemma or challenge into action. At first, members generally responded to the situation with what they had identified as their typical patterns of behaviour. As the enactment unfolded, however, they would explore new approaches to the problem and often discovered ways to integrate or transform the situation to their satisfaction. We continued our enactments either until a shift occurred which allowed some form of resolution or

until I intervened in order to allow sufficient time for closure. Often similar themes would resurface in later sessions or, in the case of the last five sessions, continue to transform over the course of several consecutive weeks.

After the ritual enactment, which usually lasted from 30 minutes to an hour, we would spend the rest of the session processing the experience and exploring the emotions that were evoked. We discussed how we felt in the various roles we played, how we reacted to each other, and what responses seemed to lead to satisfying resolutions. We also spent time connecting the ritual experiences to members' everyday lives and discussing the similarities and differences between the two. This, along with the final act of blowing out the candles, facilitated the transition from the dramatic and therapeutic space back into everyday reality. Sometimes during the check-in of the following session members would discuss how the enactment had settled with them over the course of the week and we would process any further insights or feelings they might have had about the experience.

Progressive Unfolding of the Group

Early themes in the group included nurturing growth and healing in less than ideal environments, finding an appropriate balance between dissociation and intense affect, transforming or letting go of old patterns and beliefs, remaining connected to oneself in a group of others, countering manipulation, experiencing healthy expressions of anger, and balancing autonomy and support. Regulation of affect, countering manipulation and the balance between autonomy and support were themes that repeated themselves at least once in a non-consecutive and cyclical way. Each time these issues were revisited, some new piece was integrated, often making use of the skills explored in the sessions in between. For example, we returned to the theme of manipulation two or three sessions after we explored healthy expressions of anger.

In session 11, the last before our holiday break, the group members were in a very playful mood and began to use the instruments and objects to create a collective sculpture. They used the conga as a base structure and called their creation a *bonhomme de soleil*, a sunman (as opposed to a snowman). Members discussed their playful defiance of the freezing weather outside as well as their need to have a concrete manifestation of hope.

This spontaneous exploration was to become the medium that framed a central project in the second half of the group's life. During session 13, the second session following the break, Madi introduced the idea of working with a continuous theme. She proposed that we use the conga not just as an instrument, but as the central piece in a symbolic garden that would reflect the various journeys of the group members over the life of the group. Gabrielle was attracted to this idea because she felt it would facilitate the closure process by making it less abrupt. After discussing the idea for a few sessions, Dédé agreed that this was something she would like to do, too. The group decided that they would use the conga to represent the Tree of Life, a mythological presence in several different cultures around the world.

This new focus marked a tremendous shift in our work together. Previously, it was not unusual for one or more members to be missing. However, once we started working on a common theme, all members were consistently present and prepared; absences became very rare. The ritual process itself began to transform dramatically and the women began taking more and more initiative in both the structure and process of the group. The drumming element of our opening ritual took on a new dimension as the group began to see the conga as an entity in its own right. Entire sessions were spent creating collective sculptures built of percussion instruments, scarves, toys and objects from nature – essentially anything members could put their hands on. By the time the last four sessions came around, I was

honoured to spend most of my time in the role of witness to the very powerful enactment unfolding before me.

We had to dismantle everything after each session, but we took Polaroid photographs of each sculpture so that the group members could see the progressive transformation of their work over time. Since the conga was always the central figure as the Tree of Life, the photographs document a striking progression.

Culmination: Cycle of life, death and rebirth

Bani Shorter (1996) writes that "at the core of ritual is an experience of life, death and rebirth symbolically registered that will in turn affect the being of participants in manifold and ongoing ways" (p.30). This is precisely the pattern in which our group found its culmination. The first collective sculpture was the Sunman, a bright figure described by the group members as being full of life, warmth, hope and playfulness.



Figure 1: Sunman – Session 11
Photographed by the author December 8, 1999.

Then, the theme of the garden emerged and the conga became the Tree of Life. The first sculpture in this theme saw the Tree/conga presented in a decrepit state that members felt reflected their previous and current state of suffering. Darkness and disease were powerfully represented with spiders, snakes, a witch, a dragon and other objects that had developed a negative emotional charge for the group members.



Figure 2: Decrepit Tree of Life - Session 17
Photographed by the author February 9, 2000

After several sessions of approach and avoidance, the group members came to the conclusion that their Tree of Life had been so completely overrun by parasites and disease that there was no way to heal the damage: the only solution was to completely destroy the Tree to make way for new life. Reluctantly at first and then with great fervour, the women symbolically chopped down the Tree/conga and laid it on its side, accompanied by a symbol of disconnection: the xylophone missing a note. Interestingly enough, the small drum that was later used to represent the sprout of new life was also present in this sculpture.



Figure 3: Fallen Tree of Life - Sessions 22/23
Photographed by the author March 22, 2000

This began a very intense period in which group members expressed strong objections to dismantling the sculptures between sessions. We negotiated an agreement that I would dismantle them after they left and reconstruct them from the photographs before they arrived for the next session so that the creation and transformation of these symbolic images would remain a continuous process in their minds. They wanted to be able to reflect on the status of their symbolic garden during the week between sessions.

Dédé brought prayers to read at the Tree's funeral the session after they cut it down. Madi wrote a very moving letter to the Tree asking its forgiveness both for allowing it to become so ill and for killing it. We met in the dark, with only the flickering of candles to light the passages they read: emotional intensity was at an all-time high. It felt as though the room was vibrating with grief and courage. I was in awe. I felt profoundly honoured to be a part of the deep process of transformation to which these women had courageously opened themselves. After dancing together around the fallen Tree, they removed the conga and ended the session in vigil at its grave: an almond seed buried beneath a black cloth of rich, dark earth with an iridescent bow on top to represent the potential for rebirth.



Figure 4: Vigil In the Void – Sessions 23/24
Photographed by the author March 29, 2000

The following week, we began again in darkness and sat in silence for quite some time around the emptiness of the Void. When group members began to speak, discussion revolved around potential, the darkness before the dawn, hibernation and the darkness of the womb before birth. In time, the group members began to stir and discuss ways to represent the nurturing forces that would call the new Tree to life. They symbolically provided the seed with rain, warmth and light. Rhythm, song and dance called forth new life and the women placed a small drum in the centre to represent the sapling Tree of Life reborn. They exchanged the black cloth for green and surrounded their baby tree with animals that represented healthy life in the garden. Each member also added objects she had used previously to symbolize her younger self in the earlier sessions of the group. Gabrielle brought pillows to give to everyone and these too were placed beside the garden.



Figure 5: Rebirth in the Garden – Session 24/25
Photographed by the author April 5, 2000

This was the session before our last and we spent the rest of our time discussing how we wanted to plan our final meeting together. I offered to create a montage of their sculpture photographs and make colour copies for them. The group members also asked me to write out the words to a chant I taught them that they loved to sing together. Madi suggested that we each bring a twig budding with early spring leaves. Gabriele and Dédé asked us to bring flowers to attach to the twigs, which would then become the branches of the now full-grown Tree of Life. Thus, we each brought our contribution to the last session and it was a glorious celebration of life and hope, tinged with the sadness of parting just when the group had become so close and the process so powerful.

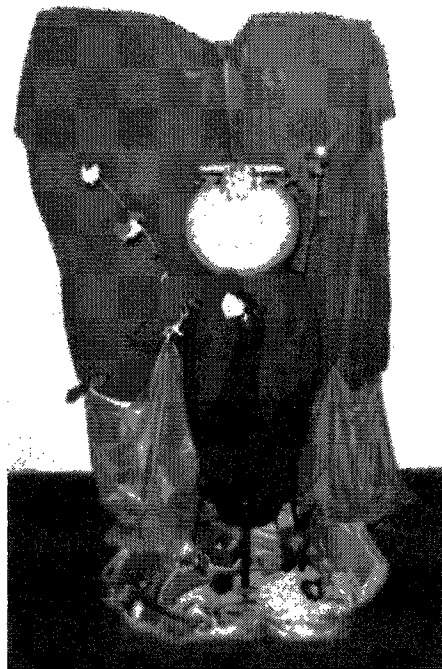


Figure 6: Spring in the Garden – Session 25
Photographed by the author April 12, 2000

Questionnaire Results: Client group

The questionnaire that I invited the members of my client group to complete was a translation of the one to which my peers and I responded. The questions were

identical and presented in the same order. This was done to facilitate comparisons between the two groups' responses, a synthesis of which will be discussed in chapter six. For now, I will be examining the results from my client group as they stand alone.

When reviewing the questionnaire results, the reader may notice that the group members often refer to the group as a 'course'. This is related to the structure in which services were presented at the community organization. Timetables of available groups were sent out regularly for members to choose from and many participants viewed the centre's activities as courses or workshops. At times they referred to me as a therapist and at others as a teacher. After a few initial attempts to clarify my role, I accepted this ambiguity from the group members, though I was careful to maintain the professional boundaries and ethics appropriate to the therapeutic relationship.

Throughout the questionnaire, members reported many of the benefits commonly associated with group experiences in general: validation, normalization, increased ease of self-expression, a sense of belonging and heightened self-awareness. (Yalom, 1995) Specific references to the impact of the ritual process itself were less frequent. However, even though they did not always refer to the ritual elements in so many words, members did speak of the power of symbolic enactment both in their descriptions of their experiences and via other indirect references.

This lack of separation between the group experience in general and the unique aspects of ritual within it may be partly due to the newness of the ritual experience for these women and a consequent lack of vocabulary with which to describe it. Of the three participants, Madi's comments are the most explicit regarding specific elements of ritual process such as symbolic representation, containment, enactment, transformation and mystery. Her previous experiences in

therapy with a Jungian analyst seem to have provided Madi with an existing frame of reference for symbolic work. This may have been what allowed her to articulate her experiences with ritual in a more fluent manner, both in group sessions and in her written reflections.

Negative associations with ritual

In response to the first question regarding members' previous experiences, beliefs, concerns and/or expectations related to ritual, all three group members wrote about having experienced negative associations with the word ritual. Dédé mentions a frightening experience she once had with a religious sect and her resulting concern that the ritual group might be like that. Madi associated the word ritual with religion and doctrine, particularly as used "for the purpose of programming an individual in the direction of a precise belief or behaviours". Gabrielle had a nightmare the night after the first session and was so shaken that she almost didn't come back.

From my perspective, there was definitely a process of taming the term 'ritual' through clarification and discussion. It began during my first contact with potential members over the telephone and continued to be an important part of the first few sessions. I spoke at length about what I meant by the word 'ritual' and I invited members to share what it meant for them. These dialogues, combined with our growing repertoire of shared experiences, facilitated the ongoing evolution of what 'ritual' would mean for us in our work together.

Joy, playfulness and the inner child

Each of the participants writes about how the ritual group created a space for her to revisit the joy and playfulness of her child-self. Madi comments that "in this privileged universe of relaxation and freedom... the environment was just right for encouraging the little girl in me to express herself. Thus, I reconnected with the joy

of life that I have a tendency to forget along the way.” Dédé explains: “I was afraid that I had forgotten that I could play, have fun, laugh, cry, be silent or attentive to another. But all this came back to me slowly and I understood that ‘little Dédé’, who played very little during her childhood, was still able to do it.” Gabrielle writes of her realization during the group sculpture of the ‘Sunman’ that “at 40, I still have the right to let myself go and have fun, and that it’s never too late to let go and bring out your inner child.”

Play and the spontaneity and imagination that we associate with it were important resources for the ritual process that I initiated with these women. I have seen meaningful ritual created without a spirit of playfulness among people who share a common set of symbols and spiritual practices. However, this group didn’t have the advantage of a common symbol set, nor was it set in a religious context, thus we required a different route to symbolic enactment. Imaginative play is a process that has the capacity to connect people to symbols via make-believe, and it is also reasonably accessible to most human beings if we can be convinced to shed our social inhibitions about adults playing like children. Clearly we were able to create a space in which this could happen and group members appreciated the opportunity to “let go” and play together. This way, we not only found a successful vehicle for symbolic enactment, we also had fun in the process.

Adding yet another important dimension to the role of play, Madi articulates a connection between play and hope. She writes: “in this privileged universe of relaxation and freedom, all our fantasies were allowed so everything became possible, even the certainty of eventual healing.”

Relationship with the self

Throughout the questionnaire results, group members write about the benefits they have experienced in relationship to their own inner worlds. All three

women write that they have come to know themselves better. They also speak of increasing comfort in self-expression. Dédé writes:

Using an instrument as though it were a person taught me that it is good, marvellous, to draw feelings out of oneself, such as anger, pain, joy, life and death and to be capable afterwards to use them directly in our everyday life, without fear of showing them and talking about them with those around us.

Gabrielle also writes: "it's thanks to this ritual course that I learned to get my emotions out, be it pain, anger, laughter or a scream."

Group members also describe how the ritual space we created together provided a feeling of calmness and peace. Gabrielle explains that "this space was somewhere that I could gather myself and my thoughts." Dédé also mentions how ritual gave her a sense of calm and safety as well as an opportunity to centre on herself. Madi writes that "the exercise of expressing my feelings and desires of the moment in a single word at the beginning of each session motivated me to listen to myself before I arrived at the session...as a result, I could verify that I was connected to myself and the Universe." Madi also asserts that ritual helped her to resolve inner conflicts and reconnect to her real values.

Sharing and connection between group members

Among the elements identified as being most important to the success of the group, perhaps the strongest statements were made about the sharing and connection that group members felt with one another. Gabrielle identifies the respect that members had for each other, the ability to "listen and be understood without having to explain ourselves, no matter what," as the most important and successful element of the experience. Madi speaks of the courage and authenticity of the group members, "the sharing of our stories, the sincere listening, and the originality of each of us both created and reinforced our solidarity and our gradually growing ease with expressing ourselves in the group." Throughout her responses, Dédé places particular emphasis on the acceptance she felt in the group and the

powerful experience of having permission to be herself, to be real, to “finally have the right to live all of my emotions without masks.”

Sacredness and spiritual pursuits

I was careful to keep my references to spirituality relatively infrequent and very general while leading this group. I wanted to create an environment where there was space for spirituality and sacredness without requiring them to be present in any specific form, or even at all. In the beginning, spirituality did not seem to play any significant role in our discussions or enactments. However, as the group unfolded, members began to make references to guardian angels, Higher Powers and the Universe during the more contemplative moments of the group. During one session, Gabrielle and Dédé even brought prayers to say at the funeral of the Tree of Life.

Over time, members began to share the ways in which they found comfort and encouragement through their spirituality: Gabrielle expresses her belief that “there is a Supreme Being up there ... it isn’t just coincidence that I found myself in this ritual course.” In response to the question: Has spirituality or sacredness played a significant role for you in this process? Dédé writes: “Oh Yes! Because I am a spiritual person who believes in a Higher Power, who believes in life, no matter how small. I believe in nature that liberates, water that cleanses, food that nourishes the body, but also the soul.” It seems clear that by the end of our time together, having an accepting and respectful space to express the spiritual dimensions of their lives had become an important element of the group for these women.

Gabrielle writes about being moved by prayers that were said in the group and Dédé writes that the group experience “delivered me from fear, sickness and death.” Both of them describe how they were able to set aside their suffering and the rest of their lives for the duration of each group session and find a sense of

distance and perspective. This fits well with the description Shorter (1996) gives of ritual as a sanctuary for souls besieged.

Madi writes about how the opening ritual “facilitated a connection with the Essence of our Being, thus also with a Universal Energy.” In her final comments, she writes:

I will not forget that at times we were able to create an ambiance of magic, impregnated with mystery. A kind of luminous energy was released, giving us access to greater truths. This gave me a taste of continuity by regularly recreating a symbolic universe that could respond to my psychological and spiritual needs in the moment.

Symbolic enactment

Although Dédé and Gabrielle do not discuss the topic of symbolic enactment directly, they do connect it to some of the benefits they experienced in the group. Gabrielle mentions that the construction of the Sunman, and particularly the placement of the yellow exercise ball as its head, concretised the feeling that there was “light at the end of the tunnel...every problem has a solution.” Dédé specifically identifies that it was “using an instrument though it were a person” that helped her to draw out her feelings. In a more general reference, she writes that “if we don’t understand the difficulties of our lives by the words alone, the music or the silence or even the movement requires us, if we want to be real, to accept our limits, all the while understanding that it’s preferable to work toward surmounting them.”

On the other hand, Madi does write specifically about the role of symbolism in our work: “via the intermediary of the symbol, I understood that I could orient ritual in the direction that was most relevant to me in the here and now.” She asserts that the experiences she had in this group reinforced her conviction that “the symbolic dimension is indispensable for deep personal growth work.” Madi writes that she is “convinced that symbolic imagination allows us to enrich the reality of real life so that we can develop our intuition and draw closer to the profound beings that we

are." Her final conclusion: "To play with symbols is a powerful tool for transformation."

Chapter 6: Discussion and Conclusion

Distinguishing Elements

There are noticeable differences between the ritual work I have described in this paper and most of the previously documented ritual work in the drama therapy literature (Emunah 1996, Jennings 1994, Jones 1996, and Mitchell 1996 & 1998). In the beginning of my training, I was both excited and confused by the description of certain drama therapy methods as "ritual". It was wonderful to see that ritual was on the table as a healing tool, however, what was being described as ritual did not look at all like the (Neopagan) ritual with which I was intimately familiar. From my point of view, what the drama therapy world called ritual resembled an ingredients list: a consistent progression of body positioning used to anchor transitions in and out of roles, exercises that facilitated a shift in consciousness toward a group-mind, the conscious development of personal mythology, the creation of powerful symbolic art to represent various elements of self and other, embodiment and symbolic enactment that were rarely explicitly connected to issues and experiences in participants' lives, opening and closing activities to mark the transitions in and out of therapeutic space, et cetera. Ritual was everywhere and yet nowhere at the same time. All the components were present, but they were not being used in concert to form a whole in the manner in which I was accustomed.

What is different about the way I designed this group is that participants took issues from their lives and consciously created symbols to represent those issues with the explicit intention to encounter and transform their experiences via enactment. It was not I, the drama therapist, who was using ritual consciously to engender healing, it was they, the participants, who were learning to do so for themselves with my guidance. The metaphor was directly connected to that which it

represented, if not at its creation then at least in the discussion that followed enactment. Many of the same processes were used, but with a level of awareness that changed the resulting experience dramatically. This ritual process, when used with deliberate intention, creates a space for the marriage of precision and intuition.

Synthesis of Questionnaire Results

Community Building

One of the most powerful elements of these experiences has been the formation of community. A sense of belonging, acceptance and connection are referred to repeatedly in the questionnaire results. Alison writes: "There is something precious and vital about coming together to be, to witness, to encounter the unknown. Intimacy develops fast, as does a profound respect for those who participate with trust and authenticity." Kazimea speaks of the sense she had of "trust, and willingness to share burdens." Gabrielle describes the satisfaction of sharing with other group members: "It's marvellous to be able to say that we participate in an exchange with someone, not just on a material level, but that there is also an emotional sharing, that we confide personal things. When someone confides something very personal, it's a sign that they have great trust in us and that is very validating." Madi writes about belonging: "As soon as I entered, I felt well received and experienced a sense of belonging to see that my place was waiting for me among the others... Also, I learned more about what real tolerance is: to welcome and respect differences." Dédé asserts: "every second of these weeks spent getting to know each other and to know and accept the other person beside us was essential."

Building community is such a critical part of any group work. We have to develop trust and a sense of acceptance before we can open ourselves to the

powerful experience of being truly seen. It is my belief that one of the most potentially damaging social experiences is the isolation of not being seen, or worse, being seen and rejected. Participation in the formation of community can be very empowering and the sense of belonging that comes from that experience nurtures and supports health and resilience even after the group dissolves. Just knowing that you have belonged to a group whose members respected you for who you are creates the possibility that it can happen again. It validates that you are capable of trusting and connecting with others and that you are worthy of that same trust. It shows you that you do not have to be alone, that there are others out there who can grasp your reality and relate to it. In short, community generates hope.

Symbolic enactment

Intentional symbolic enactment is one of the central components of this ritual process and is identified as such by members from both groups. As Kazimea explains, it is through symbolic interaction with metaphors that we discover our relationships with the reality that is represented symbolically. Symbolic enactment creates a certain distance that in turn allows us to discover a new perspective on a situation, pattern or dynamic. Dédé describes the awareness and acceptance of one's limitations co-existing with the notion that they can be surmounted. This attitude is reflective of the kind of productive distance fostered by symbolic enactment.

When we symbolically explore our relationship to aspects of our lives and ourselves through ritual, we have the opportunity to practice a new approach to an old situation, something that happened very frequently in the client group. Madi speaks of how these interactions with symbolism "enrich the reality of life" in such a way as to enhance intuition and connect with the "profound beings" we are. It is in this relationship between the symbol and the reality that we discover meaning and

develop the ability to become more than simply actors in our lives, but also creators of new scripts.

Although it was not included specifically in the client group's questionnaire responses, as part of our closure process we talked about how encountering difficulties in symbolic enactment and experiencing the success of responding in newer, more satisfying ways was directly transferable to their lives. Having been empowered by the successes of their ritual enactments, they were able to return to their everyday lives and have the confidence and courage to bring about concrete changes in the ways in which they related to their worlds. In a similar vein, Kazimea wrote: "my ritual acts commit me to following through, to actually changing my patterns of thought and behaviour, more than simply discovering and naming those patterns and stating my intentions to change."

Sacredness and spirituality

Although it was not my original intention for spirituality to play a central role in the ritual group I designed for the centre, the needs my clients identified and subsequently explored often included the same four elements that Kazimea describes as spiritual pursuits: meaning and perspective, wholeness and transformation. In some ways, one could argue that these pursuits are common to many forms of drama therapy. Grainger (1995) asserts that because drama therapy is structured around the imagery and symbolism of the empty space, "the centre of the world" where anything and everything can emerge and return, "a sense of the sacredness of the enterprise is almost inescapable" (p. 97). In an interesting parallel, the branch of Druidism I practice also establishes its sacred space via symbols of the centre: specifically the fire, the well and the tree. The establishment of the sacred centre is the vehicle by which connection to all worlds becomes possible. It is the vast potential implied by this connection that conveys the sacredness and power that is

experienced in our ritual. Perhaps this may also be true for some forms of drama therapy.

In a more direct way, the questionnaire results from both groups indicate the value all participants placed upon the opportunity to express their spiritual needs and concerns in an inclusive and accepting space in community with others. This was the primary purpose of the original group with my peers, and it became an important element of the process organically created by the women in my client group. The spiritual dimension of human experience seems to be largely ignored or even actively avoided in the mainstream therapeutic world. Perhaps this is in part a reflection of a larger society where religious diversity seems to survive by virtue of the fact that we generally avoid discussion of religious and spiritual topics outside of forums specifically geared toward those purposes. Be that as it may, spiritual beliefs often play a significant role in the way human beings assign meaning to their experiences and relationships. If we allow spirituality to be invisible in our work with clients by neglecting to inquire if it plays a significant role in their lives, we can miss out on a great deal of information about how they see the world, not to mention a deep well of resources that could potentially be mobilized toward growth and healing.

Mystery and magic

Some of Madi's comments in particular seem to be an echo of things expressed by Alison regarding the magic that characterized the ritual experience at certain moments. Alison wrote: "It made life numinous. Is that the word? In the cold, dirty, crowded city where everything looked dead, there was life. There was purpose, spirit, magic, warmth." Madi wrote: "I will not forget that at times we were able to create an ambiance of magic, impregnated with mystery. A kind of luminous energy was released, giving us access to greater truths."

In ways that often escape my ability to describe, it is this experience of mystery and magic that I find so deeply moving and transformative about ritual. Although I had confidence in my ability to create an environment that is conducive to this kind of experience, I also knew that it could not be coerced into existence. As a result of its spiritual connotations and elusive nature, I had not dared to hope that this sense of magic and mystery would manifest itself in the client group I led. I was focused on the more practical dimensions of the ritual process. It was therefore immensely powerful and awe-inspiring to witness that sense of mystery and magic unfolding in the last few sessions: there were moments that literally took my breath away. To have the experience so clearly articulated by one of the participants was very validating and confirms for me that it is possible to blend sacred and therapeutic endeavours to positive effect.

Areas For Potential Improvement

Terminology

One of the greatest challenges of bringing this experience together and getting it off the ground was the word 'ritual' and all the baggage our culture attaches to it. I did my best to explain my intentions for the group and answer any questions from potential members during my telephone screenings, but evidently, the negative associations that many people have with the word were more persistent than that. Creepy cults and dogmatic religion are not exactly the kind of associations one wants to evoke when creating a therapeutic environment. Although some honest discussion seemed to have cleared up most of the concerns within the first few sessions, the word 'ritual' was so negatively charged for Gabrielle that she had a nightmare about it that kept her away for weeks even after the issue seemed to have been diffused.

I have ethical concerns about using a generic description for the sake of making the nature of the group sound more innocuous. I believe in giving people an accurate idea of what they can expect before they arrive. However, the real essence of communication lies in its reception and it is arguable that the word 'ritual' is actually more misleading in its common interpretation than it is informative. Therefore, it seems worthwhile to consider an alternate vocabulary.

I had toyed with the idea of titling the group "Sacred Theatre" but I chose not to in large part because the word "Sacred" seemed out of place in a secular setting. However, it is a fairly accurate description of the work and perhaps it would have avoided some of the early confusion. In retrospect, I may have been too quick to assume that it would not be deemed acceptable by the agency since there was a Zen meditation group going on at about the same time.

Use of an ongoing theme

Perhaps the most positive and successful part of the client group was the powerful and compelling work we did together around the "Tree of Life" theme. The culminating sessions were so spectacular that one cannot help but try to understand what worked so well in order to replicate the experience and perhaps cause it to happen sooner in the life of the group. It is difficult to say with any certainty what exactly made it so successful, but it is possible to explore some of the rich and complicated weaving that has contributed to the tapestry.

Perhaps the most obvious place to start is in the choosing of a theme, any theme, around which to focus the work. In her questionnaire responses, Madi suggests that an ongoing theme be established sooner, after a handful of initial sessions, in order to begin work on a shared project as quickly as possible. She states her strong belief that a continuous theme is necessary because it provides the

group with a container for their work and helps to "avoid the dead time in the beginning and the moments lacking in inspiration."

Choosing an ongoing theme certainly did seem to solidify the group. As I mentioned earlier, attendance became very regular and the levels of engagement, investment and group cohesion all became much higher around the time that the theme was established. However, this development occurred almost exactly halfway through the life of the group (session 13/25). As discussed previously, there were a number of logistical difficulties getting the group underway and the ability to rally around an ongoing theme may have been something that was made possible because of the development of group cohesion and not something that brought the cohesion about.

Another factor to be considered is the time that was necessary for the group to develop a certain competence with the ritual format in general. In the beginning, they seemed to be somewhat overwhelmed by the plethora of available toys, objects and instruments. It took time for them to become comfortable using the objects as symbols to express themselves. By the time the group was at its halfway point, members would spontaneously collect objects upon arrival and use them to help express themselves in the check-in. I am inclined to believe that a certain level of ease with self-expression via symbol and metaphor was required for the smooth unfolding of an ongoing theme.

Our initial sessions were mostly self-contained. Members didn't miss much if they were out for a week and so they may not have had as much incentive to come on a more consistent basis. However, the sessions did seem to evolve into a spiralling pattern where some themes were revisited subsequent to sessions in which relevant resources had been explored or developed. I believe that this period in the group's life was a critical preparation for our later work, not just for the acquisition of ritual experience, but also for the solidification of the necessary emotional and

psychological resources required to face the deep enactment of the cycle of life, death and rebirth. In reference to rites of passage, Grainger (1995) states that "Only if the former situation is felt to have been really destroyed – if we ourselves have been personally involved in dismantling it in order to build the future anew – can we experience real change" (p.103). This is what these women did. It took tremendous courage to symbolically destroy the life that they had known and it required great faith to sit in the darkness of the unknown and believe that something new would indeed emerge.

Perhaps in some way my willingness to wait for the group and the ritual process to come together into something meaningful provided a role model for group members in those final weeks. I am certain that it would have been far more comfortable for them to skip straight to rebirth, an impulse that is difficult to resist. The session in which they kept vigil for potential in the emptiness left after destruction was probably the most difficult and intense, but it was also very powerful and transformative.

Much in the same way, faced with all of our fumbling around, it was very tempting for me to create a theme and structure and then invite members to participate in it, especially with the pressure of time limits resting heavy on my mind. However, such a process would not have been as organic in nature and, although we may have gone to similar places, I do not believe we would have achieved the same level of depth and personal meaning. Just as importantly, the process would have been of my design with their input and not something of their own creation that evolved from the themes most meaningful to them at that time. Having a set structure might have been more comfortable for all of us, but I remain unconvinced that it would have been more beneficial. Sometimes therapy, healing and personal growth lead us down paths through uncomfortable places, but the strengths we develop in the process are part of what brings us to the other side.

Reunion meetings

Although the specifics were not part of this research, the client group also had a reunion meeting of sorts. I was asked to continue the ritual group for another term after the one documented here. Madi was the only original member who was able to return. Gabrielle found work that kept her from participating and Dédé's health concerns required her to slow down and cut back on her activities. The original group continued for two blocks of time, and the subsequent group had only one block over the summer. Several new members joined the group, two of them men, but it never quite developed a consistent core.

Madi attempted to initiate another ongoing theme, but the rest of the group members were unable to grasp what she wanted to do. I had to intervene in order to prevent the other members from becoming exasperated, or even hostile toward her. I tried to help her understand that the ritual process was still new to the rest of the group, but she eventually became frustrated with what she saw as their lack of seriousness about the work and dropped out. From my perspective, the second group just needed the same kind of time that the initial group had in order to really come together with the process and each other. Fifteen sessions were simply not enough. At the same time, I was frustrated as well. It was difficult to start all over again from scratch and I suspect that the frustration that Madi and I both experienced was part of grieving the loss of the magic that characterized the last few sessions of the original group. It was too easy to forget that we took more than twenty sessions to get there.

This resonated in many ways with the reunion experience I had with my peers. In much the same way, we tried to meet again after we had all moved on with our lives for seven months. We expected it to be easy and magical without going through all the time and preparation we needed in order to support the

process and we were not able to replicate the results. I am uncertain that the results would have been the same even if we had taken more time.

Continuity seems to be of so much importance for this ritual process. In some ways, I believe that to be true for any intense, emotional engaging experience. We are hesitant to 'break the spell' by stopping the flow and rhythm of whatever we are doing because we know that we will have to invest time and energy in order to find our way back to that place – assuming that the moment has not passed beyond recovery. It is part of human nature to want to hold on to these elusive experiences as long as possible and to try to recover or recreate them once they have passed, but their transitory and existential nature simply does not lend itself well to resuscitation. We risk further grief and disillusionment by trying to force the magic to reoccur.

Recommendations For Future Groups

This method seems to work best with a minimum of 25 sessions for those who are unfamiliar with the deliberate use of symbolic enactment for self-exploration and healing. Those who are more familiar with ritual and metaphor, either through life experiences, or previous group participation may require less time. Screening the group for a similar level of experience in these areas might be helpful in order to avoid unnecessary frustration for those who may not require so much time to orient to the process.

Discussion, sometimes a great deal of discussion, can be an essential part of preparing for enactments as it provides an opportunity for members to connect and negotiate common themes. It is easy to see the time spent talking as something that takes away from the "real" work that seems to take place in the ritual enactments, yet without enough discussion to ensure that everyone is on the same page, the action phase of a session can be problematic. Discovering a common

theme that is specific enough to work with and yet broad enough to be approached from several different angles requires faith and creativity, be it the focus of a single session or an ongoing project.

This method has the potential to be powerfully moving and thus difficult to relinquish when it is over. It is probably wise to pay particular attention to the closure process and allow more time than might usually be allotted. The client group documented here began discussing closure halfway through the life of the group, about the same time that an ongoing theme emerged. As far as reunion meetings are concerned, continuation after a short break does not seem to interrupt the process, but reconvening the group after a long period of separation would seem to be ill advised, especially if the membership of the group shifts dramatically. I would also counsel against reunion meetings if there were no intention to re-engage with an ongoing process.

Although it is possible to consistently create an environment that is conducive for magic to emerge, this is not the kind of work for which one can create a list of guidelines that unfolds like a recipe. Doing the same exact things will not necessarily produce the same exact results. It is a process of creating a container, of opening a space and holding it in time. It is a collective creation that is made up of the resources, needs and interests of those who come together to experience it in this precise moment and yet, there is more to this process than that which we put into it. The co-creative element exists not only between the participants, but also as a dialogue between the mundane and the Sacred. It has a life of its own beyond our ability to direct and control. It is all about trusting a process and those who participate therein to take the experience to the deepest and most meaningful level they are collectively able to reach in the time they have together. In his postscript, Grainger (1995) provides an eloquent summary:

We are the ones who constructed the drama, the play, the ritual. In it we put more than we knew how to; into it we build a symbolism that we feel to be greater than ourselves, to originate elsewhere. Our own understanding and experience provides us with a metaphor whose richness can never be exhausted, a personal poetry that touches each individual in a different way; in friendship and love, grief and joy, we make contact with one another in metaphors of profound spiritual resonance" (p. 104).

So it has been and so it shall be again.

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Appendix A: Questionnaire Results – Peer Group

1. When you first began participating in this group, what kind of experiences, beliefs, concerns and/or expectations did you have related to being part of a ritual process?

KAZIMEA: In the Ukrainian Catholic church as a child (a biannual affair - Easter & Christmas) I was acquainted with ritual as a very sensual experience - scent, sight, sound, texture were highlighted. Ritual was also indelibly connected with nature, seasons, creatures, deities and ancestors.

My next major ritual experience was with a women's circle, which was an eclectic group - no overt domination by any one philosophy, adherents to medicine circle teachings, Witch-Camp Wiccans taught by Starhawk, and other non-specified backgrounds. We worked as a team, with no organized leadership. We alternated the leadership and planning of rituals, which were monthly and again were very connected with the cycle of seasons. From this experience I gathered that I enjoy "do-it-yourself" ritual, which can be designed to answer the needs of the group members. When we met as a trio, it was my expectation that such an even partnership among members could occur.

I was involved in the ADF Silver Fox grove in Montreal. From this experience I brought some concern about how it felt to be on the outskirts of decisions, and how I felt when one person continued to plan and organize all the rituals. I wanted to be more involved, for me to get the most out of the experience. From SFG I learned to appreciate how within a structured ritual, there can be openness which allows the unexpected to enter, including unplanned contributions from members.

I had also studied ritual as a healing technique as part of my studies in drama therapy. So I appreciated the very serious aspect that is there... when we decide our acts will be "efficacious" then they may well be.

ALISON: I had worked ritually as a Witch, both solo and in groups of 3-8, 20ish and over 100. The bigger groups had included men and women, and the smaller ones were women-only. Marking the seasons, marking personal events and hoped-for transformations, and seeking political change through activism were among the overt purposes I had used ritual for. More personal purposes were to connect with myself, others, and the Earth in a deeper and more intentional way than generally occurs in the dominant culture. Doing ritual, I was aware of the skills and special qualities which revealed themselves to me and other participants, and of interconnectedness and interdependence of people and of all beings.

Experience had strengthened my belief that the way we do things shapes the outcome, that magic is real, and that all voices are vital, everyone has something to offer. I had learned to trust the process, to sit in ambiguity until things became clear, to slow down. Ritual suits my natural pace and my introversion at the same time as it calls forth more external ways of being from me. Ritual processes are congruent with what I know of creative process as a visual artist, and what I know of healing and therapy, as both healer-therapist and client-participant.

I had experienced discomfort in the past, around doing ritual with women I did not know well, whose ideas and practices were similar but not the same as mine. I felt uncomfortable taking the role of expert, and prefer working with Witches experienced in the same tradition as mine. Having said that, I have come in the past 5 years to find that I can share ritual with other important people in my life, who

may not be Witches, or even pagan. It is more the quality of the relationship and the willingness to connect which is important to me now, and less how vibrant the magic feels or what the trappings of the ritual are.

DIMITRA: I had been planning and participating in ritual for about five or six years when we started our trio. Mostly, I had experience with rituals that I had created for my own personal needs and then later with medium-sized (5-15) group ritual in an ongoing community. I had been part of the leadership of Silver Fox Grove, ADF, a neo-pagan group from a Druidic tradition, for about three years. I had spent the last year as the person whose responsibility it was to create and lead ritual for the group every six weeks.

ADF has a highly structured ritual format. In the pagan community, we joke that the ADF Druids are the High-Church Episco-pagans. Despite the obvious theological differences, there are indeed many similarities between ADF Druidic ritual forms and those of the sacramental Christian traditions. There is a liturgical outline that all of our communities follow for every ADF rite and it is the improvisation within a set structure that gives our rituals both consistency and spontaneity. There is still a great deal of planning that is part of the process, however and most is decided before hand.

By the time I reached out to connect myself with Alison and Kazimea for the ritual work we did together, I had finished my term as Sr. Liturgist and was looking for something very different than the kind of ritual I had been doing up until that point. I wanted to get away from the structure, the planning and the responsibility to do for others and start a collaborative process with peers. I was tired of leading and I had needs of my own that I wanted to meet ritually, preferably with others who had similar needs. Kazimea and Alison seemed like good choices for this.

2. What is it about ritual that really speaks to you as a tool for growth and healing?

KAZIMEA: Symbol is a very important aspect of ritual. Ritual is symbolic action on symbolic objects, which allows me to realize, rehearse, and commit to new choices, new actions in reality. In ritual, I create a metaphor, either assigning its meaning or not. Then I act, responding to the metaphor. I discover my attitude, intentions, fears and hopes toward the reality the metaphor represents. Sometimes the connection of reality and metaphor only becomes clear through my reaction to it.

ALISON: Connection: there is something precious and vital about coming together to be, to witness, to encounter the unknown. Intimacy develops fast, as does a profound respect for those who participate with trust and authenticity. Trust: in the process, in each other, in the wisdom which comes. Containment: the circle can hold anything. Enacting symbolically: whether it is a personal transformation, a relationship transforming, a seasonal transformation, or whatever, symbolic action brings it inside, or connects inner and outer, it finds the ways the themes resonate at deeper levels within us and without.

DIMITRA: Growth and healing are sacred work to me and ritual provides a context in which that can be honoured. There is a tremendous freedom in ritual because it allows me to take my inner world and make it outwardly manifest through symbols. At which point, I have enough distance to see myself, my world, and my choices with a new perspective and interact with them in new ways. In this distance, there is room for the Sacred to speak and for me to listen. Finally, when intention enters the

space, my enactments there have repercussions in my daily life: the first and most difficult step has been taken, I have experienced some level of symbolic choice or mastery in the situation, and any change or transformation has already gathered its critical momentum.

3. What themes would you say were most central to our work together?

KAZIMEA: identity - authenticity - wholeness. Appreciating ourselves and life and its perfection, self and others and world - interconnection and distinctness, purification and transformation, cycles of gestation, growth and decay.

ALISON: I don't remember exactly what we did together, but I remember that coming together in trust and willingness to be open to whatever was there at the time between us was wonderful, and the only place in my life where that was happening. It was a place where all the details and routines of daily life and grad school and being far from home could be cast off, and the deeper essences of what was 'up' or 'in the air' or more likely, what was in the ground we had in common, could be explored at leisure. Time was different: faster and slower than usual, and a lot happened each time we were together for ritual.

I remember working as vessels, giving and receiving. I remember being seeds pressing up against the earth, growing into we-knew-not-what. I remember hiding treasures in candle wax for each other. I think for me what we did held a sense of being gifted by each other and our work. Richness, abundance, possibility, all from very simple objects and materials, it was how we moved in it, what we did with it. We didn't need elaborate stuff, the richness came from us and from being in the world. Ritual gave us time to notice it.

DIMITRA: Purification; being a vessel; seeds, growth, transformation; being close and letting go; sharing the gifts of the natural world and of our little community; finding, exploring, and assigning meaning; trusting each other, trusting ourselves, trusting the process; remembering who we are deep in our souls whatever our mundane lives might look like; making space for magic; silence, patience, encounter; sharing.

4. How did taking those themes into action as part of the ritual process help you in the experience of your everyday life?

KAZIMEA: Through reframing my daily experience in a larger, spiritual perspective, I could look at things in a more balanced, objective, calm and patient way. I could see that perhaps what feels like stagnation today may be part of a larger cycle of growth. I also found that my ritual acts commit me to following through, to actually changing my patterns of thought and behaviour, more than simply discovering and naming those patterns and stating my intentions to change.

ALISON: It made life numinous. Is that the word? In the cold, dirty, crowded city where everything looked dead, there was life. There was purpose, spirit, magic, warmth. I remembered each time who I was, how much I was, more than (sub)merged in the mundane daily-ness of my student life.

DIMITRA: It gave me a different perspective on my world, one of connection, of cycles and movement, of community. From that perspective, I felt very empowered. It brought movement into those areas of my life that felt stuck. It reminded me that I am able to find, create and share meaning with others. I knew I wasn't alone in my experiences, that others I cared about and who cared about me could relate to my world and that we could give to one another from our own unique perspectives.

5. Has spirituality or sacredness played a significant role for you in this process? If so, how?

KAZIMEA: Absolutely, our triad/circle was overtly spiritual. We created ritual in response to the question: what are your current spiritual needs? It was spiritual because we sought meaning and perspective, wholeness and transformation - spiritual pursuits.

ALISON: Yes. We came together for that express purpose, to do sacred ritual or big "R" Ritual together. We made a place through ritual for Spirit to enter and be welcomed and honoured.

DIMITRA: Definitely. Spirituality was the central focus of our work together. I reached out for this because I wanted to acknowledge and explore themes that were important to me spiritually in a sacred space where they could be honoured with others. Part of this for me was stating my intentions to the Universe and calling upon the Sacred to help me manifest the changes and transformations I sought.

6. Has the space in which we have held our rituals and the manner in which we have used, claimed, or created that space been an important part of your experience? If so, how and why?

KAZIMEA: Our creation of our symbolic sacred space was much more important to me than the actual physical space where we met. This physical location was important only in that we would not be disturbed, we felt safe and private. Our creation of where we were, as sacred, defined what occurred within that space as sacred. We took this seriously. So someone's living room, a public hotel's sauna, and the park all became sacred space.

I think this would have been more powerful for me, and the actual physical location would have taken on a more important role, if a strikingly beautiful outdoor location had been available to us. For example, in a drumming workshop I just did in a remote hostel, there was a 5 minute hike up a hill through a forest to get to the workshop hall from our bunkhouse. The first day, people complained - too steep, too long, dangerous, etc. By the third day, everyone was raving about it. It had itself become the site of learning - about how taking it slowly, walking with others, being present and accepting what is, can make every hill easier to climb. We saw amazing things on the path - spider webs marked with raindrops and dew, a mouse bounding across the path, starlight, ... If the transition had been an urban bus route we would have likely all remained oblivious to it. Some space is so intrinsically holy that you'd have to be anaesthetized not to clue in. In this kind of a space, you don't have to do much work (if any) to claim or create it as sacred.

ALISON: Usually it was a living room. It was important to have privacy and room to move, a clear space with the furniture pushed back. We had to be able to make noise. And comfort; warmth and softness and back support if needed, food, on one

occasion we spent the day shopping and cleansing in a sauna, before coming home for the ritual proper. That may have diluted it, but also it extended its reach.

DIMITRA: I was aware of both the physical space and the spiritual/psychological space that we created together. A solid block of time in a location that was private and entirely without interruptions was absolutely essential. Our attention to the various ways we chose to mark that space as sacred were also important to me. Things like candles, incense, and focused intention are all cues for me that I am shifting into a different kind of awareness where the boundaries of my reality transform. The non-judgmental, open, respectful and authentic ways in which we chose to share with each other also contributed greatly to what was able to happen within that space.

7. At various times we have used silence, music, art and movement as part of our rituals together, how important have these elements been to your experience? Would your experience have been missing something critical without them?

KAZIMEA: Creative work was a critical way for the three of us to interact as a trio, in that way that allowed us all to participate equally. Like in cooperative play, we responded to each other spontaneously. Art is the vehicle for chaos, for spontaneous actions and associations to emerge. I believe this is a connection to the spiritual, the collective unconscious. Yes, it would have been missing something without the art (of all kinds). I wonder what else could we have done? We could have made ritual statements and placed objects symbolically. Movement, art, music, drama, all brought in an element of joy that would have been missing otherwise.

ALISON: Movement was very important for me and usually is. In big group work I go deep with drum trances. Movement is a constant for me. Darkness seems to help, and candle light, for the way they transform a space visually, clutter distracts me.

Silence gives time to go deeper, and is usually part of grounding and preparing the space and ourselves. Silence while, for example, washing each others' faces seems to give the action more poignancy than if we were speaking at the time. But it's not an enforced silence. Sometimes I like deliberate silence. The only time it's been a problem is when there is someone who doesn't know what she's supposed to do - she can become anxious and that's not conducive to a good experience.

A group art activity saved our last ritual together - it was the only thing I felt able to take away with me. But usually art and music are not part of small group ritual for me.

DIMITRA: The creative elements are absolutely essential for me. I am a very cognitive person and part of the power of ritual for me is that it draws me out of my thinking self and into my creative self. I have a different set of resources available to me in that space. In the silence, I slow down enough to hear my own inner wisdom, to find the guidance of my Sacred centre. In creative endeavours, I call upon myself to think outside the box of my everyday reality - in so doing I often surpass my usual limitations. Music was also important to me for creating a sense of connection with the rest of the group.

8. What do you feel were the most important elements contributing to the success of this experience for you? Is there anything you would have changed about it?

KAZIMEA: Our unity of needs when we were in Montreal - our spiritual needs often overlapped significantly. Our clarity about defining our needs and accepting their diversity, finding the parallels and links when they were not obvious. Our faith that we could integrate our needs. The seriousness with which we took our work. I don't mean we had no fun, but rather that we gave our actions weight and meaning, significance, relevance in our lives. That we just got right into it - there was no administrative bullshit to deal with. Compare our triad with ADF rituals, and the interpersonal garbage that arose there because of defined roles and hierarchy. We had no group to run, no "other members" to satisfy, no leader or arch-anything to satisfy. All we were there to do was to meet our own spiritual needs. Simple!

ALISON: A place to BE. Letting what was emerge. Not rushing, not controlling. Being together. The trust and intimacy that developed. Yes, I would say that freedom and allowing and not dictating what was to happen was important. Letting go of preconceived ideas if it turned out that they didn't fit. Being fully present with what was.

And when that didn't happen, when only part of what Was was expressed, it was a disaster for me. The trust was betrayed and we have not recovered from it. My part in betraying that trust was not speaking my anger and resentment when I felt them, not saying what I felt and wanted. When the circle stopped being a circle and became a line, with the focus all on one of us. There is room for a circle to focus on one person, as in a healing circle. I guess we hadn't really formed a circle at that time and didn't.

DIMITRA: I believe that one of the most critical elements of the success of this group was the time we spent previous to each ritual just talking about where we were at with our lives, how we were feeling, what we felt we needed most and what of those things we could find together. I think that doing this allowed us to feel heard and supported in the areas we did not have in common and then let them go in favour of working with those we did. Our ability to work collectively without identifying a leader but rather sharing the facilitation between us was also one of our strengths. Patience, trust in the process, trust that there would indeed be a common ground to find, respect for one another, these were all important.

As far as what I would have changed... about eight months after our consecutive rituals were over due to Kazimea's return home, we met in BC for Yule and tried to revisit our process. We didn't spend the time we normally had just discussing and being together. Instead, we got together in an evening and expected everything to unfold as it had before. We were in different places and common ground felt harder to find. I'm sure we would all have a different perspective on this, but to my mind, we hadn't prepared sufficiently for the process itself to be a container and so we needed, or perhaps just I needed, someone to take up that role temporarily. Leaderless groups aren't really leaderless: they just don't have a formal leadership structure and all those tasks that are necessary to maintain a group's functioning thus become shared responsibilities. When this broke down, the process broke down. In the end, our group art became the one thing that was able to tie us all together and I'm grateful we had that.

To do it again, I don't think that I would have tried to work it all in an evening. I had forgotten how much time it took, often spaced over a couple weeks, to really connect and find our mutual needs. I didn't realize how vital this was for

us, for me. In hindsight, I would have just let it rest and gone out for dinner or something instead. Our time together had ended eight months previous and trying to bring it together again with so little preparation was a difficult proposition that we did our best with but we never found again what we once had.

9. Is there anything you can carry with you from this experience that will continue to serve you in some way even though the group is no longer doing ritual together?

KAZIMEA:

- The memory of the sweetness of how easy it can be to create effective and satisfying ritual, especially in the absence of an institution.
- Knowledge that I am not alone in my spiritual and creative beliefs, that others may compatibly share my eclectic spiritual culture.
- Knowledge that I can simply allow spontaneous improvisation to inform me, that I can trust spontaneous improv to be completely meaningful, relevant and wise.
- One important act for me as when we made candles, including wax from the candelabra of my former marriage, melting and sharing it to be burned and transformed. From this I still feel gratitude, that you and Ali were willing to share in the responsibility for that transformation, by burning "my shit" in your candles also. It spoke to me of trust, and willingness to share burdens. Our conversation last Yule had a similar theme.
- The physical object we created, the painted pot, remains with me in ongoing ritual/symbolic function. It holds a healing Aloe Vera now, which went through some very symbolic events with R., although its significance was unknown to him. To me this proved that its ritual significance was in fact real.

ALISON: I'll feel more confident in doing ritual with near-strangers again, because what we did was great, and easy, and rich. I'll trust in the process, and I'll participate fully in that process, even when what I have to say is not likely to be received well, or may hurt someone. Because mistrust once introduced does not just go away. And in the ritual setting everything is heightened. So our experience was wonderful, but it ended badly, and I carry part of the responsibility for that.

DIMITRA: I take so much with me from this experience. In my personal world, it gave me a place where I felt I really belonged and could relate to others in a very real, authentic, intimate way and be heard and understood. It helped me meet my spiritual needs when I was dissatisfied with what was available in my larger religious community. It has also been something I was able to transform for my clinical use and my academic inquiry. It has taught me that there is a process that underlies the success of such endeavours and that when a piece of that process is missing or fails, it just isn't the same. It's helped me to understand leaderless groups from the inside out. I think I also take with me a realization of how fragile human relationships can be.

10. Please feel free to add anything else that feels important to you with regard to your experience with this group or your beliefs/concerns about the future use of ritual as a therapeutic tool.

KAZIMEA: I think our work would have been much more complicated if we had had widely diverging beliefs, terminology, etc. Although we were divergent, we were not

widely so, I thought, and we had the CAT (creative arts therapies) experience, attitude, and vocabulary to tie us together.

ALISON: Doing ritual together helped me through a lonely, hard year. Magic where I least expected it, when I wasn't looking for it. I am grateful for that. I'm glad you are doing the work of bringing ritual and therapy together as Kaz and I are in our own ways.

It's scary work for me, to 'come out' spiritually, in my professional life. It's a powerful blending of personal and professional though. They go together so well. My ritual practice has enormous influence on my work as a therapist, and especially as a creative arts therapist. My art is bound up in my spirituality, too. I can't authentically separate them. It's all about being whole, being, being authentic, listening to other (transpersonal) forms of wisdom and knowing, and having many choices and the power to work with them.

Appendix B: Questionnaire Results – Client Group

1. Quand vous avez commencé à participer à ce groupe pour la première fois, quelles expériences, croyances, préoccupations ou attentes aviez-vous, du fait de prendre part à un processus rituel?

GABRIELLE: Je dois dire que, lorsque j'ai commencé le cours, je n'avais pas vraiment d'attente. C'était plutôt la curiosité qui m'attirait et le mot *rituel*. Après le premier cours, très franchement, je voulais lâcher parce que j'avais fait un cauchemar le soir même et cela m'avait beaucoup secouée. Une copine m'a dit que ce n'est pas avec juste un cours que je pouvais me faire une opinion. Alors, j'ai décidé de poursuivre et j'en suis aujourd'hui très contente.

GABRIELLE: I have to say that, when I started the course, I didn't really have any expectations. It was more curiosity that drew me, that and the word "ritual". Quite frankly, after the first course I wanted to quit because I had a nightmare that night and it shook me up a lot. A friend of mine told me that I couldn't form an opinion after just one course. So, I decided to continue and today I'm very glad I did.

MADI: Ce qui m'a attirée dans la formule du rituel co-créatif, c'est d'abord l'aspect créateur et surtout cette invitation à la transformation.

J'avais cependant quelques préjugés face au mot *rituel* que j'associais facilement à religion ou doctrine, c'est-à-dire une répétition de mots ou gestes, servant à programmer un individu dans le sens d'une croyance ou d'un comportement précis.

MADI: What most appealed to me about the co-created ritual format was the creative aspect as well as the invitation to transformation.

However, I did have some prejudice regarding the word *ritual*, which I tend to associate with religion or doctrine, by which I mean the repetition of words and actions for the purpose of programming an individual in the direction of a precise belief or behaviour.

DÉDÉ: Pour moi, c'était la première fois que je vivais cette expérience à [l'organisme]. Au tout début, j'ai eu un peu peur. Toutes sortes de pensées me sont passées dans la tête. J'avais déjà vécu une soirée dans une secte à Montréal et j'ai cru que c'était des moments comme ça que je revivrais. J'ai prié à ce moment pour que Dieu m'éclaire, j'avais tellement eu peur dans cette soirée. À vrai dire, quand je me suis présentée au cours, la seule attente que j'avais, c'était qu'on me fasse du bien, autant pour le corps que pour l'âme.

DÉDÉ: This was the first experience I had at [the agency]. At the very beginning, I was a little afraid. All sorts of thoughts were running through my head. I had already experienced an evening in a sect in Montreal and I thought that this group might be like that. I was so frightened that night that I prayed for God to protect me. Honestly, when I came to the course, the only expectation I had was that it would be good for me, as much in body as in spirit.

2. Qu'est-ce qui vous touche le plus dans le rituel en tant qu'outil de croissance personnelle et de guérison?

GABRIELLE: L'outil qui m'a le plus touchée pour pouvoir poursuivre ma croissance, c'est d'avoir eu la chance de pouvoir s'exprimer et que le groupe ainsi que toi, Dimitra, écoutaient et, parfois, trouvaient des solutions que je ne pouvais moi-même percevoir.

GABRIELLE: The tool I found the most useful for my personal growth was to have the chance to express myself while you and the group listened and sometimes found solutions that I was unable to see for myself.

MADI: Par l'intermédiaire du symbole, j'ai compris que je pouvais orienter le rituel dans la direction qui me concernait au moment où je le vivais.

Je ne sais pas s'il peut à lui seul guérir ou résoudre un conflit interne, mais il permet en tout cas de visualiser une issue, donc d'envisager les difficultés d'une façon plus positive et surtout de retrouver l'espoir.

MADI : Via the intermediary of the symbol, I understood that I could orient ritual in the direction that was most relevant to me in the here and now.

I don't know if this alone can heal or resolve internal conflict, but it does consistently make it possible to visualise an issue, and thus envision difficulties in a more positive and hopeful way.

DÉDÉ: C'est un moyen concret pour me sécuriser, me calmer, me centrer sur moi-même, sentir qu'il y a des gestes qu'on fait ou qu'on ne fait pas dans la vie, et qui pourraient nous faire beaucoup de bien, si on les met en pratique dans notre vie. Je dirais même que, maintenant, je ne pourrais vivre sans rituel. Comme notre rencontre va me manquer.

DÉDÉ: It's a concrete way for me to feel safe, to calm myself, to center on myself, to feel that there are things we do or don't do in life that could do us a lot of good if we put them into practice. I would even say that now I couldn't live without ritual. Oh, how I am going to miss our meetings.

3. Quels sont les thèmes de notre travail qui ont été les plus importants?

GABRIELLE: Les thèmes qui pour moi étaient les plus importants : le partage, faire son deuil, projeter notre personne dans le miroir, et aussi j'ai eu beaucoup de plaisir à monter un bonhomme soleil, avec des instruments de musique et un ballon d'exercice jaune. Le thème du miroir m'a appris à me regarder en face et à savoir m'accepter, ce qui est encore dur, mais j'y travaille beaucoup. Le bonhomme soleil, lui, m'a fait réaliser que je n'avais plus beaucoup de plaisir et qu'à 40 ans, j'ai le droit encore de lâcher mon fou et de m'amuser, et qu'il n'y a pas d'âge pour se laisser aller et sortir son enfant intérieur. Le ballon, on s'en est servi pour faire la tête, qui représentait le soleil, mais pour moi cela représentait la lumière au bout du tunnel. Plus précisément, qu'il y a toujours une solution à tout problème. Il y a aussi le partage qui répond beaucoup à mon attente parce que c'est merveilleux de pouvoir dire que l'on échange avec quelqu'un, pas seulement côté matériel mais aussi il y a le partage émotionnel, c'est-à-dire de se confier des choses personnelles. Lorsque quelqu'un partage avec une autre personne des choses très personnelles, c'est que cette personne a très confiance en nous et c'est très valorisant.

GABRIELLE: The themes that were most important for me: sharing, grieving, projecting ourselves into the mirror, and I also had a lot of fun making the Sunman [as opposed to a snowman] with musical instruments, and a yellow exercise ball. The theme of the mirror taught me to look myself in the face and know how to accept myself, something that is still hard for me, but I'm working on it a lot. The Sunman made me realize that I didn't have much pleasure in my life and, at 40, I still have the right to let myself go and have fun, and that it's never too late to let go and bring out your inner child. The ball we used to make the head represented the sun, but for me it also represented the light at the end of the tunnel. More precisely, that every problem has a solution. The sharing also really responded to my needs because it's marvellous to be able to say that we participate in an exchange with someone, not just on a material level, but that there is also an emotional sharing, that we confide personal things. When someone confides something very personal, it's a sign that they have great trust in us and that is very validating.

MADI: La solitude (note « décrochée »)

La confrontation avec les Monstres intérieurs ou les Énergies négatives d'auto-destruction

Le DEUIL (ses différents processus)

L'ARBRE de vie, incluant le Jardin.

MADI: Loneliness (the "disconnected" note)

Confronting inner monsters or negative Energies of self-destruction

GRIEF (and its different processes)

THE TREE of life, including the Garden

DÉDÉ: Le thème, créatif et vivifiant, de « l'arbre de vie ».

Utiliser un instrument comme si c'était une « personne » m'a appris qu'il est bon, merveilleux, de tirer de soi-même des émotions telles que la colère, la peine, la joie, la vie, la mort et d'être capable par la suite de s'en servir directement dans notre vie de tous les jours, sans avoir peur de le montrer et de le dire à notre entourage.

DÉDÉ: The creative and vibrant theme of "the tree of life".

Using an instrument as though it were a 'person' taught me that it is good, marvelous, to draw feelings out of oneself, such as anger, pain, joy, life, and death and to be capable afterwards to use them directly in our everyday life, without fear of showing them and talking about them with those around us.

4. Comment le fait de vivre ces thèmes à l'intérieur du processus rituel vous a aidée dans votre vie de tous les jours?

GABRIELLE: Et le deuil. Que dire du deuil ? Pour moi, le deuil c'était simplement la mort, la perte de quelqu'un. Mais j'ai appris que ce n'est pas seulement cela. J'ai appris au cours du rituel que le deuil peut aussi bien être une séparation, aussi se défaire des choses néfastes qui peuvent nous rendre malade et nuire à notre cheminement. Moi qui crois qu'il y a un Être suprême là-haut, je me dis que ce n'est pas pour rien que je me suis retrouvée au cours de rituel.

GABRIELLE: And grief. What to say about grief? For me, grief was only about death, the loss of someone. But I have learned that it isn't just that. I've learned in the ritual course that grief can just as easily be a separation, also the undoing of nasty things that can make us sick and interfere with our progress. I believe there is

a Supreme Being up there, and I know that it isn't just coincidence that I found myself in this ritual course.

MADI: Les processus de rituel m'ont aidée à me REbrancher à mes vraies valeurs. Ils ont renforcé ma conviction que la dimension symbolique est indispensable à une démarche approfondie de croissance personnelle.

MADI: The ritual processes have helped me to reconnect to my real values. They have reinforced my conviction that the symbolic dimension is indispensable for deep personal growth work.

DÉDÉ: J'avais peur d'avoir oublier que je pouvais « jouer », m'amuser, rire, pleurer, d'être silencieuse ou attentive à l'autre. Mais tout cela m'est revenu tranquillement et j'ai compris que la petite « Dédé », qui avait peu joué durant son enfance, était encore capable de le faire. Maintenant, chez moi, je tiens à prendre quelques moments dans la journée pour m'amuser, rire de moi, faire un peu la folle du logis.

DÉDÉ: I was afraid that I had forgotten that I could "play", have fun, laugh, cry, be silent or attentive to another. But all this came back to me slowly and I understood that "little Dédé", who played very little during her childhood, was still able to do it. Now, at home, I make sure that I take a few moments a day to have fun, laugh at myself, and play the fool.

5. L'aspect spirituel ou sacré a-t-il joué un rôle significatif dans ce processus? Si oui, comment?

GABRIELLE: Oui, cela a été un bienfait pour moi, parce que, lorsque nous faisons des prières, que ce soit mes copines ou moi, cela venait beaucoup me chercher en dedans de moi. Dans le futur, je m'en servirai comme outil dans mon évolution personnelle.

GABRIELLE: Yes, that was a benefit for me because, when we said prayers, be it my friends or myself, it moved me. In the future, I will use this as a tool in my personal growth.

MADI: À chaque séance, l'aspect sacré se retrouvait dans le rituel d'introduction :

- Le fait d'allumer les bougies nous facilitait une connexion avec l'Essence de notre Être, donc avec une Énergie Universelle.
- Aussi, la consigne d'exprimer mon émotion ou mon désir du moment dans un seul MOT me motivait à être à l'écoute de moi avant d'arriver à la séance, parfois même la veille. Ainsi, je pouvais vérifier que j'étais moi-même et avec l'Univers.

MADI: In every session, we could find a sacred aspect in the opening ritual :

- Lighting candles facilitated a connection with the Essence of our Being, thus also with a Universal Energy.
- Also, the exercise of expressing my feelings or desires of the moment in a single WORD motivated me to listen to myself before I arrived at the session,

sometimes even the night before. As a result, I could verify that I was connected to myself and the Universe.

DÉDÉ: Oh oui ! Parce que je suis une personne « spirituel » qui croit à un Être supérieur, qui croit à la vie, même la plus petite qui soit. Je crois à la nature qui libère, à l'eau qui nettoie, à la nourriture qui nourrit, même celle de l'intérieur.

DÉDÉ: Oh yes! Because I am a "spiritual" person who believes in a Higher Power, who believes in life, no matter how small. I believe in nature that liberates, water that cleanses, food that nourishes the body, but also the soul.

6. L'espace dans lequel nous avons tenu nos rituels et la manière dont nous l'avons utilisé, revendiqué ou créé, cet espace a-t-il eu une part importante dans votre expérience? Si oui, comment?

GABRIELLE: L'espace pour le cours de rituel me convenait beaucoup. À l'instant où je posais le pied dans cet endroit, je ressentais le calme, la paix, j'oubliais tout de l'extérieur pendant ces deux heures passées ensemble. Cet espace me servait d'endroit de recueillement.

GABRIELLE: The space we used for the ritual course worked very well for me. The moment I stepped into the room, I felt calmness and peace, I forgot everything outside for the two hours we spent together. This space was somewhere that I could gather myself and my thoughts.

MADI: J'ai apprécié la disposition des coussins (ou bancs) en cercle dans la pièce, avec les bougies au centre. Cela favorisait sûrement mon besoin de bien me concentrer.

Déjà en entrant, je me sentais bien accueillie et vivais un sentiment d'appartenance, du fait que ma place m'attendait parmi les autres.

J'ai remarqué que nous avons parfois utilisé peu d'espace et peu d'objets, d'autres fois, tout l'espace avec plusieurs des objets ou instruments de musique disponibles, selon que l'énergie du groupe se concentrait sur les confidences avec atmosphère plus intime ou sur la nécessité de mettre en action des émotions plus dynamiques.

C'était sans doute très utile aussi de séparer parfois la salle en deux parties pour que l'on sente bien l'AVANT et l'APRÈS, c'est-à-dire le Passage ou la Transformation d'un état souffrant à un autre plus satisfaisant.

MADI: I appreciated the arrangement of the cushions (or benches) in a circle with the candles in the middle. This solidly supported my need to concentrate.

As soon as I entered, I felt well received and experienced a sense of belonging to see that my place was waiting for me among the others.

I noticed that sometimes we used little space and few objects, and other times, we used all the space and many of the objects and musical instruments available, depending on whether the energy of the group was concentrated on confidences with a more intimate atmosphere or on the need to bring more dynamic emotions into action.

Without a doubt it was very helpful to be able at times to separate the room into two parts in order to truly feel the BEFORE and AFTER, that is to say the Passage or the Transformation from a state in which we were suffering to another that was more satisfying.

DÉDÉ: Oui, parce qu'il m'a délivrée de la peur, de la maladie, de la mort. Nous sommes sur la Terre pour vivre des expériences, bonnes ou mauvaises, pour évoluer et comprendre la Vie, dans le sens le plus large.

DÉDÉ: Yes, because it delivered me from fear, from sickness, from death. We are on Earth to have certain experiences, good or bad, to evolve and understand Life in the largest sense.

7. À différents moments, nous avons utilisé le silence, la musique, l'art et le mouvement pour nos rituels, ensemble. Quelle importance ces éléments ont-ils eue dans votre expérience? Votre expérience aurait-elle manqué quelque chose d'essentiel sans eux?

GABRIELLE: Pour moi, si la musique et l'art en mouvement n'avaient pas fait partie du cours, il est certain que quelque chose aurait manqué. La musique a été un objet de défoulement. L'art en mouvement m'a aidée à m'exprimer, à faire des sons avec ma bouche, ce dont j'avais tellement de difficulté à faire avant. C'est grâce au cours de rituel que j'ai appris à sortir mes émotions, que ce soit la peine, la colère, le rire ou le cri ; j'ai appris beaucoup.

GABRIELLE: Certainly something would have been missing for me if the music and the art-in-movement had not been part of the course. The music was a vehicle for release. The art-in-movement helped me to express myself, to make sounds with my mouth, something I had so much difficulty doing before. It's thanks to this ritual course that I learned to get my emotions out, be it pain, anger, laughter or a scream; I have learned a lot.

MADI: Tous les moyens d'expression ont été importants pour moi. Plus j'avais l'opportunité de créer et d'inventer un monde à ma façon, plus je me valorisais, me libérais et me renforçais intérieurement. Cependant, j'aurais aimé expérimenter davantage l'expression corporelle, c'est-à-dire improviser un long rituel, dans un grand silence.

MADI: All the means of expression were important for me. The more I had the opportunity to create and invent a world in my own way, the more I validated myself, freed myself and reinforced myself inside. Still, I would have liked to have experimented more with using the body as a mode of expression, more specifically, to have improvised a long ritual in complete silence.

DÉDÉ: Cela m'a apporté un bien-être immense. Ta voix m'a ravie, tes gestes doux, tes paroles qui me faisaient comprendre mes peurs intérieures et me permettaient de les éloigner pour le temps de quelques heures. Quelle merveille ! Nous formions un groupe extraordinaire, chacune de nous se donnait le droit d'être « elle-même ». Enfin, avoir le droit de vivre, sans masque, toutes mes émotions.

DÉDÉ: This has brought me an immense sense of well-being. Your voice enchanted me, your tender gestures, your words that brought me to understand my inner fears and permitted me to distance myself from them for the space of a few hours. What a wonder! We have formed an extraordinary group, each of us gave herself permission to be "herself". To finally have the right to live all of my emotions without masks.

8. D'après vous, quels sont les éléments les plus importants qui ont contribué au succès de cette expérience? Y a-t-il quelque chose que vous auriez changé?

GABRIELLE: L'élément le plus important qui a été un succès face au cours, je crois que c'est le respect de l'une envers l'autre. Savoir écouter et la compréhension de ce que l'on disait, sans se renoter quoi que ce soit.

Moi je trouve que tout s'est très bien déroulé. C'est sûr que j'aurais aimé que les cours durent plus de deux heures. Cela a tellement passé vite.

GABRIELLE: The most important and successful element of the course was the respect we had for each other. To know that we would listen to each other and be understood without having to explain ourselves no matter what.

I think that everything went very well. I definitely would have liked for the sessions to last more than two hours. It really went fast.

MADI: Plusieurs éléments ont contribué à l'implication et à l'enthousiasme du groupe:

- Les objets symboliques mis à notre disposition, de même que les instruments de musique déjà disponibles, en particulier le « conga », qui a pris une signification particulière.
- La générosité exceptionnelle de Dimitra, faite de disponibilité, de respect, d'ouverture et, surtout, d'une rare souplesse, car pouvant s'ajuster rapidement et avec aisance à toutes les situations. Sa seule présence créait donc un climat de confiance et de totale liberté.
- Aussi, j'ai senti dès le début, chez mes compagnes, beaucoup de courage, de simplicité et d'authenticité. Les témoignages, la grande écoute et l'originalité de chacune ont renforcé et stimulé à la fois notre solidarité et notre facilité graduelle à s'exprimer dans le groupe.

Ce que j'aurais changé :

- J'aurais proposé plus tôt, soit après 4 ou 5 séances (le temps de se connaître) que nous trouvions un THÈME commun, à travailler un peu chaque semaine, dans le sens d'un projet à construire ensemble.

Je crois profondément que ce thème (à l'exemple du « Jardin ») est nécessaire pour se donner une sorte de contenant (structure) aussi vaste que possible, dans le but de recevoir le plus de contenus possibles. Ceci pour éviter les temps morts du début ou les pannes d'inspiration, mais surtout pour vérifier et développer notre capacité à DÉfaire pour mieux REfaire ce qui fut jadis MAL fait à la base.

MADI: Several elements contributed to the involvement and enthusiasm of the group:

- The symbolic objects made available to us, as well as the musical instruments already there, particularly the conga, which took on a specific meaning.

- Dimitra's exceptional generosity, availability, respect, openness and above all her unusual flexibility that permitted her to quickly and easily adjust to any situation. In this way, her presence alone created a climate of trust and complete freedom.
- Also, from the very beginning, I felt from my companions a lot of courage, simplicity and authenticity. The sharing of our stories, the sincere listening and the originality of each of us both created and reinforced our solidarity and our gradually growing ease with expressing ourselves in the group.

What I would have changed:

- I would have suggested that we find a common THEME sooner, after four or five sessions (enough time to get to know each other) so that we could work a little each week toward constructing a project together.

I strongly believe that this theme (the « garden » for example) is necessary in order to provide a container (structure) as broad as possible, for the purpose of receiving the most contents possible. This would avoid the dead time in the beginning and the moments lacking in inspiration, but most importantly, it would establish and develop our ability to UNdo in order to better REdo what was BADLY done in the first place.

DÉDÉ: Tout est essentiel dans ce processus rituel :

- a) si on ne comprend pas par la parole nos difficultés de vivre, la musique ou le silence, même le mouvement nous oblige, si on veut être « vrai », à accepter nos limites, mais tout en comprenant qu'il est préférable de faire des efforts pour se dépasser.
- b) si on ne comprend absolument rien (!) pas seulement une seule seconde de toutes ces semaines passées à se connaître et à connaître et accepter l'autre personne à côté de nous.

DÉDÉ: Everything in this ritual process is essential :

- a) if we don't understand the difficulties of our lives by the words alone, the music or the silence, or even the movement requires us, if we want to be "real", to accept our limits, all the while understanding that it's preferable to work toward surmounting them.
- b) if we understand absolutely nothing else (!) every second of these weeks spent getting to know each other and to know and accept the other person beside us was essential.

9. À partir de cette expérience, y a-t-il quelque chose que vous garderez à l'intérieur de vous et qui continuera à vous aider de quelque manière que ce soit, même si l'expérience avec le groupe est terminée?

GABRIELLE: Et pour terminer, oui, c'est sûr que ces moments passés ensemble resteront toujours dans mon cœur et ma mémoire. Nous formions tellement un beau groupe. Même si le groupe est terminé, je vais poursuivre et mettre en pratique les choses que nous avons apprises. J'ai appris à me connaître, pas complètement

encore, mais je crois avoir un bon bout de chemin de fait. Je suis maintenant capable de sortir mes émotions ailleurs que cachée dans la maison. J'ai appris aussi que je ne suis pas la seule à vivre des choses et que c'est possible avec les outils que tu nous as donnés et le travail sur nous-mêmes, qu'il est possible de vivre de belles choses.

GABRIELLE: And finally, yes, of course these moments we have spent together will always be in my heart and in my memory. We really made a beautiful group. Even if the group is over, I am going to continue putting into practice the things we have learned. I have learned to know myself, not completely yet but I think I'm well on my way. Now I am able to experience and express my feelings without having to be hidden at home. I have also learned that I'm not the only one to have experienced things and that, with the tools that you have given us and the work we've done on ourselves, it's possible to experience beautiful things.

MADI: (Réponses à 9 et 10)- Je garderai bien sûr beaucoup de cette expérience :

- Premièrement, je veux garder en mémoire le symbole du « Magicien » (), comme un guide pour m'aider à traverser la prochaine étape, soit briser ma cage faite de colère et de peur, pour libérer finalement le « SON du cœur » (la note FA).
- Ensuite, je n'oublierai pas que nous avons parfois réussi à créer une ambiance de magie, empreinte de mystères. Une sorte d'énergie lumineuse s'en dégageait, nous donnant accès à des grandes vérités. Cela m'a donné le goût d'une continuité en recréant régulièrement un univers symbolique qui pourra répondre à mes besoins psychologiques et spirituels du moment.
- Aussi, j'ai compris davantage ce qu'est la vraie tolérance, celle d'accueillir et respecter les différences.
- En fait, ce cours m'a fait un bien immense, en me donnant l'occasion enfin de partager une expérience déjà commencée. Car ce que nous avons vécu ensemble confirme ma croyance au pouvoir de la créativité, si on utilise comme outil principal le symbole sous toutes ses formes.
- Je suis davantage convaincue que l'imaginaire symbolique nous permet d'enrichir la réalité de la vraie vie, puisque nous pouvons ainsi développer notre intuition et nous rapprocher de l'être profond que nous sommes.
- J'ai appris à mieux me connaître et à percevoir davantage la direction où je dois m'engager pour donner le meilleur de moi dans le monde extérieur.
- Par cette proposition innovatrice du rituel co-créatif, j'ai retrouvé le plaisir du jeu et de l'exploration qui mène à la création. Dans cet univers privilégié de détente et de liberté, toutes les fantaisies étaient permises, donc tout devenait possible, même la certitude d'une guérison éventuelle. Il faut dire que l'ambiance était propice à laisser s'exprimer la petite fille en moi. Ainsi, je me REconnectais à la joie de vivre, que j'avais souvent tendance à oublier en cours de route.
- Ma conclusion – « Jouer » avec les symboles est un outil puissant de transformation.

MADI: (responses 9 & 10) – I will certainly keep a lot from this experience:

- First of all, I want to remember the symbol of the “magicien” [a finger puppet of a dog in a magician’s robes] as a guide to help me to take the next step in breaking my cage of fear and anger in order to finally free the “heart sound” (the note FA).
- Next, I will not forget that at times we were able to create an ambiance of magic, impregnated with mystery. A kind of luminous energy was released, giving us access to greater truths. This gave me a taste of continuity by regularly recreating a symbolic universe that could respond to my psychological and spiritual needs in the moment.
- Also, I learned more about what real tolerance is: to welcome and respect differences.
- In fact, this course has done me immense good by finally giving me the opportunity to share an experience that had already begun within me. Because what we experienced together confirms my belief in the power of creativity when the symbol in all its forms is used as a central tool.
- I am even more convinced that symbolic imagination allows us to enrich the reality of real life so that we can develop our intuition and draw closer to the profound beings that we are.
- I have learned to know myself better and to see more clearly the direction in which I must go in order to give the best of myself in the outside world.
- Through this innovative proposal of co-created ritual, I have rediscovered the joy of play and exploration that leads to creation. In this privileged universe of relaxation and freedom, all our fantasies were allowed so everything became possible, even the certainty of eventual healing. I have to say that the environment was just right for encouraging the little girl in me to express herself. Thus, I reconnected with the joy of life that I have the tendency to forget along the way.

My conclusion - “to play” with symbols is a powerful tool for transformation.

DÉDÉ: Oh oui! Je tiens absolument à aller apprendre à jouer avec un tam-tam ou conga. Je sais maintenant que cet instrument me parle profondément à l’intérieur de moi, fait vibrer chaque cellule de mon corps, mon cœur et mon âme et m’apportera la guérison que je désire tant.

DÉDÉ: Oh Yes! I will definitely go and learn how to play either the tam-tam or the conga. I now know that this instrument speaks deeply to my inner self, it makes every cell of my body, heart and soul vibrate and it will bring me the healing that I long for.

10. Croyances et réflexions sur l'éventuelle utilisation du rituel comme outil thérapeutique à l'avenir.

GABRIELLE: Et c'est avec beaucoup de chagrin que je termine en te disant, Dimitra, que cela a été un plaisir immense de travailler avec toi, sur mon Moi. Tu nous as donné de très bons outils pour poursuivre notre cheminement et c'est maintenant à moi de savoir m'en servir pour le futur. Tu as été un modèle pour moi, tu étais là pour moi lorsque j'avais un besoin de pleurer, tu me prêtais ton épaule, et cela je ne l'oublierai jamais et je t'en remercie des millions de fois! Tu as fait cela comme une professionnelle.

GABRIELLE: It is with much sadness that I finish by telling you, Dimitra, that it has been an immense pleasure to work on my Self with you. You have given us very good tools for continuing our progress and now it's up to me to know how to use them in the future. You were a model for me, you were there for me when I needed to cry, you lent me your shoulder, and this I will never forget, a million thanks! You were very professional.

MADI: Voir 9.

MADI: See 9.

DÉDÉ: Je ne pourrai jamais oublier les moments de tendresse, de confiance, de liberté que j'ai ressentis dans ce groupe. Quelles belles personnes nous étions, pour être capables d'être nous-mêmes. Je ne pourrai oublier l'immense travail de Madi à vouloir se connaître, le fou rire et les pleurs de Gabrielle, les peurs qu'elle a vaincues, semaine après semaine, un pas après l'autre. La présence de Dimitra, cette faculté d'être là au bon moment pour nous aider dans notre évolution. Et moi-même avec mes carences, mes faiblesses, mais aussi l'amour que je voulais tant vous transmettre, dans votre cœur et dans le mien, quand je vous voyais changer chaque semaine vers le meilleur. Dimitra, je crois à ton travail, je crois à ce rituel. Ne te laisse jamais croire le contraire. Va aider les gens malades physiquement et mentalement avec ton processus d'outil de croissance. Cela est VRAI du commencement à la fin. Nous ne pouvons tricher avec ce processus de travail.

DÉDÉ: I could never forget the moments of tenderness, trust and freedom that I felt in this group. What beautiful people we were to be able to be ourselves. I could never forget Madi's tremendous work and desire to know herself, Gabrielle's crazy laughter and her tears, the fears she overcame week after week, one step at a time. Dimitra's presence, her ability to be there at the right moment to help us in our evolution. And myself with my deficiencies, my weaknesses, but also with the love that I wanted to be able to give to all of you, in your hearts and in mine, as I watched you change for the better every week. Dimitra, I believe in your work, I believe in this ritual. Don't ever let yourself believe otherwise. Go help people who are ill physically and mentally with your process for growth. It's REAL from beginning to end. We can't cheat with this way of working.