

A New Role for Psychodramatists: Master of Ceremonies

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ABSTRACT. There is new interest in creating or revitalizing rituals and ceremonies in life as well as in therapy or group processes. Because of their training and knowledge, psychodramatists are well prepared for using their skills in the emerging social role of master of ceremonies. Morenean principles can be adapted to the challenge of structuring memorable ceremonies.

Key words: ceremonies, drama therapy, psychodrama rituals

A TREND TOWARD REVITALIZING CEREMONIES AND RITUALS, and even creating new ones, is emerging. In *The Re-Enchantment of Everyday Life*, Moore (1996) alluded to the value of attending to ways of deepening life experiences. Drama therapists know that creating rituals is a way to close or express certain transformational processes (Blatner, 1994). Some drama therapists already function as consultants and officiants to those who want to construct or conduct a meaningful ritual. In addition, in a number of books, authors describe this endeavor (Beck & Metrick, 1990; Bizou, 1999; Cahill & Halpern, 1992; Imber-Black & Roberts, 1992; Metrick, 1994; Roberts, 1999; Wall & Ferguson, 1998; Williamson & Williamson, 1994).

Traditionally, facilitators of celebrations and rituals are generally drawn from the clergy or those recognized as toastmasters. Some contemporary ceremonies now use the disc jockey in the role. Because many people do not believe in the doctrines of a particular denomination, the role of the clergy for many major life transitions is correspondingly limited. Moreover, most clergy lack some of the required skills for facilitating ceremonies.

The challenge of making contemporary ceremonies more relevant and effective involves the weaving together of a number of elements of psychology and

drama and some knowledge of philosophy, symbolism, and spirituality. The aim is to help the participants to feel optimally included and to experience more fully the meaning of the occasion. Psychodramatists are prepared to move toward the master of ceremonies role (henceforth referred to as MC) because they have training in the areas of group dynamics, psychology, and also a measure of dramaturgy. They also know the value of spontaneity and style.

Creating more meaningful rituals is quite compatible with Moreno's ideal of sociatry in which psychodramatic methods serve to develop group cohesion and deeper insights in nonclinical contexts, including everyday life (Blatner, 1985b). Furthermore, there is a need to help people sense more meaning and inclusion when at weddings, funerals, and other rites of passage. Too often people who attend such events complain later that the ritual was dry and that they felt unconnected. To ensure more positive response from those attending the ceremony, I believe that Morenean principles might be adapted to the challenge of enlivening ceremonies (Blatner, 1985a).

The role of MC, as I envision it, is more than that of a toastmaster or an experienced public speaker. Part of the role involves helping to design the ritual, keeping in mind the need for involvement of as many key people as possible and the hunger to feel deeper meaning. Those issues require the MC to interview the key participants, almost like a psychotherapist, and draw out the significance of various themes and symbols. If the event is a wedding, for example, the MC ideally meets in advance with the key participants and helps them in the planning, bringing together a sense of drama, knowledge of the potentials of surplus reality, a sensitivity to sociometry, and awareness of group dynamics to formulate a ceremony that is most meaningful to the key players and optimally inclusive of the feelings of most of those attending.

In this period of cultural transition, when many of the older generation still cling to traditional forms, creativity is required to balance respect for the need for structure and the need for feelings of relevance and maximal inclusiveness. One way to achieve cohesion is to conduct a preliminary sociodrama—an experimental group process—with a number of the key players, in which they talk about the issues involved. As they improvise, they decide to keep certain elements and let go of those that are less successful, distracting, or easily misunderstood. The sociodrama is similar to an early run-through of the rehearsal process in traditional theater, when staging and characterization are worked out and the playwright is actively rewriting the script.

Creating Celebrations

Celebrations mark the role transitions in our lives that generally evoke the validation of our social networks: birthdays, weddings, confirmations, anniversaries, graduations, and so forth. Serious issues may be included,

because the goal is not so much frivolity as it is the more meaningful experiencing of the transition. Thus, welcoming a newborn infant at a christening or saying goodbye to a deceased relative at a funeral are types of celebrations in the larger sense of the word.

Principles from the field of drama can be applied to helping make the special events of our lives more involving and meaningful. Techniques that dramatize an event render it more vivid. When the drama techniques are applied to a collective activity, the occasion attains a degree of social communion because the participants share unconscious as well as conscious mythic images and aspirations.

In considering the art of making the various celebrations of life more meaningful and enjoyable, MCs can view themselves in the combined role elements of producer, choreographer, and set-designer. For success at producing the celebration, the MC needs to recapture the imaginativeness of childhood play, in which children naturally add to their role performance background music, sound effects, voice over (or asides), and other dramatic devices (Blatner, 2000).

Making Occasions More Vivid

One way of developing the MC role is to remember past ceremonies and note what was most effective or counterproductive. It is prudent to keep a notebook to record successful plans. Some principles that may be helpful in planning events follow:

Shifting the Pacing. The MC suggests that parts of the ritual allow for more exciting activities, perhaps involving more vigorous physical movement, and that other parts of the ritual allow the participants to slow down, perhaps to close their eyes, so that they figuratively soak up the atmosphere. The MC may weave in periods of quiet that allow for contemplation, meditation, or fantasy, and counter tendencies for people feeling rushed.

Musical Accompaniment. The MC considers the impact of melody, rhythm, and pace of songs or instrumental pieces that are to be played at various points in the ceremony. The selections can be dramatic and full of meaning. For example, at the funerals of the Black community in New Orleans, hired bands once played dirges on the way to the cemetery and lively jazz spirituals on the way back. The choice of music marked the sadness of missing the one who had died and the vigorous affirmation of faith that life hereafter is worthy of celebration.

Formal and Informal Activities. The MC plans the event so that there are informal interactions as well as more formal activities. A certain amount of structure makes people more comfortable, but if there is too much, the event seems artificial. During the informal periods of an event, it is easy for partic-

ipants to move about freely and make contact with others. It helps to shift between a focus on activities that are collective in nature and activities that involve only one or a few individuals with the rest of the group becoming the audience. The collective activities increase the sense of camaraderie and group cohesion, and the individual activities allow for personal modifications of the experience.

Validating the Participants. Because in many of today's traditional events key people often feel overlooked, the MC strives to have the primary participants to feel recognized. Audience members may be asked to stand and speak briefly or be recognized for some contribution, such as for coming a long distance or bringing a weak or sickly relative. Those who helped with preparations or made a special gift may be similarly acknowledged.

Contributions. For some celebrations, the theme of participation is highlighted. The MC may suggest that the invitations include a request to bring something to share—a poem, song, dance, story, a symbolic item to add to the decorations, a relevant thought, a toast, or some food. Those contributions help the attendees to warm-up to the event as they plan their own contribution to the ceremony.

Gifts. The MC seeks to bridge traditional expectations with ways of making the process easier and more meaningful for guest and key participants. Depending on the ceremony, the opening and the celebration of the meaning of the gifts may be a dramatic element in helping those who have prepared them to feel recognized and appreciated. For some ceremonies, opening gifts can highlight a core element.

Economic Issues. It is wise to consider the economic realities of those putting on the program and those invited. That includes the economics of time, distance, and energy expenditure. In these days of busy lives, the MC recognizes that the efforts that involve costumes or other physical arrangements can be formidable. For example, a location, although romantic or inspirational, may also be unaffordable or physically inaccessible for some significant attendees and is therefore ruled out of the plans.

Cultivating Receptivity. The MC helps the participants in a celebration savor the experience by orchestrating the variables of time, space, and ambiance. The pacing of the event may be leisurely, and the lighting or setting allows the sensations time to register in consciousness as deeply as possible. Whether the experience be an ideal picnic or a romantic or elegant dinner party, the warming-up phases of vigorous, excited, cooperative preparation results in later quiet moments with a sense of contrast.

In a way, all engrossing activities and celebrations involve a certain amount of mild group hypnosis. An MC considers that in planning the elements of the occasion so that the participants begin to focus their attention on the deeper meanings for themselves and for the others. For example, having the group

stand in a circle holding hands helps to promote an awareness that everyone is together in that present moment and that they are especially focused on whatever is at the center of the circle—the set table, the couple getting married, or the new baby. Music, singing, dancing, and simple movement enhance the unification of attention.

Using Invocations. The wording used for parts of a ceremony may be structured in advance and designed to stimulate everyone's being alert and receptive to the emotional significance of the event. An invocation mixes the principles of hypnosis and drama. The pacing of speech, tone of voice, and choice of words are such that they effectively evoke the images, memories, and ideas that are most appropriate for the experience. People's inner lives tend to create elaborations and connections under such conditions, and that increases their sense of being personally involved.

The master of ceremonies or participants may be called on to make a speech at certain points in the course of events. Using principles of invocation, what they say can be planned so that it creates a frame of reference for appreciating the symbolism of the ensuing activities. For example, a couple with a special fondness for candlelight and wine can include those in their wedding ceremony. They can light some candles and announce, "Thus do we kindle the light in our hearts, and may the light illuminate our minds so that our mutual understanding grows." Later, continuing in the ritual form of speech, they can toast each other, saying, "May this champagne remind us of the intoxication of love, hope, and good fellowship."

The wording of invocations highlights the uniqueness of the event. At family reunions, it is good to acknowledge the honored guests. By speaking explicitly and naming special guests, the MC helps the children present to experience the event more vividly. Most occasions have some features that can be emphasized in that fashion. Be certain that all speakers can be heard.

Making Affirmations. An extension of the principle of making invocations is the idea of having participants say things directly. Explicit verbal expressions tend to anchor feelings in memory for those speaking and those listening. Specific themes include the following:

- Expressing appreciation and thanksgiving to God, the group, certain individuals
- Calling attention to the beauty of the natural surroundings, the radiant faces of the participants, the works of art, and so forth
- Noting the significance of any symbolic items, art, or actions, such as a piece of clothing or a special object that might have belonged to an ancestor. If the music chosen was or is a favorite piece of a person present or one present only in spirit, the MC's mention of that connection deepens the imaginative involvement for the participants.

- Acknowledging individual contributions, as mentioned before
- Singing songs with a message or reciting poems or brief literary passages
- Affirming positive expectations and intentions. Phrasing the words in almost prayer form helps to emphasize the emotional and spiritual significance of the event. Near the closing of a celebration, the officiant might say, “May we remember the caring and warmth we share now in future times when we feel separate. May we remember that we can participate again and be welcomed again, just as we are together now.”
- Adding dramatic actions to the words, such as in lifting high the ritual objects, or having someone dance or portray something being described.
- Acknowledging hardships, grief, and other negative feelings can make an event more authentic.
- Including phrases, wherever possible, that refer to the process of opening oneself to love, faith, and responsibility. Those values draw out the best from the consciousness of a group.

Including Playfulness. Many ceremonies also benefit from including opportunities for a measure of lightness and spontaneity. Events become too heavy if people are led to take themselves too seriously (Blatner & Blatner, 1997). Many cultures recognize and deal with that phenomenon by including some roles for people who are permitted to be silly, provocative, or irreverent. Those special roles keep a counter theme of humor happening even during important rites of passage or religious rituals. In some cultures, it is the master of ceremonies who has the right to joke with the participants; in other cultures, it is the musicians who have that privilege and responsibility. Such activities need not be disruptive to the seriousness or purposes of most celebrations.

Applying Celebration in the Psychodramatist’s Own Life

Psychodramatists can take this role into the more casual activities of helping to promote the rituals of their own lives, remembering to weave in elements of improvisation and elements of drama. The rituals may be informal experiences in a family setting or theme-oriented events for larger groups. Recognizing that families naturally generate traditions over time, the psychodramatist in the MC role can give family members’ suggestions dramatic emphasis to ensure that their ideas remain part of the emerging ceremony. A design for celebrations may incorporate or figuratively underline something that one of the participants spontaneously initiates.

The MC role accentuates the enterprise of creating more meaningful rituals. The endeavor becomes a topic of conversation in families, as they communicate by e-mail or by phone. Instead of just letting holidays happen, a measure of forethought can be woven in, which becomes a model and lesson

for the younger generation. Traditions that have become tiresome or lifeless can be challenged, re-vitalized, or changed.

New Types of Celebrations

The seasons, at least in the temperate zones, can be occasions for community celebrations (Henes, 1996). Weaving in the psychological meaning of seasons can possibly stimulate some of the following associations:

Spring ceremonies reflect the new beginnings that are occurring in people's lives.

- Summer events honor the fullness of everyone's talents, their forms of productivity, and the excitement of their interests. Participants may prepare and bring something to a show-and-tell program.

- Autumn celebrations are an opportunity for friends and families to review their harvest of the year. It may be a time for thanksgiving, and the group members may define for themselves what they want to acknowledge. It is a time for mellowness and thoughtfulness, in the sense of musing and reflection.

- Mid-winter is a good time to share fellowship. On the coldest days, there is a kind of mercy in a group's sharing with each other in a spirit of friendship and festivity.

Summary

The principles mentioned here may be applied to the process of creating more exciting celebrations and ceremonies. Many of the rites of passage in our culture can thus become more vital and meaningful. Psychodramatists can employ the range of their skills to apply Morenean principles in this untapped and unformed field.

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