



Ritual & Activism

The Alchemy of Social Transformation

Lenore Norrgard

"I think it's important, as spiritual activists, that we use ritual in our work for social transformation" I said when I introduced myself early last year at a Portland-area gathering of Christians, Jews, and spiritual-but-not-religious folks gathered to organize a local branch of the Network of Spiritual Progressives, which had been initiated by Rabbi Michael Lerner.

After the meeting, John, a physicist who had impressed me with his clear thinking and his ardent passion for peacemaking, approached me. "I'm baffled as to why you think we should promote the use of rituals! Where I grew up, rituals are rote and empty practices, based in superstition. Why would political progressives promote such mindless activity?"

His candor, coupled with his passion and willingness to work for profound social transformation, moved me. "Where did you grow up? What were the rituals?" I asked. He looked South Asian, and I imagined a Hindu environment.

"I was raised Catholic in Bombay, India. People there are terribly superstitious, whether Catholic or Hindu, and I've turned my back on those unthinking practices. I am a scientist, we need to promote rational thought and action."

A scientist, a physicist. We should be able to bridge.

"I understand, I think, I grew up with rote rituals too." I told him. "In fact, my father was a pastor. However, today I was talking about something quite different, that I think as a physicist you will find compelling. I'm talking about the use of *intention* to create an energetic field that influences the physical world. This actually is not removed from contemporary physics, at all."

I gave him a copy of a proposal for a shamanic peacemaking ritual across from the White House that my shamanic colleague Myron Eshowsky and I had developed for a Spiritual Activism Conference in Washington, D.C., in several weeks. "I'd be very interested to know what you think of this. In our practice we design rituals according to the specific need at hand."

The next month, Rabbi Lerner adopted our peacemaking ritual to open a pray-in for peace, and we carried it out on May 18th across from the White House. We began by telling the crowd of three hundred that the intention for this ritual was to heal the history of violence in the name of religion, and people nodded, knowingly. We asked them

to form concentric circles, and then to close their eyes and connect with their personal source of spiritual power, whatever it may be.

The Jews, Christians, Buddhists, spiritual-but-not-religious and other folks put their hearts into it, and with song we created a field of resonance, sending it out with a prayer for peace around the world. The higher vibration was palpable.

Several people later told us it was the strongest spiritual experience they had in the four-day conference. Others observed, in the week following the ritual, that for the first time U.S. President Bush and U.K. Prime Minister Blair admitted they may have made some mistakes, in the Middle East, and, after weeks of threatening to nuke Iran, that week U.S. Secretary of State Rice offered talks.

When I got back home, the Northeast Portland Interfaith Peace Group asked if I would lead a ritual for a peace gathering they were holding in Alberta Park, in inner Northeast Portland.

The bombing of Beirut began the night before the event, and as drumming commenced, a crowd of 170 people from around the city gathered, feeling helpless against the violence, and wanting to do something positive.

Among the faces I saw in the gathering crowd was John, the physicist, and I approached him. "I'm surprised to see you here!"

He smiled. "My thinking has changed in the last few months." The mark of a true scientist - intellectually open. "I read your proposal, and I've got involved in a New Thought church. I'm very curious to experience what happens today with this ritual. The scientific method: test and see.

Shortly we formed a large circle, and a Catholic nun welcomed the

Below: after the July 2006 bombing of Beirut, 170 people circle for a shamanic peacemaking ritual in Portland, Oregon

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crowd. A prayer of invocation, and a Lutheran pastor invited people to pair off to talk about how we experience peace, or don't, in our inner Northeast neighborhoods. Then we came back into circle, and I introduced the ritual. "Close your eyes and connect with your personal source of spiritual power, whatever that may be. As we sing, hold an intention of creating a field of peace and harmony within this circle. Then, with our intention, we'll expand the field out to embrace the neighborhood, and the world."

People put their souls into it. The drummers stirred us, and some people danced as they sang. The lead singers articulated a vision of peace and justice and harmony among humans and with the earth, first in our inner Northeast neighborhoods, expanding out into the city, across the U.S., and around the world, while the circle chanted the refrain, 'Peace, Salaam, Shalom'.

Some people sang with their eyes closed, some sang holding hands. After thirty minutes our voices were tired, our spirits uplifted. One man approached me later and said, "I saw a golden spiral of energy rising from the circle, into the heavens. That was one of the most powerful experiences of my life". Others approached the organizers, asking, "Are you going to do more of this? Where do I sign up?"

John emailed me that evening. He wanted to meet. Over dinner he told me the power he'd felt in the ritual, the positive orientation in the midst of war, and we discussed how to make such rituals energetically stronger, and other ways to create true peace on the planet.

I became politically active thirty-five years ago, in my mid teens. I've participated in, and helped organise countless protests, rallies, and marches. I've delivered speeches, led crowds in chanting slogans, confronted officials. I've felt the intense power in political gatherings of people with a common grievance, a common demand.

I also have felt this power wane over the last few decades.

With the waning of power, I've felt progressive movements grow in on themselves, and I've tasted the sourness of dogmatism. While, looking back, I can see that the dogmatism is not new, in fact I helped perpetuate it back in the

day. I also see how bored and restless people have become in these gatherings. Everyone feels the waning of power. And I think it's this frustrating powerlessness that fuels fruitless confrontations with the powers-that-be, that leads to ugly taunting, and leaves people vulnerable to agents provocateurs who would have well-intentioned people carry out destructive acts that discredit the movement and leave it toothless.

In fact, U.S. public demonstrations, rallies and protests now largely resemble the empty, powerless rituals of John's childhood in Bombay; the kind of rote, passive rituals of my father's Protestant church. At marches we all know the steps, the proper protocol. Gather at the appointed hour with banners, buttons and badges, placards and leaflets to voice our support and promote our particular position, our ideology. Listen passively to speakers and musicians for an hour, clapping and cheering when we like what they say, shouting out if we don't. Line up our groups as directed by the event organisers and walk down the permitted march route. People can hardly even get a good chant going while marching any more. Arrive at the destination, listen to some more speakers and musicians. Give donations to cover the cost of the event. Gather our picket signs and go home.

Disempowered, again. Or, at least, not really empowered. Again.

In churches and in rallies, far too often the masses are slated to be passive participants, not to feel or exercise our inherent power, whether as individuals or collectives. In both venues we appeal to greater powers, God or the State, respectively, and our appeals are mediated by experts - clergy, or political organisers. Meanwhile, internally, we hunger to access and to exercise the power we know is there, somewhere: the power of Spirit, and the power of the people.

We hunger to access power, but we have been taught to fear it. This fear of power has created within us a willing passivity, and allows a laziness that results in giving our power away to external authorities, hence disempowering ourselves.

Some of us refuse to fear our inherent power, but don't really know what to do with it, how to channel it in pro-active,



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The lead singers articulated a vision of peace and justice and harmony among humans and with the earth

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constructive ways. Sometimes this leads to adolescent, rebellious acts that ultimately may be destructive. But some seem to feel that destruction is better than not claiming our power at all.

As humans, we share a cellular memory of a time when the power of the collective was joined with the power of Spirit, on behalf of the greater good of all, the greater good of humans and All Our Relations. A time when we knew our power, and when trusted elders taught us to claim and use it in a good way, for ourselves and all of Creation. A tribal time of relative harmony, long ago for those of European or Asian descent, more recent for those of African, Native American or Polynesian descent. A time, a way, that is the birthright, and the responsibility, of us all: the practice of accessing and wielding personal and collective spiritual power.

As we come back to our spiritual selves in this age, we need to regain the ability to access spiritual power for the collective good. These ways are innate to the human spirit, and often break out when we join in spontaneous song and dance. But spontaneous song and dance alone cannot channel the power available to us for the social transformation we crave.

A conscious and living alliance with the compassionate spirits, with the ancestors who bequeathed us the precious gift of life, and with the spirits of the earth and the stars who share life with us every day, is

necessary, essential, to accessing and using power in a wise, intentional way that will benefit the 'seventh generation' and all species. Without the perspective gained from such a living collaboration, without humility before the Great Mystery, our outlook and judgments are constrained by our mortal, human points of view, our personal desires, and our current times, our ideologies.

Through an ongoing dialogue with the compassionate spirits, the ancestors, and the spirits of the earth and stars, we remember our place in the great web of Creation. We learn the right use of our power, what is required of us, and what truly is desirable in these times. We give up our attachment to knowing always what is right, or what needs to happen. We come to know that a penchant to define some people as enemies, whether people on the other side of the world, or those in our own halls of government, is a cultural misconception we can overcome. We experience the truth that every single human, every being, is a precious part of Creation; we remember that achieving harmony through love, tough love though it may sometimes be, is the only way to reweave our connections and heal our world.

Ultimately, we learn how to wield our collective spiritual power for the highest good of all. As an activist for thirty-five years, who has been on the shamanic path for twenty years, and designing and leading rituals for fifteen, I see that joining the political with the spiritual is critical at this juncture: a spiritually informed politics, and a socially engaged spiritual practice, are essential.

Rallies, protests and marches once were effective forms through which masses of people experienced and channeled our collective power to confront the powers of the State and corporations. But the power of these forms has waned, and now they tend to waste valuable energy, leaving those who participate frustrated, while many more stay at home, not wanting to waste our time in a way that feeds into the fragmented 'us versus them' paradigm that poisons our very efforts to heal social ills.

Our times call for the transformation of rallies, protests and marches into massive, intentional, sacred healing rituals,

in which we ally ourselves with all humans, the compassionate spirits, the ancestors, and the spirits of the earth and the stars. Guided by the intention to reweave the web of Creation we humans tore with our industrial-age divorce from the Sacred, our public rituals can make globalisation a spiritual one that brings forth an honouring of all forms of life and human culture.

Come downtown with me. Picture five thousand people along the river, sharing a common intention of bringing healing to ourselves and the earth; raising our vibration and acknowledging the living water as our divine relative, and the river mirroring back our clarity and harmony, rather than the toxicity it mirrors most days. Over time we clean the river and raise the vibration of our city and everything else that river touches.

Imagine ten thousand people surrounding a parliament, town hall, or a newspaper building, with our divine embrace. We shift our 'us versus them' mentality to a 'we and our unity', thereby reminding those within of their own divinity, of our connection with and responsibility to Creation, here and around the world.

I see fifty thousand people ringing the blocks around the Knesset, a hundred thousand circling the Palace of Westminster, with the common intention of being and bringing peace; raising our vibration and embracing those within as a part of the whole, and bringing them into alignment with the sacred, thereby ending the will to war. A hundred thousand people ringing the blocks around the White House, embracing Bush, Cheney, Rice and others as our brothers and sisters, and reminding them of our common humanity with people the world over. They, or enough of their underlings, remember, and the course of history is changed.

Through repeated, focused rituals in which we unite with the compassionate spirits, we once again can access the spiritual power that is our birthright, and channel it to bring forth profound peace through defending and establishing just, loving and sustainable ways of life the world over.

We stop appealing to external powers, and step into our spiritual and political adulthood. Our focus becomes reweaving a world in balance, in harmony, and love.

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