

Women Transforming Feminist Ritual

LISA SCHIRCH

Alors que les mondes académiques et diplomatiques s'en remettent principalement aux formules toutes faites sur la pacification et mettent l'accent sur les efforts sophistiqués utilisés dans les guerres civiles internationales dans l'hémisphère Sud, les femmes de la base de l'Amérique du Nord utilisent le rituel pour bâtir la paix dans un système patriarcal qui engendre la violence.

While the academic and diplomatic worlds rely heavily on verbal forms of peace-building and focus on high level efforts used in civil and international wars in the southern hemisphere, grassroots women in North America employ ritual in the task of building peace in a patriarchal system that perpetrates violence. This tendency contributes to the ongoing denial of the structural and direct forms of violence women and men experience in places like North America. This article explores the ways members of the North American women's movement women use ritual to transform the conflict they experience living in a patriarchal system and details the functions of ritual in the process of peace-building.

Applications to the Field of Peace-Building

Women in other regions of the world have also found sharing in small groups an important form of empowerment for peace-building. In my current work with the West African Network for Peace-Building's Women in Peace-Building project, participants in a capacity-building training programs consistently rate a session called "shedding the weight" highly in comparison to more traditional teaching sessions.¹ The "shedding the weight" session is similar to the North America women's group format. Groups of 20 women in Senegal, Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Liberia gathered in circles with candles and shared the burdens in their lives. West African women experienced and testified to the same transformation and empowerment expressed by women in North America. When women meet together in a ritualized space they can turn their isolated stories of oppression into a common

When women
meet together in a
ritualized space
they can turn
their isolated stories
of oppression
into a common
fabric that
empowers them
to act together for
social change.

fabric that empowers them to act together for social change.

The field of peace-building can draw several significant lessons from feminist ritual. As a peace-building practitioner working in many different contexts, I seek to borrow what I have learned from feminist ritual when working with all groups in conflict. Peace-builders in all parts of the world may encourage and assist people in conflict in creating rituals that serve to empower and affirm their identity, transform their relationships, and empower them to act for change. Depending on the group that I am working with in a conflict, I try to include a variety of rituals both formal and informal, improvised and traditional,

to engage people in different ways of learning and communicating about peace. Participating in the creation of ritual may be empowering for groups, particularly those who have been historically oppressed or excluded from formal ritual making. Since so many conflicts result from perceptions of threatened identity, creating empowering rituals may have profound effects on the conflict behaviour of a group. Ritual can allow a group in conflict to create an "idealized world" that may help people get beyond the anger and frustration that prohibits conflictual relationships from changing.

As a scholar and practitioner in the field of peace-building, I pay particular attention to the role of ritual in conflict. As a member of women's groups that practice ritual, I turned a researcher's eye onto the dynamic of ritual in women's lives in North America and to the use of ritual in other forms of peace-building during a five-year research process from 1994-1999. I interviewed women who participated in women's groups and conducted participant observations on a number of feminist rituals in the U.S. and Canada. This article draws on and summarizes some of that research (Schirch).

History of Women's Use of Ritual

Women have been using ritual in the process of peace-building to create communities that meet everyone's

Patriarchy as Peace-Building

human needs for millennia. Many North American women see themselves as “returning” to women’s historical use of ritual as a form of healing and empowerment dating back to prehistoric times when women and men lived in more egalitarian cultures. Many scholars agree that these older cultures were more egalitarian, cooperative, and peaceful, and that they oriented and ordered their lives through ritual practice (Eisler; Campbell). Feminist scholars prompted the revival of ritual in women’s groups as they documented both the prehistoric egalitarian cultures and the widespread continuity of ritual healing traditions well into the middle ages. Some scholars focused on the witch hunts in medieval Europe to reclaim, rename, and remember what happened in the 300-year time period when between one hundred thousand to as many as nine million European women were killed for being accused of or practicing ritual healing, often referred to as witchcraft (Barstow). Patriarchal governments and Christian institutions cooperated in rooting out and destroying most of the remnants of earth-based, healing religions. Women and some men who continued to practice midwifery and other holistic medicinal services based on an understanding of the mind/body connection and the power of ritual were massacred in the so-called witch-hunts (Matter). Women are reviving ritual today as a form of ongoing resistance against patriarchy and healing for women caught in its web.

Patriarchy as Conflict

Patriarchy is a system that places more value on males and masculine social characteristics than on females and feminine social characteristics. The system of patriarchy set into motion the European witch-hunt that led to the direct deaths of millions of women. Today, many women continue to die from the patriarchal perpetuation and negligence of the massive problem of violence against women in all its forms. Patriarchy places males at the head of their families, elects men to most political offices, and

Many women see themselves as “returning” to women’s historical use of ritual as a form of empowerment dating back to times when women and men lived in more egalitarian cultures.

creates opportunities for men to rise to the tops of most businesses, government agencies, religious institutions, and educational organizations. Patriarchal hierarchy sets up a conflict where many men are granted cultural, social, economic, and political permission to meet their needs at the expense of women’s needs.

Feminism as Peace-Building Paradigm

Feminism provides a paradigm or a set of values for peace-building. While there are many different feminist theories and therefore types of feminists, several principles are held in common. First, feminism emphasizes the importance of sex and gender in the world and highlights the differences between male and female experience. Second, feminism affirms women’s lives, experiences, and their capacity for bringing about social change. Third, feminism critiques and analyzes the many misogynist and sexist faces of patriarchy. Fourth, feminism offers a vision of an egalitarian, cooperative model of relationships where women and men and feminine and masculine characteristics are valued and respected equally.

Women’s Groups and Ritual

“Consciousness-raising groups” became the foundation for the women’s movement and the growth of feminist ideas in North America during the last four decades. Women meet regularly all over North America in unstructured, non-hierarchical groups to share the stories of their everyday lives and to use informal and formal rituals of empowerment to address patriarchal violence. The women’s spirituality movement and a return to using ritual as a form of healing and empowerment became a branch of the larger women’s movement.

Diann Neu of the Women’s Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual (WATER) in Silver Spring, Maryland describes women’s spirituality groups as “springing up like wild flowers” all over North America (190). Anne Kent Rush calls the resurgence of feminist ritual a “ren-

naissance of female spirituality” and sees women’s spirituality groups as “birth centres for social change” (384). The emergence of female-centred spirituality reflects the desire for ideological, social, and cultural change away from patriarchy toward a time when men and women cooperate in the creation of and participation in all aspects of social life.

In her chapter on “Contemporary Feminist Ritual,” cultural theorist Kay Turner claims male control over religious rituals “has been their most profound display of cultural authority and their most direct access to it” (221). Turner sees women’s use of ritual as a powerful symbolic statement of women’s equality.

Asserting the right to ritual as a source of power, vision, and solidarity is the symbolic corollary of equal pay, right of choice, domestic freedom, the establishment of women’s businesses, etc. Successful and enduring change in the status of women will come only through the parallel transformation of symbols and realities. Feminist ritual practice is currently the most important model for symbolic and, therefore, psychic and spiritual change in women. (Turner 222)

Feminist ritual provides support to women who feel the effects of patriarchy in their lives, gives value and legitimacy to women’s experiences by providing new ways of understanding personal problems as women’s problems, and helps women to develop and recognize the power women have to change their lives (Neu 187).

Ritual Functions in Conflict

Rituals can be constructive or destructive for humanity. As powerful social tools, rituals can arouse the emotions of hate and domination over others. Adolph Hitler used rituals to stir his country to kill their neighbours and to march toward war. The power of ritual can, however, also be tapped to build peace.

Scholars from a wide range of disciplines including theology, psychology, anthropology, and political science document the many functions of ritual, particularly in communities experiencing conflict. Ritual can be defined as a symbolic form of communication that takes place in a unique space and aims to either reaffirm or transform relationships. This definition has several elements (Schirch):

- Ritual as a unique space that is set apart from regular,

everyday life by use of special symbols, a special time or place, or a special grouping of people together.

- Ritual as symbolic communication that holds a preference for emotion, symbols and senses rather than verbal modes of communication.
- Ritual affects relationships; either reaffirming the status quo and protecting existing relationships or transforming problematic relationships into a new social order.

Asserting the right to ritual as a source of power, vision, and solidarity is the symbolic corollary of equal pay, right of choice, domestic freedom, the establishment of women’s businesses.

Cultures around the world have used rituals to deal with conflict for a number of reasons. First, ritual forms of symbolic communication make it easier to express difficult, ambiguous, and conflictual messages that cannot be articulated with words. Second, ritual spaces remove people in conflict from the place where conflict itself is taking place and allow them to create an idealized, conflict-free world that they can use to imagine and redesign their everyday lives. Third, ritual can act as a lubricant to relationships, reaffirming or sanctioning healthy relationships and providing a passageway from an old set of conflicted relationships into new, more peaceful ones. An example of

feminist ritual will help put flesh on this theory.

A Case Study: A “Naming, Transforming, and Cleansing” Ritual

A group of university students planned a feminist ritual to mark Women’s History Month and the international “Take Back the Night” yearly campaign to raise awareness of and protest violence against women. The students first showed a group of students a film that described how women are portrayed in music videos. The film argued that music videos show a destructive and one-dimensional type of female sexuality where women are sexually available to all men at any time and women fight other women for the privilege of being with men.

After the film, several students led the group in a three-step ritual to name, transform, and cleanse the participants of the images that defile women. In the first stage of the ritual, the ritual facilitators set the tone for the ritual and announced the ritual space. The student leaders asked participants (mostly women) to “name the sickness, the disease, the hurt, the whatever that this caused you to feel.” Participants took pieces of paper and solemnly wrote down their negative thoughts and reactions.

After a few minutes, the facilitators invited the participants to go outside where they had a fire burning in a trash can in a small garden. Here again, the facilitators had

created a separate, secluded space for the ritual. The ritual leaders announced that participants had entered a space for ridding and transforming the negative thoughts into something positive. The leaders invited participants to put the papers into the fire and share with the group, if they desired, what they were transforming.

As some of the participants in the circle brought their papers to the fire, they shared their “naming” messages with the group.

One of the messages I’ve internalized from this culture’s image of me as a woman is that femininity means being forever a hopeless victim and I want to transform that into a femininity of power, wisdom, and strength.

I want to rid myself of the belief that I personally am not big enough to change it.

I want to burn the idea that beauty is judged by what I wear and what I look like rather than who I am inside.

After all the participants had burned their papers, the facilitators invited the group back inside for the cleansing part of the ritual. The leaders offered bowls and pitchers of water to participants to wash their hands and/or drink water as a symbolic act of cleansing themselves from the negative messages portrayed in the film. Altar tables at the centre held flowers, candles, cups, and bowls of water.

Feminist rituals like this one play important roles in the transformation of patriarchy. The next section explores the ways feminist ritual functions and uses this example as a case study for analysis.

Ritual Space for Women’s Empowerment

In this example of feminist ritual, the facilitators verbally announced that the place where people stood had become a special area, set apart from the video watching and the normal space of everyday life. In each of the three stages of the ritual, they had symbols that marked the space as separate. In the “naming” space, there were candles. In the “transforming” space, there was a larger fire in the centre of the circle. In the “cleansing” space, there were altars with water, flowers, and candles.

“Sacred spaces” have always been created for conducting rituals. Feminist ritual provides a unique example of the ways in which ritual space separates people from normal social structures, time, and space by using the form of a circle and a variety of types of altars and symbols. Some

women use the term “casting a circle” to signify the creation of a ritual space. Elements of the material world, such as fire, earth, water, flowers, and foods are often used as physical symbols of beauty and power to create a focal point in the centre of the circle. These “altars” contribute to the ambiance of a safe, special place set aside from everyday time and space. At the very least, women often bring candles and scarves to transform someone’s living room into ritual space.

Feminist ritual space is a “patriarchy-free” zone. Starhawk notes “ritual can become a free space, a hole torn in the fabric of domination” (98). In feminist ritual, women find a place to value the stories, experiences, and changes in their lives. In order to do this, women need to feel empowered to go against everyday social structure. “In ritual, we create a symbolic space of protection and safety, in which we break the Censor’s dominion and express freely whatever comes” (Starhawk 99).

Feminist ritual is a space for women’s empowerment, a place where women create “a ‘little universe’ within which women try out what they want the macrocosm, the ‘big universe’ or the real world to be” according to

Diane Stein (1991: 2). Creating a women-oriented environment allows women to share stories and break the solitude of living in a world where their voices are often not heard. While patriarchal values and experience prevail “outside the circle,” women’s ritual allows a revisioning of the world and the empowerment of women in conflict with their patriarchal society “inside the circle.”

Learning and Communicating through Ritual

In the “Naming, Transforming and Cleansing” case study participants learned and communicated through their bodies, senses, and emotions. People were encouraged to first write down their emotional responses to the video as an act of personal reflection. Then the participants engaged in the social act of burning the reflections as a way of transforming negative feelings. At the end, people washed their hands and drank water together as a way of symbolizing that they were collectively purified from the damaging images shown before in the video.

Women’s ways of knowing, feeling, communicating, and being are given preference in feminist ritual, making it safe for women to be themselves without fear of scrutiny. In feminist rituals, learning and communication happen through words, symbols, the use of the five senses, expression of emotion, and physical action. Writer and women’s ritualist Z Budapest vividly describes the appeal of ritual

Women’s ways of knowing, feeling, communicating, and being are given preference in feminist ritual, making it safe for women to be themselves without fear of scrutiny.

to the remaining “animal” part in modern humans. She charges women to awaken the pre-verbal “slothwoman” in all of us as we use elements in ritual to arouse all of our senses and engage our whole selves (15-16). Budapest suggests that smells, sounds, movements, and symbols that are pleasing to the eye and touch create awareness and learning in humans in ways that words alone cannot.

Affirmation and Transformation in Women’s Ritual

The ritual case study shared earlier allowed people to feel united with others who had experienced the video images. It affirmed their relationships with each other as human beings. The group also sought to transform the prevailing patriarchal social order that gave birth to media violence against women. Feminist rituals provide an opportunity for women to both affirm and transform relationships.

Feminist rituals offer women a means to transform their identity from an isolated individual, a “victim” of patriarchal society, to an empowered member of a community of women. Peace-building requires collective efforts. When people join together, they are able to empower each other and address the roots of the conflict before them.

Tom Driver describes the transformation of identity that occurs in women’s consciousness-raising groups in his book *The Magic of Ritual*.

The women learned to distinguish between a familiar but deceitful story of their lives easily accepted—nay, fostered—by society, and a more shameful, disorienting, anger-producing, yet more truthful story, the telling of which amounted to the first stage of a conversion. (117)

One woman interviewed for this research noted that feminist rituals

... transform me essentially from someone who is acted upon and in the worst cases a victim, to someone who is autonomous and powerful and who is very much part of the universe and all of its pieces... it transforms my sense of myself.

Another woman articulated her experience in a women’s group as follows:

A lot of us experienced our power being taken away specifically by men. And [it was the] men that we trusted most, so we felt very vulnerable, very powerless. [Ritual] had a profound effect on us, and our sense of selves as powerful.

Another woman told of a ceremony created to transform a woman’s perception of herself as a victim into a survivor of abuse. With a group of friends, she created a

funeral service where she buried a childhood dress, representing her childhood of abuse. She declared herself a “survivor” of abuse in the ritual, and celebrated this new identity with her friends. Feminist rituals are also used to mark and give value to important stages in women’s lives, such as the beginning of menstruation, a pregnancy, a new achievement, or menopause.

While transformation in women’s ritual is centred at the individual level, women are often inspired with their new-found sense of empowerment to change the world around them. Stein describes feminist ritual as a “training ground to end the patriarchy and to learn to work together” (1990: 7).

Power-within grows exponentially and women together set about to right the wrongs of modern civilization.... A group of five such like-minded women then will set out to clean up a stream bed or a park in their neighbourhood; a group of 25 will join a protest march for women’s reproductive rights; a group of a 100 will set up a peace encampment.... (Stein 1991: 3)

Feminist ritual is not designed as a temporary cathartic re-lease of the pressures of patriarchy. It is aimed at lasting change that will affect the lives of the women involved, and hopefully their families, friends, and communities as well.

Conclusion

Peace-builders everywhere can use ritual as a tool for building empowered communities. Peace-building requires the sensuality and symbolic language of ritual. While words and dialogue are important components, eating together, sitting around a fire and drinking traditional herbs, and kneeling in prayer can be moving elements in peace-building programs.

Ritual can be formal or informal, improvised or traditional. In traditional areas of Africa, women and men practice the sacrifice of goats or chickens, for example, as a way of ritually purifying young men who have participated in war and want to reintegrate into their home communities. In other parts of Africa, women improvise rituals for their new roles in formal peace-building. Women meet together, sing, pray, and eat along with their babies and children to create a community of women with a clear voice for peace. Women march in streets together for peace, put up posters calling for an end to violence against women, and accompany women candidates in elections to ensure their safety.

As a peace-building trainer and facilitator, I believe that ritual is an essential part of all peace-building processes. Whether peace-builders are delivering food aid, negotiating a ceasefire, or campaigning for women’s rights, ritual gives peace-builders engaging tools for communi-

cating our hopeful message and implementing our most practical goals.

Lisa Schirch is an Associate Professor of Conflict Studies at the Institute for Justice and Peace-Building at Eastern Mennonite University. She is currently a Fulbright Fellow working across Africa with the West African Network for Peace-Building's Women in Peace-Building program. She is a Canadian and graduated with her BA from the University of Waterloo in Political Science and her Ph.D. from George Mason University.

'The training program was designed by Thelma, Ekiyor, the Coordinator of the Women in Peace-Building Program.

References

- Barstow, Anne Llewellyn. *Witchcraze: A New History of the European Witch Hunts*. London: Pandora, 1994.
- Budapest, Z. "Teaching Women's Spirituality Rituals." *The Goddess Celebrates: An Anthology of Women's Rituals*. Diane Stein, ed. California: The Crossing Press, 1991.
- Campbell, Joseph. *Myths to Live By*. New York: Bantam Books, 1973.
- Driver, Tom Faw. *The Magic of Ritual: Our Need for Liberating Rites That Transform Our Lives and Our Communities*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991.
- Eisler, Riane. *The Chalice and the Blade*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987.
- Matter, E. Ann. "Ecclesiastical Violence: Witches and Heretics." *The Power of Naming: A Concilium Reader in Feminist Liberation Theology*. Rosemary Radford Ruether, ed. New York: Orbis Books, 1996.
- Neu, Diann L. "Women's Empowerment Through Feminist Ritual." *Women and Therapy* 16 (2/3) (1995):
- Rush, Anne Kent. "The Politics of Feminist Spirituality." *The Politics of Women's Spirituality*. Charlene Spretnak, ed. Toronto: Doubleday, 1982.
- Turner, Kay. "Contemporary Feminist Rituals." *The Politics of Women's Spirituality*. Charlene Spretnak, ed. Toronto: Doubleday, 1982.
- Schirch, Lisa. *Setting the Stage for Peace: Ritual Dynamics in Conflict Transformation*. Under review at Oxford Press, 2002.
- Starhawk. *Truth or Dare: Encounters with Power, Authority, and Mystery*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987.
- Stein, Diane. "Introduction." *The Goddess Celebrates: An Anthology of Women's Rituals*. Diane Stein, ed. California: The Crossing Press, 1991.
- Stein, Diane. *Casting the Circle: A Women's Book of Ritual*. California: The Crossing Press, 1990.

ALEXIS EASLEY

To Dorothy Wordsworth

When I stood between those black walls,
peered out the window at your wild garden,
I could imagine how ivy and foxglove
drew you out of yourself and into the rocky
valleys,
walking ten miles per day, Grasmere to
Ambleside,
writing thought in motion.

On your page the lake dazzled
with shifts in light and cloud,
silver moon or damp sun.
Back at the cottage
you mended shirts by lamplight,
then stitched sentences
with thread of beeswax and tallow.

Only later, when you moved
to your brother's house
and wheeled his gravel walks,
did you feel confined.
How did you fall into buttoned up poses,
the maiden aunt, when inside you must have
wandered at ridge-top, words spinning at your
feet?
There would be no one to walk with you,
to see the cataract through your eyes.

It wasn't until last summer,
when I finally walked your path,
trudging through cow gate and muddy field,
that I was able to know what led you
to walk and to write: it was a way
of defeating stillness.

Alexis Easley's poetry appears earlier in this volume.