4. A Transformation in Liturgical Practice

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Meaningful Decoding of the Ancient Heritage

Liturgical practice must never again say "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." "Name," "Father," "Son," and "Holy Ghost" are code words that make little or no sense to the common mind of our era. Anyone who wants to hear that phrase every week is indulging in nostalgia. As far as meaningfulness goes, we might as well say it in Latin. Furthermore, the phrase holds in being a patriarchal emphasis on males that is demeaning to the feminine components of our humanity. In addition the word "Ghost" implies to the modern mind an ethereal substance--a fundamentally misleading image that supports our most maiming superstitions. Even the word "name" is incomprehensible in this context. That leaves us with only "In," "of's." "and's," and "the's."

This phrase can be translated into modern metaphors. There may be hundreds of good ways to do that translation. It is not necessary for us to settle on one of them and expect it to endure for the next thousand years. The triune depiction of the experience of God is an enduring gift of Christianity, but the specific language of the past need not endure. So while it might be meaningful to begin our liturgical practices with a rehearsal of the triune summary, how do we say it? Here is a song some of us frequently use at the beginning of our Christian resurgence circle meetings:

> In the name of the Infinite, the Silent Mystery,
> In the name of those who live in truth and equanimity,
> In the name of the wind of freedom as it blows through me,
> Amen, Amen,
> Hallelujah! Hallelujah!
> In the name of the Silence, the Word, and Liberty.

These words are sung to the tune of "Ghost Riders in the Sky." Three candles sitting on a coffee table in the middle of the living room are lit as this song is being sung by the group.

Singing this song has worked pretty well as a means of establishing that something different is intended for the circle meeting than a mere gathering of friends.

But even this song has its limitations. What does "in the name of " mean? What does "Amen" mean? What does "Hallelujah" mean? What does "Word" mean? Perhaps the rest of the words in this song are capable of being rooted in the context of our times. But even terms like "Silence," "Mystery," "freedom," and "equanimity" have to be illuminated in the study life of the group in order to be reminders of that master context of living we intend to indicate as the context for our meeting.

Why do we need any ritual at all? Ritual, like breathing, is unavoidable. Just sitting in a circle is ritual. Something needs to be said to establish why we have gathered in this circle. If we attend a workshop on toning led by a Native American shaman, we are not surprised to see the teacher do some fooling around at the beginning of the workshop with incense and drums and rattles and stories. If we go to a retreat to learn meditation from Buddhist teachers, we may find them saying little rituals like "I take refuge in the Buddha; I take refuge in the dharma; I take refuge in the sangha." I am struck by how close that litany is to the threefold Christian ascription.

Maybe something like this will work for opening a Christian circle:

We take refuge in the Infinite Silence,
the Source of life and death--Present in all events.
We take refuge in the humanly-lived Ultimate Message
that we are forgiven and welcomed by the Infinite Silence.
We take refuge in the Winds of Awe
blowing freedom, compassion, and equanimity through our lives.

Or perhaps we just light three candles and say:

The Infinite Silence
The Ultimate Message
The Winds of Awe

Whatever we do, language is important. Finding the contemporary metaphors that mean something to us is essential. When we read the Old and New Testament Scripture, we probably need to read it from some competent modern translation. But as we do this, we need to be clear that we are hearing many obsolete metaphors that need to be translated for our modern ears. Even when we are part of an experienced group who has done metaphorical translation frequently, we must never assume that a particular text of Scripture is being understood in an appropriately contemporary manner. Reading Scripture always needs to be followed with some form of careful metaphorical translation for our times.

Organically Derived Group Celebrations

The more carefully we examine our inherited liturgies the more we will ask why our circle groups need any liturgical practice at all. The elemental nature of ritual is indicated by simply noting that something must be done to start a meeting, to structure a meeting, and to conclude a meeting. Whatever is done is liturgical in function. So let us begin by playing with liturgical forms--meaningful details we can repeat week after week. Playfulness is the very essence of liturgy, but ritual playfulness need not be spontaneous in the sense of doing something different every week. Repetition, week after week, can also be done playfully. Repetition serves the function of becoming a reminder: it programs our minds to remember all week long who we essentially are.

One key principle with which to govern our experiments in liturgical playfulness is whole-group participation. We are not looking for an imposed properness. We are not looking for professionally designed correctness. We are looking for meaningfulness and participation by a particular group of living and creative people. Liturgy needs to be organically derived from the lives of real people who are living realistically in this century of planetary history.

One way to promote this organically derived quality is to conduct rounds of group participation in which every person is asked to make creative responses out of their own lives. For example, the meeting leader might ask a question like, "When during this week have you experienced fear over stepping out of your safe boat onto the wavy waters of your life?" There are a million versions of this sort of question. Every line in our songs, every verse in our Scriptures can suggest such a question. The idea is to play with sharing life at some deep level. Here are some more examples of such questions: When have you felt groans too deep for words? When have you experienced the freedom Paul is talking about? When have you walked away from Spirit opportunities because your attachments were too great? Such questions will assist us to dig out of our own lives the concrete material that makes the emergence of good liturgy possible.

Appropriate Acknowledgements of Life Passages

The liturgical practices of every religion in the world have in some way or other focused on major life passages: birth, adulthood, marriage, vocation, death, and others. Becoming 40 years of age has become a significant life passage for many. Becoming 60 years of age is perhaps another. These exact numbers may not be important, but they do indicate real life passages--mid-life reorientation and elderhood appropriation. Each of our significant life-passages cries out for appropriate acknowledgments.

In the Christian tradition baptism has played a dual role. It has celebrated the entry into the community of a new infant. It has celebrated the entry of a self-aware adult into the new life of the body of Christ. We need to cut through the morass of the inherited baptismal practices and recover our clarity about what we are celebrating.

Birth is a significant event not only in the life of the infant but in the life of the entire community who receives that infant. So let us imagine what it would mean to scour from our memory all those superstitions about water sprinkled on the head of an infant magically cleansing it from some sort of pervasive corruption. Let us just focus on the simple idea of welcoming this infant into the human community, into the community of the living on planet earth. Let us ask the plants and the animals to welcome this child. Let us ask the sky and the soil to welcome this child. Let us ask the rivers and the oceans and the sun and the moon and the stars to welcome this child. And yes, let us ask for welcome from the Christian community of which this child's parents and other caring adults are members. Let us ask that Christian community to celebrate the Spirit potentialities of this infant and take responsibility for the possible realization of those potentialities. Herein is a meaningful direction to head in order to make welcoming the birth of an infant an appropriate liturgy.

These same principles can be applied to adulthood, marriage, and death. It is certainly a huge event for a child to take on his or her first roles of adult responsibility. This is something far deeper than instructing impressionable youth in Christian dogma so they can be confirmed as another "informed" member of a Christian denomination. We are talking about adulthood itself. We are talking about the mystery of dying to childhood as a total mode of life and venturing out into self-aware, self-responsible living on behalf of one's own life and all others. We are talking about doing this in the context of being part of the body of Christ. What would be an appropriate celebration of such an overwhelming passage? This is the question we need to pursue. A full answer has yet to be constructed.

And Marriage? Couples are currently being married in churches for no other reason than to please family and friends and do what others do to make a somewhat big deal of this key event. But let us imagine two members of a Christian circle (or network of circles) deciding to marry

and asking that circle to assist them in the celebration of this union as the union of two members of the living body of Christ. To imagine this fully is to imagine a revolution in our thinking about marriage. Christian marriage is a confusing arena because we have for thousands of years thought of marriage in the context of Christendom, in the context of the whole society, the whole village, the whole family, the whole circle of friends. Marriage as a Christian ritual has been almost completely lost in this sea of images rooted in some form of generalized social properness.

Suppose we saw marriage between two members of the body of Christ as an enrichment of their quest to be the body of Christ. In celebrating this passage, what would it mean for us to look for ways to hold up the potentialities of living out the intimacies of family life in a way that created a larger and more effective body for Christ to live in? We are a long way from full clarity on this.

And death? It does not take much awareness to see the vast sickness of the inherited rituals in this arena. The combination of funeral-parlor profits and flying-away-to-heaven theologies have come together into one of the most anti-Christian formulations of ritual on the surface of the planet. In order to break this spell, some radical departures will be required. The key principle needs to be that death is real, an important event in the life not only of the dying person but in the community of persons he or she is leaving. Most Christians today do not actually worship the God of life and death, but some sentimental substitute. So appropriate ritual in this arena will be controversial and challenging to friends and family and society as a whole. Here again, we are a long way from full clarity on how to do this appropriately.

The appropriate acknowledgment of life passages is an important and unavoidable arena for Christian resurgence, but we need not rush ourselves in this arena. Meaningful rituals can only be worked out by real people who are members of deeply committed communities or circles. Furthermore, working out effective guidelines and suggestions for all these celebrations may take decades.

Facilitating Group Thoughtfulness and Study

For right now, our efforts toward liturgical emergence can focus on facilitating honest group thoughtfulness and study. Such study is the very opposite of "manipulating the group mindset." The current congregational structures are set up to "sell" an almost thoughtless group of security seekers into "buying" a brand of doctrines thought best by the ordained "sales team." Laity sometimes say that they want clergy who can make them think, but when clergy actually organize courses in which full-blown thoughtfulness and study are required, most of these same laity opt out. Thoughtfulness and study are hard work. Most Christians today expect all the hard work to be done by their hired hands. Serious covenants of study in theology, ethics, and Christian resurgence are, people often say, "too difficult to fit into our schedules." Not so frequently said, but also true, is that this hard work of study is difficult to fit into our lethargy as thoughtless, spoon-fed recipients of a clergy-dominated comfort system.

In our covenants to be serious Christian resurgence circles, we need to emphasize covenanting to thoughtfulness and wholehearted participatory study. This is the first "liturgy" we must practice in order even to understand what liturgy is. Serious study is the first innovation needed in Christian liturgical transformation. Until up-to-date thoughtfulness becomes the common commitment and capability of the entire body of those claiming to be the body of Christ, the remainder of the transformation in liturgical practice cannot move toward its appropriate enrichments.