

## Lighting the Fire - Tools for Large Public Rituals

By Catherine Pennington © 2001

Published, Feb. 2001 in

*Ritual Today, Journal of Contemporary Ritual Theory and Practice*

I remember years ago hearing the phrase “if you can’t do it with the willow wand you picked up on the side of the road, then you probably can’t do it at all.” My companion in this conversation was referring to ritual invocations and magic and the theory that all the fancy tools and flash paper will do you no good if you have not the talent for the magic in the first place. It occurred to me recently that in the realm of the “Public Ritual, size: Large” the opposite is also true. Without the fancy tools and flash paper, all our talent for magic is just talent, inaccessible to our audience at best, confusing at worst. In the venue of the large public ritual you will be trying to capture, hold and transform the attention of anywhere from 13 – 1300 people. Subtly doesn’t work. Inference doesn’t work. Assumptions will get you kicked off the stage, or at least never invited back. An intricate flourish of your hand may seem like the wise motions of a well-trained ceremonial magician to those 20 people in the first row, but to the 300 people in the last 10 rows, it is nearly invisible and therefore meaningless. The use of flash paper to invoke fire might seem like overkill in a private ritual for a group of 10, but in a large public ritual of 200 it will speak to the symbolic self of nearly all of those in attendance. They will *know* what you mean when you say fire, because you have just defined it for them. The fancy tools and flash paper create a bridge –through symbols and symbolic imagery- that will tie a disparate group of ritual participants together and help create transformation on the personal and global scale.

The University of Victoria's Hypertext Writer's Guide states that, “[g]enerally speaking, a symbol is a sign representing something other than itself.”<sup>i</sup> Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary goes even farther and defines a symbol as “[a] visible sign or representation of an idea; anything which suggests an idea or quality, or another thing, as by resemblance or by convention; an emblem; a representation; a type; a figure; as, the lion is the symbol of courage; the lamb is the symbol of meekness or patience.”<sup>ii</sup> Something is symbolic then when it stands in for something or represents something else. Many symbols have evolved without anyone planning to create them while others have been specifically created to function as representative for some meaning or idea. One example would be the national flag of Japan: a red circle on a rectangular white field. On one level that is all the flag is – a circle of red sewn, painted or woven on to/into a white rectangle that can be made out of any material. But most people understand on some level that this flag means more than the geometric elements it is comprised of. It is said to represent the rising sun, as Japan is called the Land of the Rising Sun. Within the wall of flags that frames the courtyard of the United Nations building in New York City, it is a representation of Japan’s inclusion in the union of nations. The flag’s very existence represents Japan’s own existence in the world of nations. The flag with its red circle on a white rectangle then is a symbol, representing the country of Japan, the rising sun, and, in certain context, a member of the United Nations.

Symbols speak to that part of our consciousness which still thinks in pictures and emotions. This is not the rational brain of everyday that gets you through the maze of work and family and rush hour traffic. This symbolic level of awareness, or Symbolic Self, is the place where memories are accessed, a gateway of triggers and sparks that open emotions, memories and the possibility for

transformation. It is the Symbolic Self that we as ritualists are always trying to reach because it is at the symbolic level that humans make deep and lasting change in themselves and in the world around them. Symbols are vital to ritual work precisely because they hit us on deeply emotional levels, they become embedded within our psyches. Ritualists use this embedding nature of symbols to reach deep into another person's heart and unlock the door to that person's transformational process.

When doing private<sup>iii</sup> ritual the road to the Symbolic Self is through the common or shared experience and language of the group. There are the rituals and techniques that are passed down through time and through the specific group's teachings. Each member of the group has some level of experience with the symbols employed by that group. Even new members, who don't yet understand the language, understand that there **is** a common language and that they will learn it over time. Access to the symbolic has an agreed upon pathway. A member of the group may flub a line while doing an invocation or blessing, but everyone else knows the line as well, and the symbolism will be retained. The fire may refuse to light at summer solstice, but all the members of the group know that it is suppose to, and the apparent recalcitrance of the fire elementals will become part of the shared symbolism of that group.

In most public ritual you cannot assume a shared symbolic language. Your audience<sup>iv</sup> is always going to be mixed bag of people. Some of the people will be known to you, many others will not. Each person who attends will do so for her own reasons. Sometimes they will be your friends who are there to support your efforts, many will be strangers or mere acquaintances. There will be Elders from your community at some rituals; while at others there will be Seekers, those who are curious about the ritual or your traditions, with little to no real experience. There will also be many people between the Elder and the Seeker. At most rituals you will have people with varying degrees of knowledge about the subject matter and methods you are presenting. Some will have come because they are passionate about what you are offering, others because they wished to be entertained. And almost none of those attending will have been privy to the meetings over coffee or the emails you and your associates have been blazing back and forth in an effort to nail down all the loose ends before the day of the ritual. In short, there will rarely be a shared language, a shared tradition, a shared understanding between you and your audience. If you hope to touch the vast majority of your audience you will have to reach them, as you would in private ritual, through the Symbolic Self. Our problem is that in large public ritual the Symbolic Self does not have an "easy" path to be reached through. Instead we must create commonality and shared experience. And we have at the most, two hours to do it in.

This is where illusion and stagecraft come in. In the course of a two hour ritual we cannot spend time "catching" everyone up on our traditions, have them read the cliff notes to the major religious or cultural texts and teach them what colors or tools correspond to what symbolic meaning. It's just not going to happen. What is going to happen is that at the beginning the audience will be a mismatched, un-unified group of individuals each with their own theories and assumptions about what you are going to offer them, and what they in turn will get out of the ritual. While they will, hopefully, not be suspicious of what you are doing, they will also have very few qualms about getting up and walking out if they don't "get it" or if they get confused in the first 20 minutes. If you want to make an impression and add to their transformative process then you are going to have to grab them and hold them tight in those first 20 minutes, or better

yet, the first 10. You simply will not grab their attention by “spelling out” the associative links between fire and the rising sun or the whirling motion of a dancer to the inner cosmos. You are going to have to show them.

“Show don’t tell” is an old writer’s mantra. It means to show your reader or audience what is going on in active terms, rather than spending pages on having a narrator tell us what happened after the fact. Imagine if you will that in *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare had had his Narrator describe the fight between Romeo and Tybalt in Act 3, scene 1 which leads to Tybalt’s death and Romeo’s banishment. A single actor standing on stage talking about how Tybalt said this, and then Romeo said that and then they each pulled out their swords and fenced around for a bit, still saying mean things to each other until finally Romeo killed Tybalt and all hell broke loose. Boring. Instead, Shakespeare gives us the scene in action. We are witnesses to the rage and distrust between these two boys and the confusion which leads to the fight. We are there sharing in Romeo’s horror when he realizes what he has done, who he has killed and what this means for his future. The action is real, it is palpable and it is in your face. This same palpable reality is what is required for our two hours of public ritual time.

Let’s go back to our flash paper for a moment. In a many earth-based spirituality rituals, elemental guardians will be asked to join the ritual and guard the sacred space from outside intrusion. For most people these will be an Eastern Guardian of Air, a Southern Guardian of Fire, a Western Guardian of Water and a Northern Guardian of Earth. Within a private ritual group the association of East with air and so forth will be a well-established fact. Everyone will know what images are associated with East and with Air and what words, sounds, smells, tastes, and Divine forms the group uses to define East and Air. Lighting candles on a table, or a fire in the fireplace will generally be all that is needed to for all the members to understand that the Southern Guardian and the element of fire have been invoked. A common symbolic language exists amongst the members. For a large public ritual we could use a candle, but a single candle, or even a handful of candles is not instantaneously recognizable, or easily seen by a large and diverse audience. To translate the symbolic information used in ritual to large groups of people, we need another source of information, specifically the tools of theater and the craft of the illusionist. To convey fire to a large group we need a magician’s flash paper.

The disciplines of theater and illusionary magic have many tools to offer the Public Ritualist. There is costume, set and prop design and construction. There is the use of music and sound effects to enhance and support the mood of the piece. Using lighting to create an aura of feeling and establish the time of day. Dance and fight choreography can be used to draw the lines of movement and make them distinct as well as safe. To invoke the quarters and elements for a large ritual we need to use tools like flash paper that are large enough and clear enough to connect to the diverse crowd we have in attendance. Imagining an unlimited budget for a moment, we might use stage lights to create a sunrise and wind machines to simulate a spring breeze for Air and East. For West and Water we might consider using a wall of linked video screens with video imagery of an ocean and misters sending out cool drops of water from above the audience. For North and Earth we could have a group of drummers bounding as hard as possible on wide, deep toned drums to create the sound of an earthquake or the rumble of a mountain as rocks shift.

Perhaps the tool greatest tool a ritualist can borrow is the craft of acting, the ability to make others believe that you are the character you say you are portraying, that you feel the pain and the joy and the rage that you say you feel. As ritualists we use acting all the time, often without understanding that we are acting. The task of remembering what words we are going to say, and in what order, learning when and where to walk around the ritual space, the frame of mind we must be in before the ritual begins, the emotions which surge through us as the ritual progresses, all of this is part of the craft of acting. The difference between the actor and the ritualist is in the performer's intention. An actor works to entertain and hopefully move his audience to tears or laughter. A ritualist is striving for a deeper outcome, one that will change not only the way people think, but how they see themselves in the world. While the end results may differ, the road is shared. To remember what words we are going to say to honor the Ancestors we must study a script and memorize our lines. To know when and where to walk around the sacred space we must rehearse and walk the steps many times before the performance day to create a mental map of the space and the action. To understand and prepare ourselves for the frame of mind we must be in, and the emotions which will surge through us as the ritual progresses, we must do research into the meaning of our ritual and the Divine forces involved. These are all things the actor does to prepare for a show, and which the ritualist is well advised to do each time she prepares for ritual.

It is important to note that not all of the tools of theater should be used for every large public ritual. Even a successful theatrical director will not use all the tools listed above all the time. Sometimes their very absence is a powerful symbol in and of itself. Complete silence or total darkness can underscore a journey into the heart of the earth. By taking away the cues of sight and sound that most people rely on for spatial orientation, we can persuade the Symbolic Self that it has traveled beyond the normal reality of waking day and into the altered state of dreams or even life after death.

As Public Ritualists, we have a responsibility to develop our tool bag to its fullest degree. We must properly utilize all the tools available to give our audience what they are rightfully entitled to: an entertaining and transformative experience, one that works with their Symbolic Self as much as it works with their higher brain functions. In accepting the yoke of performing for a large public venue, ritualists can make no assumptions about the experience levels of those in attendance, their reasons for attending, or their willingness to participate. We cannot assume a common symbolic language; instead we must create one for our audience and our ritualists. Through the use of illusionary magic and the tools of stagecraft we will give our group a common set of reference points and easy symbols that we can all share in, with or without a lot of experience. With the symbols and road maps in place, we will be able to take our audience on the journey of their lives. With their permission, we will transform them into beings who are just a little bit closer to the Divine than they were when they met us at the crossroads.

## Notes

---

<sup>i</sup> The University of Victoria's Hypertext Writer's Guide, <http://webserver.maclab.comp.uvic.ca/writersguide>  
Category : Symbol. Copyright, The Department of English, University of Victoria, 1995, Page updated September 23, 1995

---

<sup>ii</sup> ARTFL Project: 1913 Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary  
[http://humanities.uchicago.edu/forms\\_unrest/webster.form.html](http://humanities.uchicago.edu/forms_unrest/webster.form.html) , Symbol (Page: 1461)

<sup>iii</sup> For simplicity sake I will use the term private when referring to small, (13 people or less) gatherings of people doing ritual on an invitation only basis, and public when referring to large (13 or more people) gatherings and the ritual is open to anyone who has knowledge of its happening

<sup>iv</sup> Some people will not use the word “audience” to describe those who attend their public rituals, choosing instead to call them participants, guests, congregation or co-celebrants. I prefer “audience”, I find that this keeps me honest, as to who I am responsible to and what I am trying to accomplish. Because, while I hope to expand my audience’s visions and experiences, to bring them in touch with a small fraction of the Divine, and to speak to them on a mythic level, because they have comet to me with their time and attention, I am also responsible for their entertainment. They don’t have to like what I do for it to be entertainment, but they do have to be enraptured by it for it to have been worth their time.