

Healing Rituals for Survivors of Rape

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Abstract: *Therapeutic rituals focus on clinical healing within different contexts and client populations. This article explores the use of therapeutic ritual at individual and collective levels to help survivors of rape to heal. This technique is applied to both levels through a discussion of two rituals developed for rape survivors. Results of a study that examined participant comments about a collective ritual for healing are discussed. Findings indicate that participants attend the ritual to be supportive of others and to be supported themselves. Family members attend to obtain information about rape. This article explores practice implications from a service planning and implementation perspective.*

Keywords: *Therapeutic ritual, rape survivors, individual ritual, collective ritual, community ritual, ritual elements*

The use of rituals for healing purposes can be traced to ancient times. Rituals have been practiced within a variety of cultural and religious contexts (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 1996; Guilmet & Whited, 1987; Idowu, 1992; Jung, 1964a; 1969). Jung (1964a, 1969) regarded rituals as a mechanism to promote transformation and rebirth. Ritual as a process is defined as a renewal of personality functions that are healed, strengthened, and improved through a ceremonial process (Jung, 1969).

Jung also recognized the therapeutic importance of ritual. Symbols and ritualistic behavior, when appropriately used, tap into unconscious meaning (Jung, 1964b). Therapeutic ritual has more recently been applied to grief work (Bolton & Camp, 1989; Bradley, 1990; Reeves & Boersma, 1990), couple and family therapy (Hughes-Schneewind, 1990; Laird, 1984; Imber-Black & Roberts, 1992; Mackey & Greif 1994; Olson, 1993; Parker & Horton, 1996; Sand-Pringle, West, & Bubenzer, 1991), group work (Banawi & Stockton, 1993), and treatment of anorexia and bulimia (Brown, 1991). The importance of therapeutic ritual for survivors of incest and ritual abuse has also been documented to be an important component in the self-healing process. Therapeutic ritual contributes to positive coping (Juhasz, 1995; Winslow, 1990).

This article examines the use of therapeutic ritual with rape survivors for community and self-healing. First, the use of ritual is explored as a technique to promote growth. It is applied at the collective and individual levels through a discussion of two rituals developed for rape survivors. Secondly, it reviews the findings of

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a study that examined participant comments about attending a collective ritual for healing as one method to measure the impact of this experience on attendees.

RITUALS—DEFINITION, STAGES, AND ELEMENTS

Rituals may be defined as symbolic acts or rites that help people do the work of relating, changing, healing, believing, and celebrating (Imber-Black & Roberts, 1992).

Henry (1992) regards rituals as symbolic acts that confirm a meaning system or a culture and help to define a community. In this regard, cultural values can be examined collectively and validated through rituals and ceremonial practices (Henry, 1992). Rituals can be performed within an individual context (Winslow, 1990), family settings (Imber-Black & Roberts, 1992; Laird, 1984), in groups (Banawi & Stockton, 1993), and on a collective level (Mullis & Fincher, 1996).

Rituals have a form and a determined course. Roberts (1988) identified three stages that are important to the ritual process. Stage one is a separation stage, at which time the individual prepares for the ritual and separates from everyday routine. The second stage is transitional, where the individual encounters the ritual and explores new roles and identities. The third stage, reintegration, moves the participant back into everyday experience.

Generally, rituals are composed of both open and closed elements. Open elements allow individuals some flexibility to attach their own meanings to the ritual. Participants are allowed to create or add to its content. Closed elements provide some structure and safety measures for the expression of strong emotion. These elements are established and provide form and direction for behavior.

Roberts (1988) discusses several other elements of importance in healing rituals: (a) affirmation of pain and loss, which conveys acceptance and understanding to the participant, (b) alternation of holding on and letting go, which provides the individual with a transition from the present to the future, and (c) action to celebrate finality, symbolizing the end of the ritual. These elements function to provide structure to the ritual process.

Symbolism is integrated throughout the ritual experience and comprises another essential element (Jung, 1964b; Laird, 1984; Moore & Myerhoff, 1977; Parker & Horton, 1996). Each symbol must have a direct and obvious connection to the event or ritual purpose, and it must add to the meaning of the ritual. For instance, lighting of candles in a candlelight vigil represents restoration through active movement from dark to light. It also symbolizes hope for better days.

RITUAL PURPOSE

Rituals are used for various purposes. Sometimes they signal or mark a rite of passage or a transformation, such as a marriage ceremony or a baptism. They are also used for celebration or commemoration, as in the case of religious worship, birthdays, holidays or anniversaries. Another purpose for rituals is to accomplish some type of restoration. It is this third type of ritual, also referred to as a liberation ritual, which is the most beneficial for survivors of rape.

Liberation rituals help individuals release themselves from an event or action, and, therefore, are particularly helpful for recovery from trauma, violent acts,

abuses, or betrayals (Parker & Horton, 1996). Restoration is accomplished through a symbolic removal or disengagement from the harmful event (Parker & Horton, 1996). Negative forces are symbolically ended, dispersed, or accursed. Closure is then attained, and participants are encouraged to remove the pain. This process is designed to empower the individual, and the final focus is on hope for the future. Juhasz's (1995) exploratory study of ritual abuse survivors discusses the therapeutic use of rituals as a technique to transition from destructive ritual behavior, such as self-mutilation, to more positive forms of ritual behavior, such as incense burning. This ritual transition assists in the development of positive coping. The use of liberation rituals in conjunction with counseling and other supportive services can assist in the healing process of survivors of rape.

INDIVIDUAL RITUALS

Individual rituals serve to provide meaning and growth experiences to one person. Jung (1969) suggests that an individual experience of transformation through rituals requires a higher level of consciousness and, therefore, effects long-lasting changes. Persons who engage in individual rituals can use the ritual process as a medium to alter undesirable aspects of the personality, to reframe experiences, and to change the meaning of a behavior or an event (Juhasz, 1995; Jung, 1969; Winslow, 1990).

One benefit of an individual ritual is that it can be designed to meet the specific needs of a client. Knowledge of a client's strengths, weaknesses, and desired areas for change help the client and social worker customize the ritual. Individual rituals also allow for a greater use of open elements. With professional guidance, a client can develop healing rituals with symbols that have personal meaning and may be more effective for personal growth. The private aspect of individual rituals is another benefit to consider. Individual rituals can be performed without anyone else present, enabling them to contain personal elements that remain confidential.

The Candle Ceremony

The Candle Ceremony is an individual ritual designed to assist survivors of rape to gradually move toward healing and growth (see Appendix A). The ceremony is structured so that the survivor is encouraged to remember the rape event. Remembrance is an important part of the ritual. So often, survivors are encouraged to forget the rape experience and move on rather than move forward (Brown, 1991). Encouraging remembrance provides an element of recognition within the ritual, acknowledging that the rape occurred and giving the survivor permission to think about it. The ritual is also structured so that survivors can focus on the good or positive elements of their lives. This aspect of the ritual encourages healing and emphasizes client strengths and a movement forward.

This healing ceremony is designed as a liberation ritual and contains both closed and open elements. The closed elements include the actual form of the ritual as a candlelighting and as a movement from dark to light in symbolism, action, and thought. Other closed elements include Imber-Black and Robert's (1992) three essential elements of affirmation, holding on/letting go, and actions of finality. These elements are contained in the ritual's structure. Affirmation is achieved

through the process of remembering the pain and lighting the dark candle, followed by the celebration of goodness symbolized by igniting the light candle and focusing on the positive aspects of the survivor. "Holding on" is the part of the ritual that directs survivors to think about the event, which allows them to hold on to the experience. "Letting go" occurs through the release of feelings and eventually focusing on the goodness or positive aspects of the survivor's life. Finality is contained in the actual extinguishing of the candles. The open elements involve a series of choices about the definition of regular performance of the ritual, how, and what dark and light aspects of a person's life will be acted out, and whether the ritual will be individual and private or a group effort.

COLLECTIVE RITUALS

Rituals applied to a collective or community level provide the opportunity for people to withdraw from their routine and experience themselves as part of the larger group (Moore & Myerhoff, 1977). Jung (1969) describes this group process as collective experiences of transformation. These group experiences provide an individual with strength and purpose that cannot be obtained in isolation (Jung, 1969).

Collective rituals provide a mechanism that makes public statements about social issues and conditions. Others can be available as witnesses or fellow participants who affirm the experience. This group experience can mitigate the isolation often felt by rape survivors.

Another function of collective rituals is that they communicate shared constructions of reality and legitimize social prescriptions and societal views through the use of symbolism (Laird, 1984). Collective rituals can be used to express group values and shared meanings, and also help to develop them within the group context.

The Candlelight Vigil

The Candlelight Vigil for Rape Awareness is an example of a collective ritual. It was initially developed to provide support for survivors and to increase awareness of rape in a small suburban/rural county. The format of the vigil was designed to: (a) draw on the expressive arts of music and theater, (b) provide auditory information through panel discussion, political discussions, speaker presentations, and survivor testimony, (c) provide written resource and service information, and (d) combine ritual and ceremony for community and survivor healing. It is an annual planned event. Survivors indicated that they have attended the vigil multiple times and anticipated attending the next one. The vigil was held in a large church at the center of town. Participation by survivors and members of the community was encouraged through advertising, networking, and word-of-mouth. In addition, invitations were sent out to key community leaders and service providers.

The symbol for the rape awareness campaign is the coupling of two ribbons—one black and one light blue. These ribbons symbolize the awareness aspects of the campaign; the colors represent bringing the issue from the dark into the light. The campaign slogan, "Rape Awareness: Bring It Out of the Dark," is symbolically represented in the vigil through a traditional candlelight ceremony.

Each vigil attendee received a small candle upon arrival at the church. The candlelight ceremony was preceded by a formal program that consisted of opening remarks by event organizers and several formal presentations. Included were speeches by political representatives, survivor testimonies, and panel presentations by service providers. Theater, poetry, and music were also incorporated into the program as artistic mediums tapped into the groups' emotional response and offered the opportunity for group sharing and participation. Every vigil ends with an introduction to the candlelighting ceremony, the lighting of the candles, and an uplifting group song. The selection of music was deliberate; the music was chosen for its symbolism in relation to the vigil theme. Upon completion of the song, the candles were extinguished. The vigil served as a symbolic representation of hope and release.

Comments by survivors indicated a need for a therapeutic healing process in-between the annual vigil. The Candle Ceremony served this function. A copy of this ceremony is passed out to each vigil attendee upon arrival at the event. This ritual continues the light-into-dark symbolism through its use of dark and light-colored ribbons and candles and through the act of lighting and extinguishing candles.

METHODOLOGY

In an effort to examine participant reactions to the candlelight vigil, a questionnaire was developed to obtain general information about participants and their experiences in attending the event. The questionnaire was exploratory in nature.

The main purpose of the candlelight vigil was to serve as a protected space for families, friends, and survivors of rape and to provide an opportunity for survivors to have a voice and to be heard. Two open-ended questions were included in the questionnaire in an attempt to ascertain whether this was achieved. The questionnaire also had 12 forced-response questions comprised of demographic type questions, such as age and gender, rape survivor status, frequency and reasons for attending the candlelight vigil, and the impact of participation on the respondent.

Approximately 200 questionnaires were distributed to all attendees at the third annual candlelight vigil. Since the primary purpose for attending the event was to provide healing and support, attendees were not pressured to complete the questionnaires. To protect the ambiance of the event, only one verbal request was made to fill out the questionnaire. Participation was both voluntary and anonymous. Respondents were asked to hand in completed questionnaires at the end of the vigil or mail them to the college. Mailing information was printed on the questionnaire.

DATA ANALYSIS

Despite the low response rate of 16% ($N=32$), a few clues emerged from the data. About one-third (31%) of the 32 respondents identified themselves as rape survivors. The remaining respondents indicated they had not been raped. Thirteen percent reported that they were family members of someone who survived rape, and 66% indicated that they were friends of someone who survived rape. Twenty-two percent identified themselves as a community helper or advocate. Most

respondents had either experienced rape or knew someone who was raped. Additional demographic information is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: *Demographic Information on Candlelight Vigil Participants (N=32)*

	<u>n</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Type of Participant*		
Survivor of rape	10	31
Family member of a survivor	4	13
Friend of a survivor	21	66
Community helper	7	22
Student	26	81
Gender		
Male	2	6
Female	30	94
Age (in years)		
13—18	3	9
19—29	24	75
30—49	3	9
50—65	1	3
Over 65	1	3

**Note: Participants could designate more than one category.*

Fifty percent of the survivors reported that they had attended the candlelight vigil to support themselves and 40% indicated that attending the vigil made them feel good. The results showed that these survivors attend community rituals, such as the candlelight vigil, to receive support. This is one of the main purposes of a collective ritual. For these survivors, the candlelight vigil was regarded as an event where they would find comfort and understanding. Survivors reported positive feelings about attending the event. These findings support the preliminary discussion in this article that relates to the purpose of community rituals, in that they provide support and define a comfortable or good space.

All family members reported attending the vigil to obtain more information about rape. This finding suggests that family members regard the candlelight vigil as a place where resources and information will be available, which also ties into the purpose of a community ritual. Obtaining information about rape is one way in which families can be concretely supportive; the secondary gain is that they obtain support for themselves.

Seventy-one percent of friends of survivors of rape reported attending the candlelight vigil to support a rape survivor. Fifty-four percent of the respondents who had not experienced rape reported that they received information about rape. This finding indicates that for these respondents, the candlelight vigil provided an opportunity to demonstrate collective caring and concern. Much needed information that is readily and visibly available about rape was received, which again tied into the purpose of a community ritual.

Two open-ended questions were used to provide a more qualitative perspective. One question asked respondents to describe the most important part of the candlelight vigil. The second question was added mainly for program evaluation purposes. It asked respondents for suggestions to improve the ritual. Responses were analyzed for themes and patterns that emerged from the respondent's handwritten comments.

Survivor Comments

Several respondents commented that they found the structured healing rituals within the candlelight vigil to be the most helpful part of the evening. As indicated earlier, these rituals were designed to include both open and closed elements and Robert's (1988) three elements of healing. For these respondents, participation in structured rituals became a significant part of the evening and helped with their own transformation process.

Another respondent suggested that the testimony of the survivors was the most important part of the vigil. Still, another observer pinpointed "giving support to the survivor" as most important. Allowing survivors an opportunity to speak and providing community support to survivors are two significant purposes of collective rituals, and these comments lend credence to their importance.

Other comments centered on the themes of support, strength, having a voice, and not feeling alone. One survivor remarked, "The most important part of the vigil is knowing I'm not alone." Collective rituals allow for just this type of opportunity. Participants can experience themselves within a larger, supportive group context.

Another participant reflected, "To me, the most important part of the vigil is the bringing it out of the dark theme. It is a dark, ugly thing that cannot be stopped without first acknowledging its existence." These comments point to the impact that the community ritual experience has on the creation of a collective voice to raise concerns about rape and violence. Another respondent commented, "It's the only thing in life which makes me feel." This comment can be linked to Imber-Black and Robert's (1992) affirmation of pain and loss. Within the protected space that was created, this community ritual provided this respondent with the opportunity to express painful feelings, something this survivor apparently has not been able to achieve outside of the context of the candlelight vigil.

One respondent attached a letter to her questionnaire in which she described her rape experience and provided a detailed discussion of her reactions to the candlelight vigil. She wrote, "Please convey my thanks to all who gave of their time and energy to put on the vigil. Even though I perk up when there is information available about this issue, there is much I learned last night. It also reminded me that all the years of denial, shame, and self-blame were not my fault and that there is hope for young women now to deal expediently with the onslaught of emotions after rape occurs." These comments articulate the positive impact the event has on survivors. For some survivors, participation in a collective ritual can be an empowering process; it provides an opportunity for them to have a voice in society.

The majority of responses to the second question, which regarded suggestions for improvement, emphasized personal experiences. Major themes included

reducing speeches made by political representatives, lessening the number of speeches in general, and increasing the opportunity to hear from survivors. Evidently, what make events like these so important are the opportunities for personal reflection, survivor stories, and personal transformations. There are too few events that allow for this type of honest discourse.

Limitations

This study attempted to obtain information regarding the impact of attending a candlelight vigil for rape awareness on individual participants. The sample size was small, and there was a low response rate, probably due to the sensitive nature of the information being collected. Respondents were obtained using a convenience sampling technique, although analysis was descriptive and qualitative in nature. Given these methodological limitations, the results cannot be generalized to the broader population.

Although the numbers are small, this study can serve as a pilot to guide future research in this area. The profession could benefit from more information about the use of community and individual rituals as a practice technique. Those who did respond articulated that participation in this event provided meaning for them.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Ritual is an important practice technique that can be used on an individual, group, or community level. Practitioners are in an excellent position to develop and apply therapeutic rituals to promote client healing. Rituals can be beneficial in the healing process for a variety of problems and can be adapted to any setting. The planned use of ritual can also heighten awareness about an issue and serve as an important medium for change.

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Appendix

The Candle Ceremony

Perform this ceremony in-between annual candlelight vigils.

After this candlelight vigil, purchase one light-colored candle (light blue, white, or cream) and one dark-colored candle (black, brown, dark blue, or dark green).

Light these candles regularly in a private, comfortable space. The definition of “regular” depends on you and your own healing process. The candles can be lit daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, etc. It is important that you establish your own pattern. Choose a private area that feels comfortable, an area where it is least likely that you will be interrupted. It could be a family room, a kitchen, or another area. Choose a time that feels comfortable to you, a time when you are least likely to be interrupted.

Light the black or dark candle first. This candle symbolizes the dark, the pain, the bad. As you light the candle, think about the bad, and those who raped you and made you suffer and hurt. What you do next is up to you and your individual healing. You can think about, speak out, or shout names, events, or actions that hurt you and places where you were hurt. Whatever you remember should be about your dark images and your pain. Spend as much or as little time as you feel you need with the first part of this ceremony.

After you are through with this first part, focus on the light blue or the light candle. This candle symbolizes the healing, the light, the goodness. Light the candle. As you light this candle, think about what is good in you and your life. Think about your strengths, your greatness, and your blessings. What you do next is up to you and your individual healing. You can think about, speak out, or sing out the good parts of your life, give examples of your healing, parts of yourself and your personality that please you, people who have been supportive of you, etc. Spend as much time as you feel you need with the second part of this ceremony. Now, extinguish both candles.

Remember: You are strong. You are goodness. Healing is powerful. Your strength and your healing will overcome your pain. You will be healed. Repeat this thought in your mind.

Your candlelighting ceremony can be a private ceremony, or you can invite close family members, friends, or other survivors. This is a personal choice. Do what you believe will benefit you most. Do what you feel will provide you with the best healing experience.

Note: For friends of survivors who are asked to participate in the candlelighting ceremony, please recognize that this ceremony is very important to the healing process. If you are asked to participate, attend regularly. Your support is critical to the healing. Take seriously the personal struggles. Your understanding will contribute to the healing process.

Survivors, if you ask a family member or friend to participate and you feel that they are not supportive of the ceremony or your healing, do not ask them back again. You need positive influences and support to heal. Seek out people who can be encouraging.