

Review of Marilyn Beloff, Ph.D. 's October 21, 2004 Workshop  
Changing the Culture of Divorce: A training in the **Use of Healing Ritual** at the Boston Law Collaborative

Since I have been thinking about the need for divorce rituals for many years I was delighted to participate in this workshop and prepare for it the night before with my co role players. It was a privilege to meet Marilyn, and the other participants, as a sense of spirituality and caring emanated from all. Furthermore, Marilyn really knows her stuff, given her training in what she calls depth and I call existential approaches to psychology along with her experience in and research about healing ritual for the separated and divorced. She could be the first secular Rabbi, priest or minister in Canada and clearly has found her calling as a true pastoral counselor.

She taught us how to create a blessing and memorial service for the metaphorical death known as divorce. Such a service allows us to reduce shame and fear associated with such loss.

Starting from the concept of the traditional Get or "granting of a bill of divorce by the husband" in Orthodox Jewish religion and after telling her personal story and a review of the literature, Marilyn explained the basic stages of an archetypal healing ritual: Separation, Limen, and Re-aggregation.

By separation she refers to the need to move away from the mundane world and add elements to a ritual that create a sacred, solemn space. So we used props to create an atmosphere of solemn healing, such as special shawls or other garments, candles, wine (which symbolizes spirit and transformation), objects, burning of photos or even the marriage license and music. Each of these props were customized by and had meaning for the partners of the former marriage. The ritual enactment is made more visceral by the use of ethnic, religious, spiritual, cultural or family symbols. The elder often starts the cutting of the marriage license or of a special cloth, which then are torn fully asunder by the ex-partners.

Limen mean threshold and involves the notion that this ritual must bring forth a visceral experience that puts one into the sacred space with a sense of spirituality or alerted states of consciousness though no LSD was dropped nor peyote smoked. It is in this emotional space with open heart that the partners offer to give a release to one another. This is a transformational release because one is stating that the other is officially free to go forth in the future free of any bonds of obligation to the ex and expected to create a new life with whomever they choose. The partners in our role play chose to express a special prepared letter of "truth" and forgiveness to one another and together they addressed the fears and needs for reassurance in their children, who depending on their age might or might not have been present. By stated intention, all are almost magically pulled toward a sense of closure. The letters are prayer like. They might express the wisdom of Rabbi Schachter Shalomi or the sentiment of the Buddhist prayer of loving-kindness.

By re-aggregation, Marilyn suggests a moving out from the sacred space back to the everyday world and the immediate future needs of all participants in the process.

The elder, as played by Marilyn, provides instruction over a number of hours to the participants planning their ritual. She helps them choose pertinent witnesses, who may be long term family friends, who are able to be present at the ritual in an emotional supportive way to the whole family. These witnesses generally help take note of the many positive experiences they have had together over the years and offer their help in maintaining continuity by pointing to their interest in staying connected in the future.

Following Jung, who said "There is not birth of consciousness without pain, she reminded us that suffering, loss, and death can lead to rebirth? At one of the later convention workshops on Advocacy versus Empathy, reference was made to "the initial trauma of divorce" and the need to wait until people emerge from the shadows in order to be able to fully function under the strictures of the four way agreement and be able to make wise decisions about their future needs in the legal process. Divorce rituals may be the most efficient paths to achieving such an end for those couples struggling through the legal divorce. As we all know the emotional divorce does not easily happen in sync with the legal, economic, and social or community divorce processes.

Our group watched and created 3 different role-play scenarios. And I think it is fair to say that were all were emotionally touched on a very personal level. The attorneys, social workers and psychologists all had fun playing together and using both our right and left brains. I was left with the sense that what might have taken months to resolve in psychotherapy was able to be much more efficiently created in a divorce ritual, the planning and execution of which might take 6- 8 hours over a short concentrated time period.

Submitted by Shel Miller, Ph.D. October 25, 2004

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