

SELF-GENERATED CEREMONY

It is through rites that Heaven and Earth are harmonious and sun and moon are bright, that the four seasons are ordered and the stars are on their courses, that rivers flow and that things prosper, that love and hatred are tempered and joy and anger are in keeping . . . He who holds to the rites is never confused in the midst of multifarious change . . .

-- Hsun Tzu (Confucian)

Life experience initiates us again and again, whether we are conscious of it or not. Rarely are we provided with the support and understanding to take on the deeper meaning, and the guidance to confirm these life changing experiences. Through self-generated ceremony we reclaim our direct relationship with “spirit” or God, and with the transformative experience of planting our “intent” into the world outside and within. In this way we actively engage in our lives and intimately participate in the mysterious workings of the universe.

Ceremony lifts up crises and events and makes them sacred, tapping the inherent wisdom of these experiences rather than just surviving them. They are a way of both generating and reinforcing commitment, of enshrining and enabling, of making real a feeling, thought, purpose, or hope. Joseph Campbell stated that ritual “gives form to human life, not in the way of mere surface arrangements, but in depth.”

Coming of age, pregnancy and childbirth, marriage, loss, changes in job or location, significant illness, dying and death – these are all natural times for ceremonies of transition. Self-generated ceremony reinforces the significance of these “border crossings” in our lives, while supporting us to formally mark closures, epiphanies and new beginnings. Without ceremony, we can become caught in the “in-between world,” lost in the tension of ambivalence.

There is no “right” or “wrong” way to do ceremony. There is the discovery of *your own* way that brings heart, mind, soul and spirit together. Perhaps your way is simple, or maybe it’s elaborate. Perhaps you plan them over a long period of time, or maybe you find meaning in more spontaneous creation. What is important is that you are ready for what you are setting in motion. Rather than ceremony being a magical means of getting to where you wish you were, it formally marks where you have arrived. The secret teaching is that *this* is the fastest way of moving into our becoming.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF IN PREPARATION:*

- What am I ritualizing?
- What is the primary function of the ritual?
 - Do I want to mark a *severance* (separation, termination, parting, letting go, conclusion)?
 - Do I want to mark a *threshold* (transition, change, adjustment, shift in role, status, or task, period of extended sorrow, questioning, transformation, renewal)?
 - Do I want to mark an *incorporation* (return, joining, union, reestablishment of harmony, new responsibilities, new beginnings)?
- What symbolic actions and ritual components would express this (these) aspect of the experience most meaningfully? **Examples:**

Severance: smashing, burning, cutting, burying, throwing away, untying, washing off, dismantling, crossing a threshold.

Threshold: vigil, making vows, period of silence, nakedness, wearing masks, praying, dancing, rattling, dedication, veiling.

Incorporation: re-crossing threshold, putting on, mending, tying, building up, unveiling, changing clothes, calling in, name change, feasting.

- What symbols or objects (natural or human-made) do I want to use?
- Do I intend to speak to anyone or anything? If so, what do I want to say and to whom?
- In what order do I want to do these things?
- Do I want to invite anyone else there? If so, who? Other participants or witnesses, alive or in spirit?
- Where do I want to do this ceremony, and when is the appropriate time?

* These questions were put together in 1981 by Virginia H. Hine, a cultural anthropologist, after studying ceremonies of many cultures and religions from around the world for an unpublished manuscript entitled *Rites of Passage for Our Time: A Guide for Creating Ritual*. She sought to glean the universal elements and process of ritual building.