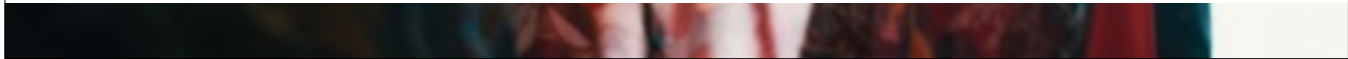
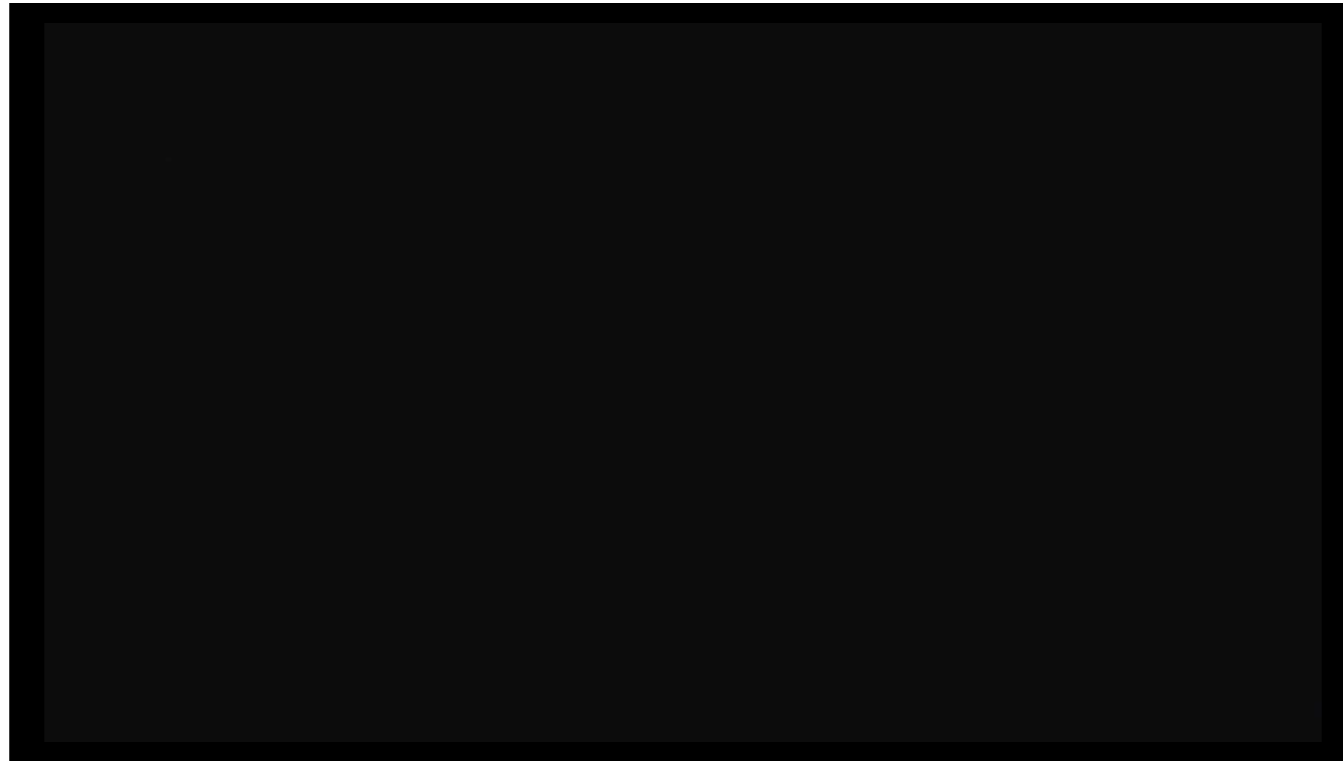




LIVING **IN** STORIES

Embodiment in Therapy Through Liturgical Practice





Has anyone seen Schindler's List? This opening scene is so striking because the colour is slowly extinguished along with the ritual flame. As if the first step - the one that makes every other horror possible - is to rob them of the ceremonies that define the Jews as a people. They could no longer engage in the performances that defined them.



LIVING **IN** STORIES

Embodiment in Therapy Through Liturgical Practice

I want to draw your attention to a kind of practice that already has a great history in narrative therapy - using ritual and ceremony - and tell you about how I've been building on this and give you a little bit of theory to support some of these practices.



My interest in this probably goes back to my experiences growing up in the church.



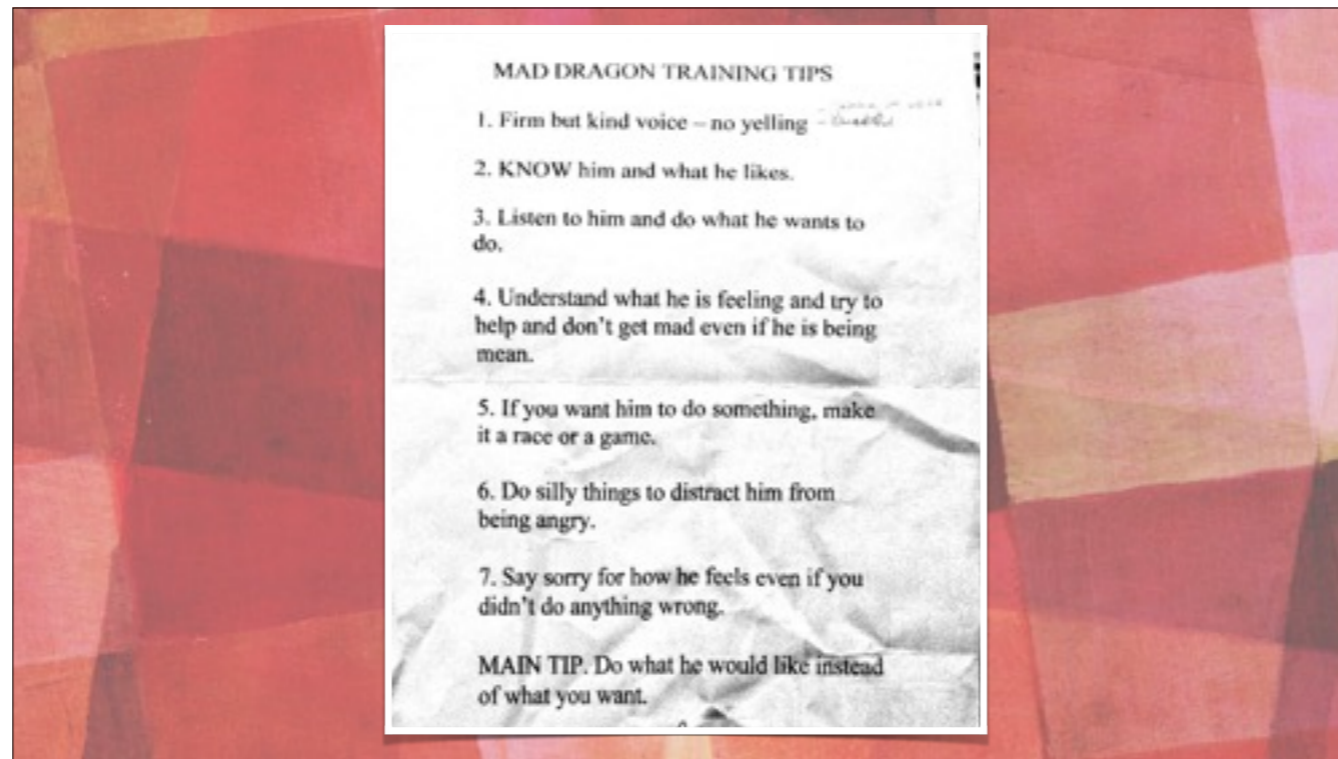
Even though I was not part of a “Liturgical” tradition, community ceremonies and rituals were still a central part of every week. I remember how drawn I was to the ritual of baptism particularly. It was so visceral - especially when we did it down in the bay: the wind, the smell of sea salt, the ritual words and then the person disappears for a moment under the water and emerges gasping and wet looking almost like a different person. Everyone would cheer!





The Cullin family came to see me because their transition to Thailand had completely thrown off the family equilibrium. Their 6-year-old son, Cal, in particular was regularly becoming so angry and violent that, to feel safe, they were having to put him in his room, lock his door with a piece of rope and leave him in there to break things and put holes in the walls until he calmed down.

Right away I set about externalising Anger. It eventually came to be called a Mad-Dragon - the kids were huge fans of How to Train Your Dragon 2 - and the family led me to understand that it wasn't only Cal's Mad Dragon that was out of control but also their dad's. He never became violent or abusive but certainly was holding the family captive to his moods and had a tense relationship with everyone.



In one session I had the two “boys” stay in my office and work on an activity with Legos to help them start thinking about Anger together. Meanwhile, the oldest daughter, Sal and her mum met with me in the playroom. I interviewed them about their mad-dragon training skills and came to find out that both of them were particular masters in this art. This is the list of training tips Sal printed off and brought to me in the next session. I asked her if this sort of training was tiring and if she and her mum might like to take a break - whether they thought it was about time the boys took over training their own dragons. They both said, “yes”.

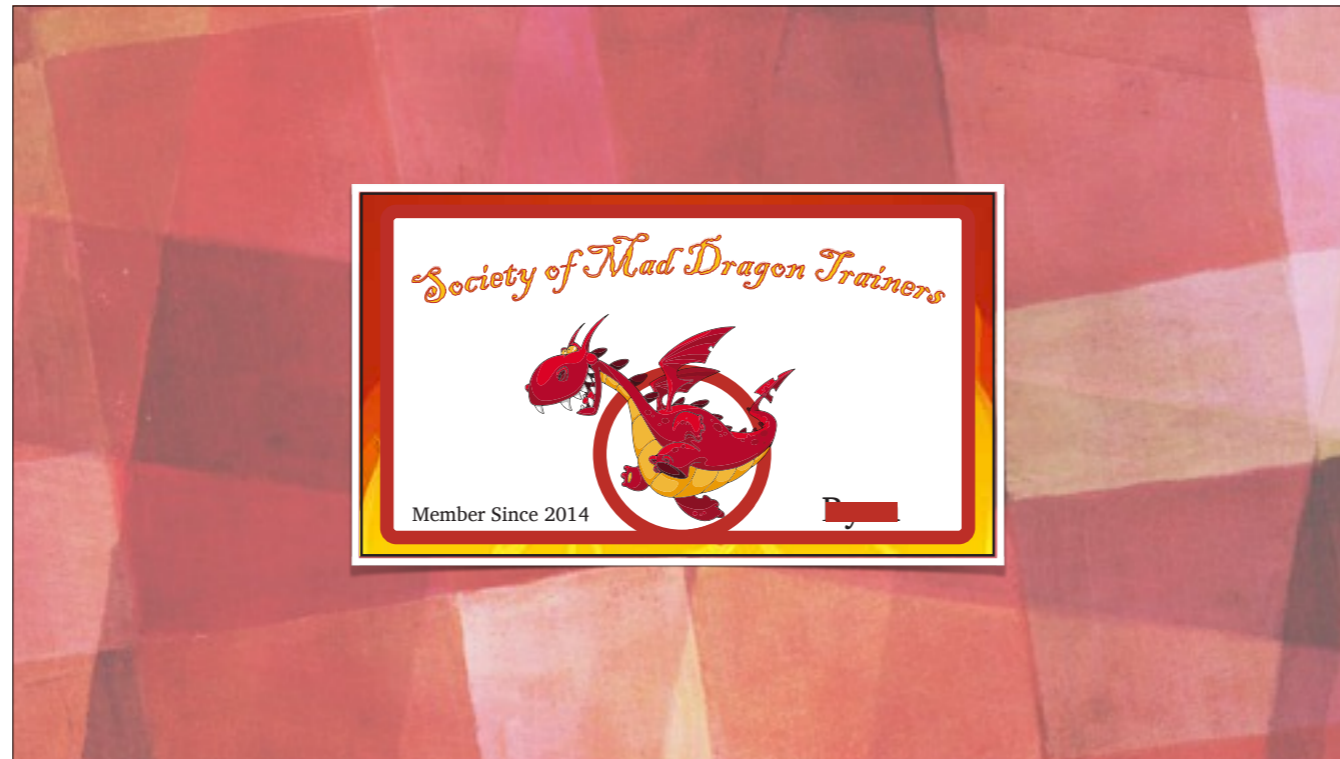
I could see that the notion that she and her mum - who, up until now was at the edges of her ability to keep going, she was so exhausted with trying to hold the family together - were master Mad-Dragon trainers was turning the tables somewhat for Sal. I asked if she would like to be part of a society I was forming and if she thought her siblings might like to as well. She enthusiastically agreed. I spoke with Cal and his dad about this, too - we discussed what sorts of things they would have to learn to do in order to be given membership and what things they were already doing.

Meanwhile, I pursued couples work with Mum and Dad.



A few weeks passed and Cal did indeed begin to make significant strides toward controlling his anger as his parents began to adjust things about the way they related to one another and the children.

It seemed the time was right for an induction ceremony. I made invitations like this one and sent them to each person in the family. Dad volunteered to make certificates and membership cards.



Here is one of the membership cards. I brought mine as well. **STAND** On the day of the ceremony, I set up a some of the dinosaur and dragon toys in the playroom into a little boulevard, put on some Lord of the Rings music and brought in some silly ceremonial objects - rubber gloves, a flexible length of plastic hose and a plunger. With some ceremony, each member of the family was presented with their certificate and card along with one or two words about their accomplishments as Mad-dragon trainers. Then we caravanned from the office back to the family's house where some food and drink had been prepared. Cal showed me up to his room and there was a ceremonial cutting of the rope that had been used to lock his door as a way of affirming the immense progress he had made in Dragon Training and helping his family to feel safe. **SIT**

DEFINITIONAL CEREMONY

*The work of Barbara Myerhoff
and Michael White*



This work is, of course, informed by the idea of Definitional Ceremony.

DEFINITIONAL CEREMONY

“

Definitional ceremonies are likely to develop when, within a group, there is a crisis of invisibility and disdain by a more powerful outside society... they are strategies that provide opportunities for being seen and in one's own terms...marked by the enunciation of the participants' collective symbols.

- *Barbara Myerhoff, 1986*

I'm very interested in this political element of ceremonies and also the fact that **collective symbols** are a key part of these ceremonies. They aren't just plucked from nowhere - the building blocks of Definitional Ceremonies are things that already exist within the culture(s).

Michael White's Outsider Witness questions have also been invaluable to me in forming these ceremonies, however, my interest today is more in how we can use these **collective symbols** to political effect.

The Society of Mad Dragon Trainers had many complexities but one was that the role of Sal and her mother in holding the family together had become invisible as had the ability of Cal and his dad to control themselves.

This wasn't the end. This story is still going on. But this was an opportunity for every member of the family to be redefined around a new collective identity and perform that identity.

But it was more than that...

CULTURAL LITURGIES

The work of James K. A. Smith



James K.A. Smith is a religious philosopher whose work has helped me shape and better understand the importance of Embodiment especially through ritual and ceremonial practice.

CULTURAL LITURGIES

“

We live *into* the stories we've absorbed;
we become characters in the drama that
has captivated us.

- James K.A. Smith, 2013

He suggests that we are first *imagining beings* and second *thinking beings*. This means that it is not, first and foremost *ideas* that shape our desires and hopes for life but stories that we experience in a sensual, bodily way and that we live out.

CULTURAL LITURGIES

“

Liturgies are compressed, performed narratives that recruit the imagination through the body... we are immersed in rituals that shape us and determine, unconsciously, what we value.

- James K.A. Smith, 2013

Integral to culture are what he calls Liturgies. They are essentially daily, hourly, minutely rituals and ceremonies that form our sense of how the world works, what it means and what is most important in life on the level of our *bodies and imaginations*. We might say these are discourses, but there's an important little nuance that is being brought out here: Liturgies are cultural practices that orient our bodies in the world. That make it possible to perceive the world.

We engage in these quasi-religious rites constantly whether we want to or not. We cannot avoid them but, when we find they foster injustice, oppression and psychological pain we can engage in counter-liturgies that allow us to live into different narratives of life. We might say, *alternative storylines*.

So, we can be encouraged to collaborate with the people who consult us to create these kinds of counter liturgies in various ways but especially in “performances” like ceremonies.



Let me give you an example: Smith vs. Bullying



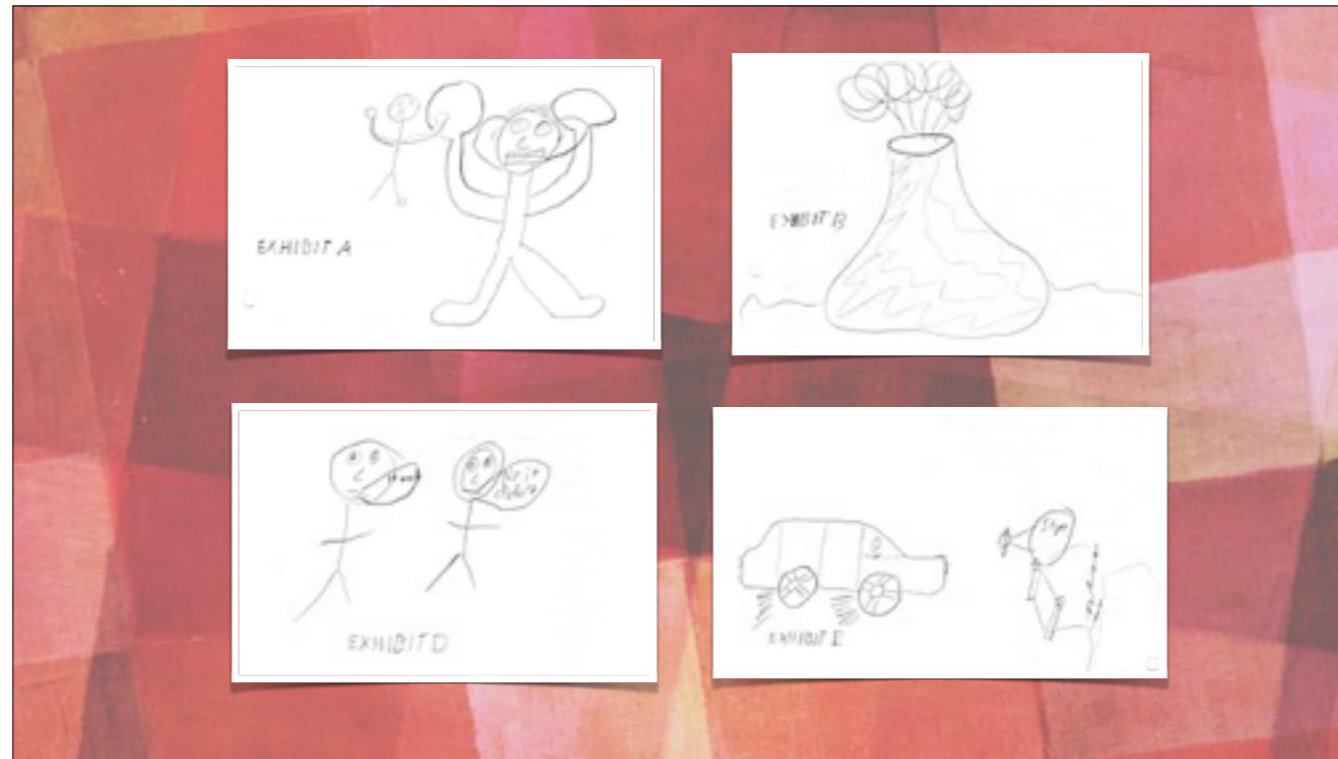
This is Bullying. Or what Jason Smith liked to say was Bullying as we externalised it and exposed it's tricks and tactics in my office over several conversations together.

Externalising practices as described and developed by Michael White, are a key foundation of most of the ceremonies I have engaged people in.

One day Jason came in with his mum and was fuming because a teacher had, he thought, unfairly kept him in at recess to finish some work. "We should sue him!" he said.

This gave me an idea. "We can't sue your teacher," I said, "but what if we sued Bullying?"

He loved the idea and so we started right away drawing up the evidence we would need.



Jason drew these pictures to be used as evidence against Bullying - Ways Bullying takes advantage of him:

- A. His physical weakness
- B. His volcano-like touchiness
- C. [NOT SHOWN]
- D. Arguing over what happened in the game
- E. Inability to stop himself doing or saying something when enough is enough



Exhibit F is evidence for aspects of Jason's character that Bullying had hidden from teachers, classmates and even Jason himself - that Jason works to train hard (the treadmill and the sweat). That he has a big heart and that he loves to help others (the cape). He also has a handlebar moustache!

Can you see that we are not only preparing to retell an alternative story of Jason (one that, by the way had already been developed in our other meetings) but are enacting a cultural narrative - one of legal justice - that he can *live into*?



Jason's mother also prepared some of her scrapbooks and a few of Jason's awards as evidence of this completely hidden story about Jason. Two of his friends were asked to come and act as witnesses to his kind character as well.

We held court in the conference room in the library, as the plaintiff's lawyer, I dressed in my best clothes and Jason chose the head of year 5, Mrs. Welch to be the judge in the case. Bullying came alone.

At the end Mrs. Welch read the judgment I had prepared for her and hit her gavel - we'd won! It was important as I was writing that judgment not to open a door for Jason and his friends to experience failure later on if Bullying continued to bother them. The judgment couldn't be **final**.

SMITH VS. BULLYING – JUDGEMENT

(turning to “Bullying”) Does the defendant have anything to say for himself? I thought not.

So, the court will now pronounce its judgment:

This court has heard that the actions of Bullying in and around this school and against the year 5 boys in particular have been sneaky, reprehensible and downright dirty. This school community will have nothing to do with such low-down characters as that. Therefore:

I hereby find in favour of the plaintiff, Mr Jason Smith and against the defendant, Bullying.

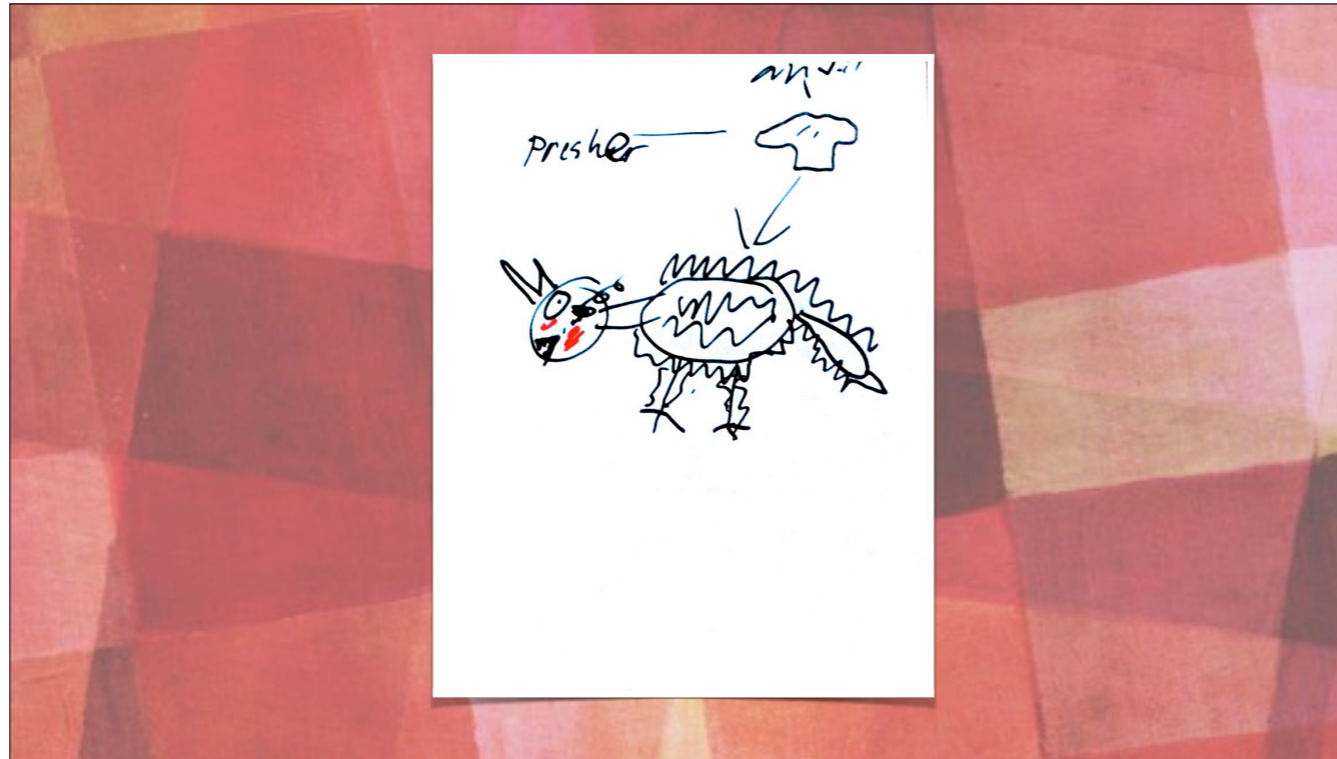
The court bans bullying from showing his face on this campus at any time except to serve 100 hours of community service.

In repayment to Mr. Smith and to the year 5 boys whose fun playtimes at lunch and snack he has ruined so many times, Bullying will have to stand outside and think of ideas to help the boys get along. Under no circumstances will he be allowed to go into the warm (or cool) classroom and at lunch he will have to watch Mr. Smith caring for others and doing things to avoid arguments and fights like stopping when he is asked or walking away from sticky situations.

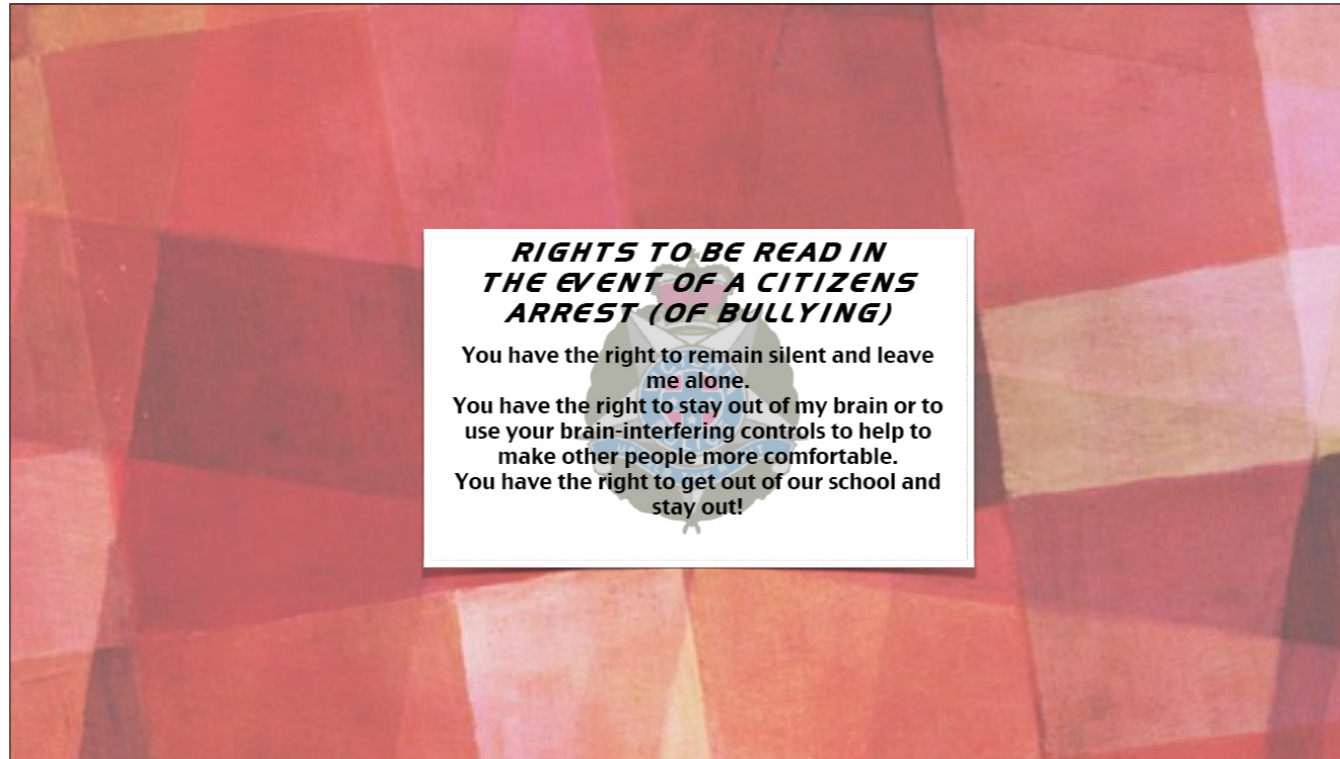
If, during the 100 days, Bullying is discovered to be playing any of the tricks we have heard about here today, this should be reported immediately to Mr. Klims or Mr. Loftis at which time Bullying will be taken directly to jail!

(Hit the gavel) Court is adjourned!

Here is the judgment I wrote for Mrs. Welch - the head of year 5 (She was Jason’s choice to act as judge) - to read out at the end of the hearing. This was an early attempt but it even at this time I could see how important it was not to make this ceremony “final” and leave an open door for Failure. This ceremony wasn’t to mark the end of Jason’s relationship with Bullying but rather was his stepping into a narrative of legal justice in his dealings with Bullying.



This ceremony proved very significant in the life of Jason and his family. He was far less susceptible to Bullying's tricks and had a different sense of himself in the yard. His relationship with his teachers became less adversarial, his mother's too - she had more faith that another side of her son was understood at the school - and he even started sticking to the diet his paediatrician had put him on! The ceremony didn't "cure" everything. Bullying still caused problems but Jason's relationship to it had changed. A few weeks later he reported that Bullying was putting pressure on him and others so he decided he would use this anvil to put pressure on Bullying.



I helped Jason make this little card that he could keep with him as a reminder of his new relationship with Bullying.

CRITICISM AND ENERGISING

*The work of Walter
Brueggemann*



Walter Brueggemann is a Theologian and Bible scholar who writes, among other things, about the Biblical prophets. But his work has become very important to me in my *therapeutic* work in recent months.

CRITICISM AND ENERGISING

“

I suggest that the dominant culture, now and in every time, is grossly uncritical, cannot tolerate serious and fundamental criticism, and will go to great lengths to stop it. Conversely, the dominant culture is a wearied culture, nearly unable to be seriously energised by new promises...The task of prophetic ministry is to hold together criticism and energising...

-Walter Brueggemann, 2001

He suggests that a prophet, both in ancient times and today, has two main tasks in relation to the culture in which she finds herself. To Criticise that culture and to Energise it. In this sense, the therapist is a kind of prophet writ small.

[read quote]

Smith V. Bullying was a performance of criticism while at the same time energising Jason, his family and friends and the school in relation to what was possible for him and for his classmates.

I propose that, in relation to the dominant culture, any ceremony for therapeutic purposes will set out to do both of these things to a greater or lesser degree - criticise and energise.

ELEMENTS OF “LITURGICAL” PRACTICE



So here are some elements I'm suggesting could be essential for Liturgical Practices:

ELEMENTS OF LITURGICAL PRACTICE

- ▶ **In Relation to the Person:** Performance of preferred identity (definitional ceremony)
- ▶ **In Relation to Culture:** Criticism and Energising
- ▶ A set apart or “special” time and place
- ▶ An Audience (present or implied)
- ▶ Use of experience-near symbols
- ▶ Enactment of *resonant* narratives

There may be others but this is a beginning point

TYPES OF LITURGY

SOME POSSIBILITIES



Here are a few kinds of ceremonies that I've tried over the last few years. Really, this only represents a few of the possibilities but you'll notice that these all fit loosely with some already established cultural ritual.

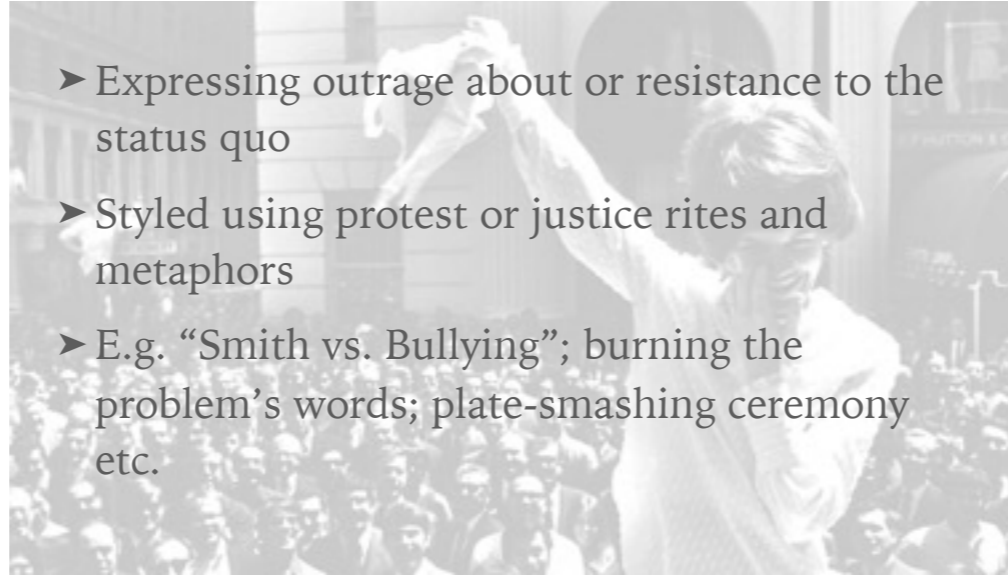
CEREMONIES OF OBJECTION



Smith Vs. Bullying was a ceremony of objection (I use this word because “protest” often seems too Political with a capital P for many people). These make use of cultural narratives and rituals of taking a stand.

CEREMONIES OF OBJECTION

- ▶ Expressing outrage about or resistance to the status quo
- ▶ Styled using protest or justice rites and metaphors
- ▶ E.g. “Smith vs. Bullying”; burning the problem’s words; plate-smashing ceremony etc.



I have also been a part of word-burning ceremonies and...



...a plate smashing ceremony which is a very visceral way of stating objection

CEREMONIES OF INDUCTION



In many cultures these ceremonies are used in professional or religious settings to mark entry into a new *social* identity. I have used them with my clients for the same purpose. They imply the taking on of new responsibilities and privileges.

CEREMONIES OF INDUCTION

- ▶ Marking entrance into a new/reclaimed collective identity
- ▶ Expressing eligibility and responsibility
- ▶ Styled using rites of professional, social or religious induction
- ▶ E.g. Society of Mad Dragon Trainers; Bravery Licence etc.; Guardians of Joyfulness.

In recent months people have been inducted into the society of Mad Dragon Trainers, The Going to America Club and....



...The Guardians of Joyfulness

CEREMONIES OF CELEBRATION AND COMMEMORATION

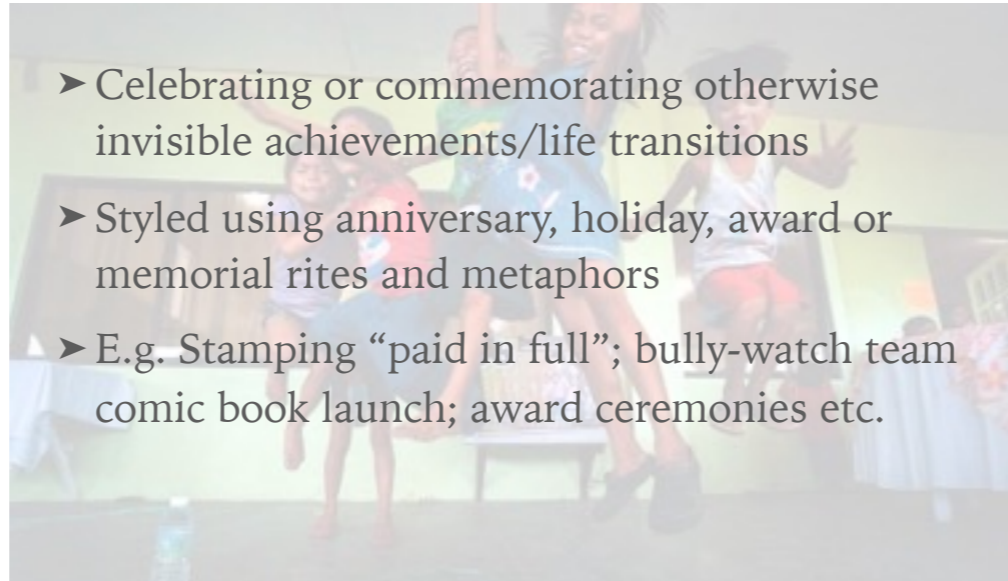


Birthdays/anniversaries are the obvious example of these kinds of commemorative ceremonies but many holidays and rituals of passage (like weddings or graduations) also feature rituals that fit in here. These are happy occasions intended to mark the passage of time and to celebrate achievements or important events. These can be very formative of our sense of what life is about.

To openly celebrate that which is not otherwise celebrated can also be a political act.

CEREMONIES OF CELEBRATION AND COMMEMORATION

- ▶ Celebrating or commemorating otherwise invisible achievements/life transitions
- ▶ Styled using anniversary, holiday, award or memorial rites and metaphors
- ▶ E.g. Stamping “paid in full”; bully-watch team comic book launch; award ceremonies etc.



In my practice these have taken many forms - from awards ceremonies (like the awards lunch for the “team” one of my students formed with his friends to take on Blame and Arguing with Teachers); to parties (like the one young Kathryn had with her family to celebrate her getting control of “I Can’t Do It Worries”); to forgiveness ceremonies (like the one in which Nora decided to stamp the records she had made of grievances against her with “Paid in Full”) and...



to... “Launches” (for example the launch of the comic book I helped one young man create about his intention to stand up for the kids who get picked on); This presentation is acting as this kind of ceremony for me right now - it has allowed me to look back over my work, to reflect on it, recount it to others and now place a marker here in time.

CEREMONIES OF MOURNING

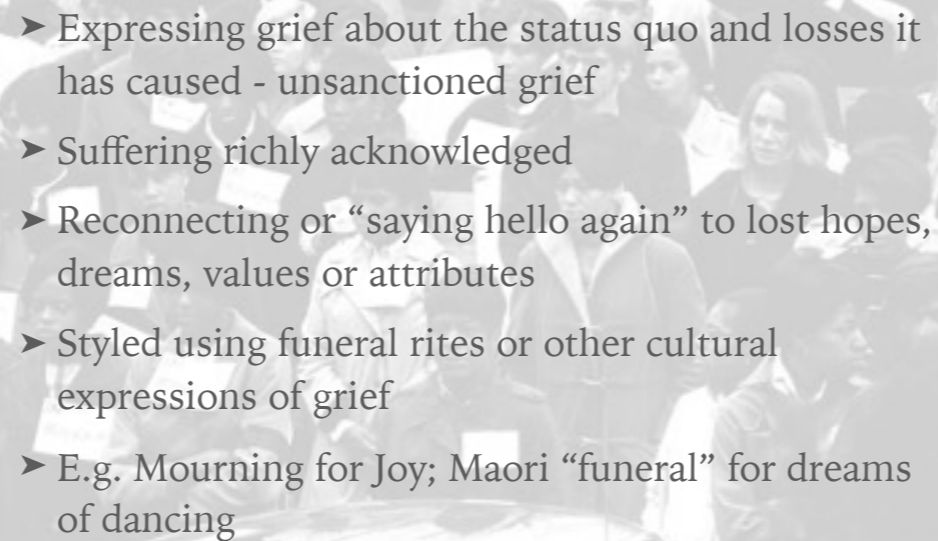


Finally...This is a very particular kind of objection ceremony or protest. One in which suffering is fully acknowledged.

I have initiated mourning ceremonies about social issues and for one young lady's dreams.

These are styled using some of the collective symbols used in funerals but are intended for grief and "saying hello again" rather than defeat or fatalism. This is a way to richly and bodily acknowledge loss while reclaiming that which has been lost.

CEREMONIES OF MOURNING

- 
- ▶ Expressing grief about the status quo and losses it has caused - unsanctioned grief
 - ▶ Suffering richly acknowledged
 - ▶ Reconnecting or “saying hello again” to lost hopes, dreams, values or attributes
 - ▶ Styled using funeral rites or other cultural expressions of grief
 - ▶ E.g. Mourning for Joy; Maori “funeral” for dreams of dancing

I have initiated mourning ceremonies about social issues and for one young lady’s dreams.

These are styled using some of the collective symbols used in funerals but are intended for grief and “saying hello again” rather than defeat or fatalism. This is a way to richly and bodily acknowledge loss while reclaiming that which has been lost.

I want to finish by sharing an example of this kind of work with you - one that’s particularly precious to me.



I want to share with you a story about Jennifer.

Jennifer flew in to Thailand with her family from Myanmar to seek some counselling support around a number of different concerns but especially about Anxious Thoughts.



My therapy work nowadays takes place in Northern Thailand at a centre called the Well.



We mainly work with cross-cultural workers such as missionaries, volunteers or aid workers living throughout Asia. They are often, but not always Christians, and are frequently isolated by geography, culture and narratives of heroic sacrifice and service.



I did some work with the whole family but it was the time that Jennifer and her husband, Jack, and I spent together talking about Anxious Thoughts that led to the ceremony I want to describe for you.

Anxious Thoughts, I came to find out, was very much like a thug that was always right over Jennifer's shoulder making life difficult some days and unbearable on others. It had kept Jennifer in a perpetual state of exhaustion, fear and depression about who she is and how little of a contribution she could make to a world that seemed overwhelmingly full of suffering and poverty. Anxious Thoughts had many horrible things to say about Jennifer - especially about what a terrible mother she was and even how incapable she was of escaping Anxious Thoughts! - and she told me, "I think it's true!"

When I asked her what she had lost at the hands of this thug, she told me through tears that she had lost her Joy, her Freedom, her Energy and her Sense of Who She Is. She hated Anxious Thoughts for taking these precious things from her but there seemed no hope that they could ever come back.

The sense of desolation and grief was so strong that I proposed a fitting response might be to hold a mourning ceremony for these enormous losses she had sustained.

CRITICISM AND ENERGISING

“

Real criticism begins in the capacity to grieve because that is the most visceral announcement that things are not right. Only in the [dominant culture] are we pressed and urged and invited to pretend that things are all right...and as long as the [dominant culture] can keep the pretence alive that things are all right, there will be no real grieving and no serious criticism.

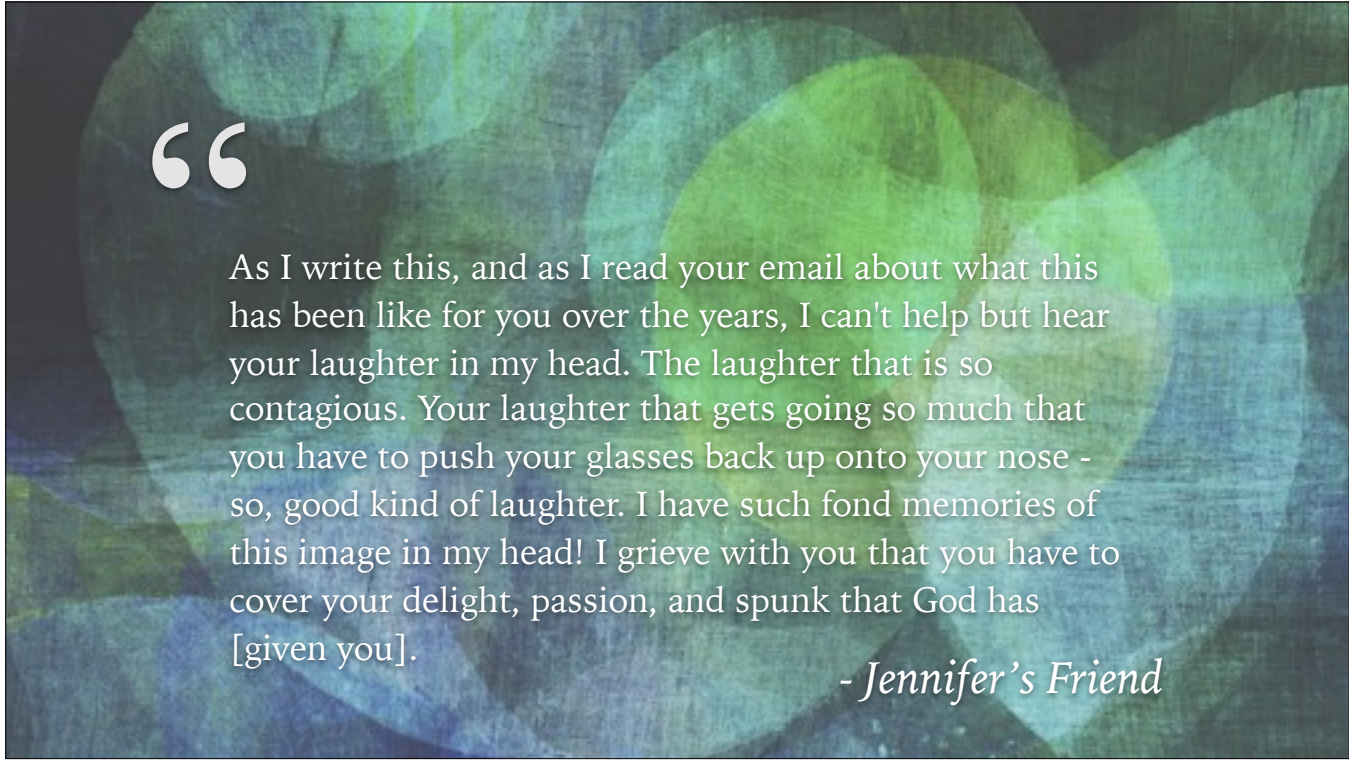
-Walter Brueggemann, 2001

I suspected that much of Anxious Thoughts' power over Jennifer came from the notion - very prevalent in Western culture and especially among cross-cultural workers - that she *should be fine*. She was healthy, she had materially more than most of the women around her, she should be able to trust in God and bear her light sufferings gladly etc. etc. Also that, as a woman, it was unseemly for her to speak her mind or make a complaint.

A mourning ceremony would act not only as permission to grieve but also a statement that things are not fine - not just in Jennifer's life but within the culture she was a part of.

Jennifer was intrigued by the idea but immediately began to question whether it might be a sign of giving up on those things she values in life. This is a very important concern and one that emphasised to me that Jennifer hadn't entirely lost hope! I told her that this has the question of others before engaging in a mourning ceremony and that their experience of the ceremony was one of "Saying Hello again" to those lost things rather than "saying goodbye" or letting them go forever - an idea you will recognise from White's work with bereaved people.

Jack helped me to get in touch with a few friends - scattered over various continents - that Jennifer had chosen to participate in the ceremony from afar. With her approval, he also wrote a "eulogy" of his own and scrounged two or three photos of his wife that attested to her Joy, Freedom and Energy.



“

As I write this, and as I read your email about what this has been like for you over the years, I can't help but hear your laughter in my head. The laughter that is so contagious. Your laughter that gets going so much that you have to push your glasses back up onto your nose - so, good kind of laughter. I have such fond memories of this image in my head! I grieve with you that you have to cover your delight, passion, and spunk that God has [given you].

- Jennifer's Friend

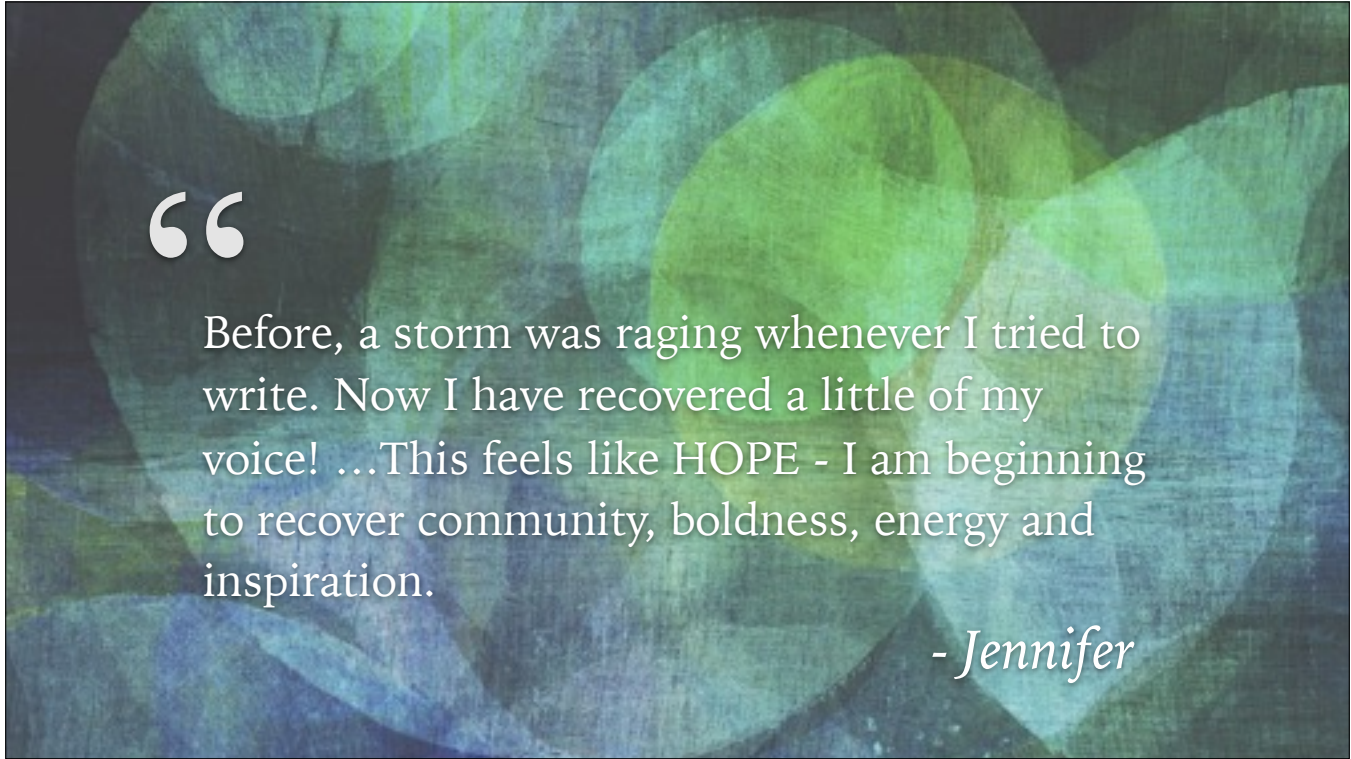
When the day for the ceremony came I rearranged my room, drew the curtains and lit some candles.

During the very simple ceremony Jack and I took turns reading the “eulogies” that Jennifer’s friends had written about her Joy, Energy and Freedom.



We looked at the photos and the two of them reminisced about the colourful clothes Jennifer used to wear and their carefree adventures in nature. There were many tears and plenty of laughing. Finally, we listened to this piece of music which had always encapsulated the Joy and Mystery of the world for Jen and then she lit one of these candles - which my wife had made - to symbolise the beginning of hope again.

I have told this story because, for me, it really well illustrates the dual ideas of Criticism and Energising. The next time I saw Jennifer a few days later she told me that she had spent the rest of the day in reflection and with the heaviness of grief and then she had gone out and bought a journal and begun to write in it.



“

Before, a storm was raging whenever I tried to write. Now I have recovered a little of my voice! ...This feels like HOPE - I am beginning to recover community, boldness, energy and inspiration.

- Jennifer

STAND She told me she hadn't been able to write - something she used to love to do - for a few years until now.



When they left, Jack gave me this old knife with some chips in it because it had been with him on many adventures and he felt it was a fitting gift to memorialise the journey we had been on together.



Like the other ceremonies I have described, this actually didn't spell the end of my work with Jennifer and Jack. Although Jennifer began to recover more and more of her Sense of Who She Was, they came back to Thailand and we continued to expose the roots of Anxious Thoughts in Women's culture etc. and to try to pour water on the "Weed" of her Energy and desire to speak out.

RESPONDING LITURGICALLY

- Write down or share with someone nearby one (small) way any part of this talk might effect **your work, your own life or the life of someone you work with.** Or write a **question.**
- Bring your response and exchange it for a stone to sit in your pocket or hold in your hand and remind you of this effect.

