

4

Ritual Honesty

Holding Truthful Tension

 Ritual making is a serious enterprise. Because rituals are so powerful, a cavalier approach can fail to accomplish the rite's life-giving goal, exacerbate difficulties, or even cause harm. Christian ritual is a rope intertwined with four cords: pastoral, theological, ecclesial, and ethical. What is so artful about ritual is that all these are integrated into a single action. To assure their strength and balance, however, the rope must be sheathed in ritual honesty.¹ The principle offered in this chapter, assuring the honesty of any Christian rite, begins with ethics; for good pastoring is always ethical and all theology should be ethical. Yet implications for the other three strands, pastoral, theological, and ecclesial, will be made clear in stories throughout the chapter. Joanie's story will lead us into five aspects of ritual honesty.

Five Aspects of Ritual Honesty

Every ritual involves giving and receiving, the interaction utterly central to the Christian life. God gives; God first loved us. All is gift. It is inasmuch as we receive that we are able to recognize the gift, and offer back what little we have: our tithe, our thanks. Sometimes deep giving, pouring oneself out for another, can be a true labor of love. It is important not only for the focal persons to spend themselves before the rite, but it can be important for the support persons and witnesses to do the same.

I was delighted to discuss with Grace contributions she and the other witnesses might make to the ritual and thus to Joanie and Frank, to support them each and both in this tenuous and tense time. Grace planned to offer her art form and write a poem. It made me glad, for it would be personal, beautiful, and true, as well as a labor of love, a deep gift for our friend. But then my delight shifted suddenly to distress when Grace announced, "Barbara has offered to bring the main dish for a meal afterward." My heart missed a beat as an uneasy "No!" arose from my spirit. My own reaction startled me, for every liturgy, every worship service, every ritual I'd ever been a part of had centered around food or had ended with a shared meal. And it was right and good for Barbara to make her offering of love and care for Frank and Joanie. But I knew that in this case, trying to share a meal would be a terrible mistake. What was wrong?

It is standard practice in both Christian and other faith traditions to follow worship with a meal. All humans eat; eating (of special foods, in special ways, at special times) underlies the religious and ritual practices of all humanity. What is there at the end of a Bar/Bat Mitzvah, at sundown during Ramadan, after a wedding or Shabbat service or a Lord's Day service? At the end of an ordination, a baptism, even a funeral? There is a feast, a repast, a reception. There is hospitality and graciousness, formal trays of carefully made hors d'oeuvres, vases of flowers, color-coordinated napkins. There is casual comfortability, a warm "help yourself" welcome. There is hot coffee, iced punch, bottles of something. There are aromas to tempt the tongue, colorful patterns to delight the eye. There is plenty. There is, in short, a celebration involving food.

So it was natural for one of Joanie's supporters to begin to plan the meal after the ritualization. This was the death of a marriage. Every honoring of death she had ever known needed someone (who was not the focal person) to coordinate the food—and so she offered.

But on this occasion, sharing food would not have been appropriate. It wouldn't have worked. No one could have eaten. To try to share a meal would have conflicted utterly with what had just been done in the ritual. How could they have broken bread together after they had unraveled the dining tablecloth, separated the furniture, and parted company? Eating together is a sign of unity: one board, one loaf, sharing one meal. But the point of this ritual was that there was no longer a shared table, a common cloth, a united marriage. Trying to eat together that day would have broken the symbol and confused the meaning. It would have enacted forced unity when in fact separation and disunity had just been honestly proclaimed. Trying to eat together on that day would have placed everyone in an untenable, awkward situation. (What would they have talked

about?) Eating together is normal daily fare—but a broken marriage is utterly unnormal, undaily, sad, and tragic (even if sometimes also life-giving and necessary). To try to eat together that day would have been dishonest.

1. A Ritual Sets a Dominant Feeling-Tone

When the dominant feeling-tone of a ritual is compromised or when a dominant tone is selected that is not ultimately life-giving, the ritual is dishonest. For example, Sunday celebrates the day of resurrection, and so always bears joy and gladness—sometimes unmitigated, sometimes muted. Toward the *celebration* end of the continuum, Sunday worship is inherently felicitous and full of praise, thanks, and rejoicing—that is its basic feeling-tone. Therefore, to make Sunday worship ultimately gloomy with no good news is to violate the centerpiece of the Christian faith: life eternal in God through Christ's resurrection on the first day of the week. Even during Lent or even if a tragedy has occurred during the week and the congregational tone is sober, the inherent meaning of Sunday worship is still Christ's resurrection, and thus leans toward celebration.

By contrast, Good Friday is the day of the crucifixion, a day of pain and agony, denial and betrayal. Of course, this is part of the process of redemption, a necessary step without which there could be no resurrection. However, the tonal range of Good Friday leans toward lament and penitence. And this can be a gift for worshipers. To invite persons into the feeling-tone of the day in which Jesus' suffering is made real can enable worshipers to acknowledge their own suffering, betrayal, pain, and agony. The honest connection with sin and death in Good Friday worship can be liberating and highly experientially effective because of this integrity. To dispense with the anguish of the cross too quickly would change the dominant feeling-tone of Good Friday and close off the possibility of persons connecting their own honest suffering with that of Jesus.

It is important for a ritual leader to discern an appropriate affective and spiritual feeling-tone, a movement that is true both theologically and experientially. This is the first aspect of ritual honesty.

In any change there is always a loss, and always a gain. This is part of the challenge of identifying an affective movement for a ritual action. If both are present, which should predominate? In the case of Joanie and Frank, marking the unraveling of their marriage was honest; the covenant "til death us do part" was broken. Yet here, too, was a new beginning

for Joanie's individuation as person and for Frank's career. Is this more lament or more joy?

We will see in the next section that multiple affections are juxtaposed in any ritual: loss next to gain, praise next to lament. Yet before the joy of new beginnings comes the lament of brokenness. This ritual fittingly unravels the marriage. For Joanie and Frank, the dominant tone, expressed by the enacted symbol, was lament for the unraveling of their communion.

Loss can be difficult to ritualize, as noted above, because fear of loss strikes close to home for witnesses and rite-makers. I have seen persons lose their jobs, their pregnancy, their house, their business, their reputation, their health—and their “friends,” like Job's friends, are inclined to treat them as if they have done something wrong, as if they are at fault, separating from them as if their losses were contagious. Yet rites of lament, like Joanie and Frank's, can help persons weep over and accept the changes they did not choose, which is the one essential for moving through to new life. In rites of loss and lament, unwanted feelings can be safely expressed, such as anger or self-deprecation or unnameable feelings similar to guilt or shame. Scripture selected may include shaking the dust off one's sandals (Mark 6:11; Luke 9:5), the Exodus story, or the rich young ruler (Mark 10:17-29; Luke 18:18-29). Such rites can keep the sense of loss from devolving into self-loathing or resentment, both in the focal person as well as in others who may be experiencing unidentified shame due to the focal person's pain. The gospel story can contextualize the focal person's feelings. Hope can come from the promise of walking, even in loss, into the future God is already preparing.

On the other hand, if the focal person really was involved in an ethical infraction or injustice, the tonal movement would be oriented toward lament, confession, and reconciliation. Proclaiming forgiveness would be absolutely essential in such a rite; but if it comes too soon, it could be experienced as “cheap grace” and fail to restore the person to full personhood in Christ. Thus any ritual action would be postponed until these issues are sorted out. A different kind of pastoral spiritual care would first be needed: the focal person would be helped through a process of repentance and amendment of life.

First, he or she identifies one's own responsibility as the cause or source of alienation from self, others, and/or God, similar to step four in a twelve-step program. Second, similar to step five, one names (confesses)

one's responsibility and participation. A ritual setting is often most comfortable for this. Pastors and spiritual guides are commonly ones to hear such confession. Naming before a witness is difficult, but absolutely necessary for healing to occur within the focal person. Third, one corrects the action and makes amends to those who have been harmed. This could be accomplished before the rite but symbolized during the rite. And fourth is the pronouncement or assurance by "another human being" of God's forgiveness in Christ.

The ritual process may involve several months of working with confession and repentance in sorrow and humility, then moving toward planning and participating in a ritual manifesting lament and repentance, forgiveness and relief, gratitude and new ministry.

The first aspect of ritual honesty, then, is to draw not only on the person's feeling-state, but also on the theology of Christian faith, in order to identify an appropriate dominant feeling-tone for the ritual. Ritual honesty calls for the spiritual, affective experience of the focal persons to be juxtaposed with the spiritual, theological truths of the faith in a way that honors their experience and gives life through Christ in the Spirit. Thereby one can create a ritual in which the focal person can find healing or passage grounded in the grace of God.

2. Accommodating a Wide Range of Feelings and Thoughts

Having assessed the most honest dominant tone for a ritual, the second aspect of ritual honesty may seem contradictory: intentionally making room for a wide range of appropriate emotions, dispositions, and affects. Ritual is valuable in healing and passage or transformation because it is a genre—a container—big enough to hold complex realities together in one moment, one event. I imagine ritual operating along a tonal, affective continuum, marked by celebration at one end, and lament at the other. While holding focus on the dominant feeling-tone, it is also important for ritual planners and leaders to claim the length of the tonal keyboard, black notes as well as the white, and learn to play all the chords in major as well as in minor keys. Some rituals may span most of the notes, in higher drama and greater length. There may even be several movements in a single ritual. Other rituals may focus on a more narrow range, lingering down in lament or trilling in joy, tendering romance or tapping in

sharp staccato. All the possibilities from joy to lament are there, but most of us, used to a narrow familiar middle range, shy away from playing notes in the extreme, even if they truly bear upon the situation.

Ritual leaders need to be attentive to a wide affective range, not least because focal persons are often experiencing something extreme that falls outside the average acceptable range, and they don't know what to do with it. In some cultures, for example, it is considered extreme to express outrage, or righteous anger, or to sob loudly. When people have meta-feelings of guilt or shame at experiencing such intense thoughts and feelings, they may try to suppress or deny them. If a ritual planner/leader plays only in the middle, major keys, then the focal person who is down three octaves is at risk of feeling more odd and "out of it" after the rite than before. Ritual composers need to hold a wider range in mind. First, being daring, they need to enter fully, deeply, into the truth of the spiritual feeling-tone of the focal person, even if it should be at the extreme end of lament or the extreme end of joy. They must not shy away from playing the truth. And second, being wise, they need to compose the modulation of joy into sorrow and lament into hope. They must remember that lament and rejoicing are two sides of one coin and that the human psyche holds together sets of competing and contradictory feelings, meanings, and understandings.² Both major and minor chords must be used in any effective and honest ritual.

For example, though the joy of resurrection predominates in Sunday worship, the Sunday after a national emergency will not have the same tone as Easter Day. It would be ritually dishonest to try to cause people to be only joyous when people's hearts are heavy. The spiritual hospitality offered by our Lord makes space in the living room of his heart for the truth of all our feelings and experiences, that they may be welcomed and there find healing and transformation. There is nothing more false than the pretend happiness imposed on a people expected to clap when they can't remember their reason for living. Without the minor theme, it is not a concerto. Honest celebration always has room for those who cannot or do not celebrate that day, and honest lament always remembers the hope attested to by God's salvific intervention throughout history, even in direst times.

On the one hand, then, a ritual has a primary foundational affective and spiritual feeling-tone, theologically understood. And on the other hand, it also makes room to include a contrasting tone or perhaps a multiplicity of contradictory meanings. Like the weeds and the wheat (Matt.

13:28-30), they need to be allowed to coexist. This necessary minor theme is what enables people to laugh at funerals and cry at weddings. The story of Vivian illustrates how openness to a wide range of notes is essential for the music of ritual honesty.

Three days after Vicki made contact with her, Vivian confessed to her congregational women's group that she had become pregnant while in college, given birth, and put her baby up for adoption. After thirty years of longing for a chance to reconnect with her long-lost child, her daughter had called and expressed a desire to meet her birth mother. In tears, Vivian shared her plans to travel to meet Vicki, and the group prayed with her and rejoiced in the possibility of this reunion of mother and daughter. One member, Julia, later pondered how the group might be more supportive, possibly in some ritual way, and thought of hosting a sort of baby shower as a send-off for Vivian's trip. However, the more Julia contemplated the idea, she realized that it certainly could not be a surprise gathering, and that Vivian undoubtedly had even more complex feelings about this situation than she had already shared, which needed careful handling. Rather than risk violating Vivian's spiritual process, Julia decided to invite her to lunch, so she could express the group's desire to send her off in an honest celebration with signs of their love, and to ask what Vivian might like.

Julia was appropriately sensitive to the reality that as blessedly joyous as the "gain" was for Vivian in finding her daughter, the "loss" was very real and present. While there was no denying that celebration would predominate at the ritual, the gain-loss together were a holy and tense truth for Vivian, one anyone planning or leading a ritual must understand and respect.

For some women in Vivian's situation, however, celebration might not be the dominant affect. It might be shame or guilt or anger. A ritual for such a woman would not at first be a celebration, but might be a lament or a confession, perhaps followed by thanksgiving and letting go. Psychological work might be needed first, before a ritual, and perhaps afterwards as well. Attentiveness to the honest situation of the focal person, as well as to the range of feelings honestly present, is the work of the competent ritual leader. Time and care must be taken.

To be able to hear the focal person's heart accurately, it is helpful for the ritual maker herself to engage the full range of human experience from joy to lament. Both are part of the human experience. Both are expressed in Scripture. All are created and redeemed by God. There is nothing too far out to be heard, accepted, addressed, and lifted before the Lord.

Some rituals operate at the joy end of the spectrum. At the far end of joy might be Christmas and many weddings. And at the tip is Easter Day, when all the stops are pulled out and the music is as if from angels. People come dressed in their finest, bringing their relatives and other guests, and the church house is filled with flowers and trees and color and swooping banners. Neighbors and strangers appear in eager anticipation, and the hinge point of the year is gloriously manifest in undaunted extravagance.

On the far end of the lament tone are rituals for occasions when both human and divine spirits have been violated. Ultimate injustice, degradation, unfreedom, hatred, falsehood and dishonor challenge the very possibility of living in relationship with self or God or one another. These are cases in which ritual action is most needed, yet these rituals are among the most challenging to prepare, such as when a community is touched by senseless violence. In such cases, lament is a normal human affective response.

Perhaps the best expression of lament is found in the Bible, especially in the Psalms. For example, Psalm 137 is a lament, reflecting the experience of people who were ripped from their homes and force-marched to Babylon, where the foods, the language, the religion, the culture were utterly foreign. Its final verse (v. 9), aimed at Babylon, is especially difficult: "Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!" Many versions of the psalter omit that verse altogether, and few sermons are preached from this text. However, when these verses are taken as lament, as anguished outcry by a violated and victimized people, this ceases to be interpreted as a scandal in the biblical canon. Instead, it becomes not a call to action but a normal, nonrational outrage fantasy. Anyone who has had to witness an act of intentional violence to a loved one will be forgiven for *feeling like* doing the same to the perpetrator's children.³

Many, by the grace of God, have never experienced "the hour of lead," as Emily Dickinson called it.⁴ But many have known such inhuman trauma that their sense of "normal" has been violated to the core. After appropriate psychological work, such feelings are exactly what can be healed or transformed in the ritual process. Forgiveness takes time, and comes with healing. Some wounds, those that cut down to the inner flesh, must heal from the inside out. If the skin closes over too quickly, infection will set in, and not only does the wound itself not heal, but the whole organism is at risk of death. To live requires keeping the wound open long enough for it to heal at the deepest inside place, and work its way out. The healing process, therefore, is extremely painful.

For some agonies, expressing lament with all its feelings can be the first step in healing: the core outcry from an unspeakable pain. And the feelings of lament are legion: anger, rage, self-deprecation, immobilization, apathy, self-absorption, shame, guilt, taintedness, flatness. Typically such extreme emotions are well worked with before a rite, in pastoral care or counseling, in anger work, in retreat and spiritual guidance, with deep nurture, and the rite would come later. This is what happened to Joanie. In other cases, a rite needs to enable the person to begin the very throes of such pathos, and bring it into the context of the sweep of salvation and into contact with God's tender lovingkindness. As Don Saliers puts it, worship is always a moment when human *pathos* is brought into juxtaposition with divine *ethos*.⁵

Sometimes the true name of the pathos cannot be found. A good ritual, however, can allow the feelings to exist, and often to be healed, even without being named. Thus ritual honesty requires the leader/planner to identify and evince the dominant feeling-tone or melodic line inherent in the ritual event, and then the secondary feeling-tone, while also including harmonies and disharmonies with all the consonant and dissonant overtones, without denying or avoiding chords that seem contradictory. When this happens, a healing juxtaposition is created between theology or belief (that is, "Nothing can separate us from the love of God who has covenanted us with each other and Godself") and the precipitating affect or feeling (such as "I want to kill someone, to die, to give up, to explode in rage"). Through the ritual, participants may find themselves singing in a new key (for example, "In this solidarity, I find my first energies turning into hope and a desire to build something new, good, healing, redemptive"). This juxtaposition of hope and lament is central to Christian theology, Christian worship, and Christian daily living. Gordon Lathrop refers to it as a "juxtaposition of contraries," which God creates and redeems, always "for the sake of life":

The Christian liturgy . . . embraces contraries: life and death, thanksgiving and beseeching, this community and the wide world, the order expressed here and the disorder and chaos we call by name, the strength of these signs and the insignificance of ritual, one text next to another text that is in a very different voice. . . . The mystery of God is the mystery of life conjoined with death for the sake of life. The name of this mystery revealed among us is Jesus Christ. The contraries of the liturgy are for the sake of speaking that mystery. It is by the presence of these contraries in the juxtapositions of the *ordo* that Christians avoid the false alternatives so easily proposed to us today.⁶

Holding contraries together is more difficult than it may seem. Because North American dominant culture is inclined to hold the expression of emotion to a reasoned mean, a contained balance, a “no big deal” moderate middle, the import of ritual honesty might be missed. Sometimes, the dominant affect of a rite is at the extreme: extreme joy or extreme lament. And when this is the case, the planner/leaders must carefully, courageously enable the *truth of the extreme to be evinced within the safe container of the ritual*. For example, does the death-cracking beauty of worship on Easter day express the zenith of hope and gladness? Is lavishly abundant joy demonstrated in new artistic creations just for Easter, in the clothes of the participants, the glorious music, the participation of the people, the extravagance of procession? And on the other end of the continuum, does worship after the devastation of a natural disaster, or an act of violence, or every Good Friday liturgy, manifest the honest anguish of utter tragedy and loss through ritual wailing, woe-filled silence, words and music of dread and sorrow? An honest ritual allows the fullness of the dominant experience and tone to be expressed, without suppressing the minor secondary tones. In services of celebration, loss is always present; and in liturgies of lament, hope is always manifest. But jumping to hope too soon, or glossing over the lament, renders a ritual dishonest.

One of the wonderful things about ritual is that, like a powerful symbol or a poetic word or a piece of artwork or Scripture itself, ritual can hold the paradox of opposites together without homogenizing them or choosing between them. Participants in ritual can relax into an event that honestly reflects life’s complexity and our response to it. There is no need to pretend in an honest ritual or to cut off part of oneself or cover over a few aspects of last week or deny or suppress large chunks of our feelings or our questions or our doubts. There is no need to leave half of ourselves (which doesn’t seem to fit the agenda) at the door. There’s room not only for each of us, but for *all* of each of us.

The ritual action must be emotionally honest. It must allow the range of feelings persons bring to worship and to hold a truthful tension. Vivian was blessed to have someone with Julia’s ritual fluency and competence to comprehend that although she was thrilled to meet her daughter and to celebrate with her friends, it would be emotionally and ritually dishonest to lean toward a celebration that ignored those thirty lost years and denied periodic interjections of guilt and grief. Vivian was in the hands of someone she could trust to make a ritual great enough to hold the whole

truth together at once. Therefore, she could relax and focus on receiving the ritual gift: freedom to express and have witnesses to her lament, loss, guilt, gratitude, joy, and future; to tend the family relationships; and to make whatever spiritual turns she needed to make to be utterly healed and free in face of the gift of Vicki in her life.

Every day Vivian has to choose within her emotional self: Where shall I place my focus? In the shadow of the tomb, the guilt and pain and loss thirty years ago and every day in between? Or in the light of the resurrection, giving thanks for my daughter, well raised, now in my life for me to love? Both are true. Sometimes she is tempted toward the tomb. But by the grace of God, almost every day she turns toward the resurrection. To pretend that there is only resurrection and not a real death is to ignore the wounds on Jesus' hands and feet, to deny the truth, to lessen the power of God's work of redemption, and to attenuate, dilute, or "shallowize" the honest daily experience of Vivian's life.

It seems to be human nature to seek stasis, the familiar, even if the balancing act and exertion to hold on means ignoring the evidence or subtle suggestion that the picture is larger than we can see. Faith involves trusting the bigger picture beyond our reach, the picture that includes death, but also resurrection. Our faith gives us a worldview based on the paschal mystery: that there is real death and that this death in Christ is the very seed of life.

Competent ritual avoids an easy stasis, and enables manifestation of truthful tension. Climbing down to the pit of pain and risk is the only way to climb up the other side. Death always, in the fullness of time, gives way to resurrection. This is the Christian hope.

3. Ritual Symbols Must Be True

Having acknowledged the ethical obligation for ritual to be emotionally honest, first through honoring a dominant feeling-tone and second through juxtaposing a secondary tone and perhaps several (even contradictory) beliefs and emotions, we turn to the related third aspect of ritual honesty: that through the tone, words, symbols, actions, persons, and music, rituals *enact what is real*. Ritual does not point to a reality, but it enacts a reality. Its symbols are not tokens or decorations, but loci of value and power.⁷ Rituals are where something happens. Something changes. No one leaves a ritual action the same. Rituals are real.

Ritual honesty is an extension of the principle that Christian ritualization engages the paschal mystery in the deaths and resurrections of our daily lives. And resurrection only comes after death. Beginnings only come after endings (and the liminal or neutral zone in between). Without real death, the “life” afterwards holds little meaning. Symbols must be true. That is, symbols must actually signify something. If there is no reality, there is nothing to signify, and any attempt to do so is false. Exchanging wedding vows and rings before the ceremony not only renders the ceremony meaningless, but it turns the exchange of rings into a private devotion with no witnesses to the public reality of a new family created in our midst. Symbols and rituals are real. They change reality; they effect reality. Ritual honesty requires honoring their truth and power.

It is for this reason that work needs to be done before the rite. Psychological or spiritual changes needed must be established before the rite so that the ritual can effect the passage. It is the ritual that creates the change. The focal persons’ status is different at the end of a rite of passage than at the beginning. And if the persons are not ready to pass over, the rite will be false; worse, they will be stuck in a pretend world. They were not ready for the changed way of being, but now, having participated in a ritualization, they may feel they should be. It is easy to be caught in immobilization between what one’s inner state is (stuck in the past) and what one’s public persona is (passed to a new stage). When a graduation ceremony is held before the final papers are submitted, the rite is false, and energy to complete the work can be sapped. When a wedding occurs before the commitment has actually been made on the part of the people, divorce usually follows soon after. When a Quinceañera is given for a young woman marking maturity on her fifteenth birthday, but in fact she is neither mature nor responsible, the new freedoms granted to her can result in disaster. The power of a ritual occurs when it completes and makes real a reality that has already been in the making, for which there is preparation and readiness.

For a ritual to be honest, a temperature must be taken of the honest situation of the focal person. It is critically important not to allow something untrue to be signified. Thus conducting rituals too soon can create a dishonest ritual.

Joanie and Frank’s ritual was not too soon. It was conducted at the very end, long after there was any hope of the marriage’s self-correction. Vivian had worked through to acceptance over the years. She wisely gave

herself a month to prepare for her visit to Vicki. Julia's ritual for her would be planned carefully with no hurry; it would serve as an emotional-spiritual bridge to the public acknowledgment of this reality. A ninetieth birthday celebration might not be conducted on the exact day of the birthday, but it would not be done in the eighty-eighth year, either, for that would seem more a spoof than an authentic celebration.

4. Ritual Involves Everyone Present

A fourth aspect of ritual honesty is the importance of not forgetting that everybody in the ritual will be affected by it: not just the focal person, but all the participants. While the focus is on the person seeking healing or passage, all the persons present are worshipping, all the persons are caring, all are listening, all are witnessing, and all will come away changed by the experience.

Like the performative arts of drama, ballet, or symphonies, ritual exists only while it's happening, in its enactment. The score or playscript or ritual words are guides to the event, but they are not the event themselves. Yet in spite of this similarity, ritual differs from all of these performative art forms because in ritual, *all are performers*. There is no audience. In this way, ritual action is less like a drama and more like a conversation in which all are participants, though the style and strength of participation may vary. Ritual is a group experience.

While storytellers are compared to sinners of cotton or wool, recounting an ever-lengthening "yarn," a conversation may be compared to a weaving in which a thread, wound through various designs, can be followed through the whole tapestry. The conversationalists are group contributors to the story. There is a covenant of honesty and trust. Conversationalists pay rapt attention to the subject and to each other's contributions, for all share responsibility for the golden thread woven through the whole. One person shares an insight or piece of information. Another connects that insight to his own experience, personalizing the content, increasing intimacy in the group, and en fleshing the insight. Someone else picks up the thread and weaves it into a book she is reading. Several then comment on the book, a subconversation that goes on for several minutes. Then the thoughtful, quiet one in the corner elegantly twists several ideas together, so that the original thread is reintroduced in a now strengthened floss with more meaning than before. The result is unique;

it belongs to those who were there, who created it together. It is not a “product.” It is not visible. But it exists with force, and it may be remembered forever. When the conversation has integrity, everyone is uplifted.

If each person focuses on the shared topic, contributing from experience, then there is trust that each one can also work on one’s own connections and insights. However, if one person dominates, the flow is stopped, corporately as well as individually. If there is a leader or host, the job is not to control the conversation, for that ruins it, but to attend to the structure: inviting a quiet person to speak by asking an earnest and related question, for example, or deflecting a dominator, or serving refreshments to renew the spirit when there is a lapse in the energy. A good conversation makes room for all its participants.

Like a conversation, a ritual has a leader who attends to the structure (sequence, timing) but does not control the activity as one would control a computer program or a power plant. Like a conversation, some speak with fluency, some hardly speak at all, yet all levels of participation are honored. Like a conversation, a ritual has a primary thread that participants have covenanted to knit, relate to, and unwind, while individual connections and insights are constantly clicking. Like a conversation, ritual action is a covenanted activity. The ritual is successful inasmuch as everyone enters the covenant, which is sometimes explained for newcomers. Like a conversation, certain manners or etiquette serve as shorthand guides for keeping the covenant (Don’t talk when someone else is talking. If you can, stand to sing, sit to listen. Honor God in posture, silence, speech.) Like a conversation, there is a deeper ethic: don’t cause people to reveal more than they wish to reveal, don’t violate confidentiality, hold everyone’s freedom intact, be sensitive to everyone’s vulnerability, keep the covenant of not dominating or stopping the flow. Be honest. And like a conversation, each participant in a ritual will come away with something personally, uniquely for him or her, even though it has been a communal event, centered on the focal persons, and always on the Holy One who is greater than all of us put together.

Thus, like a good conversation, at the end people feel refreshed and satisfied, for they have participated in something greater than themselves, something uplifting, something true and honest. Honesty is essential for any good conversation and any good ritual. If untruth is spoken, if people put on airs, then the event is fake, a waste of time, and can sometimes even negate the spirit of celebration it was intended to honor.

5. Allowing the Creative Tension of Opposites to Abide Together

Related to the importance of openness to a wide range of affective themes in a ritual and assurance that everyone will be invited to participate is the fifth aspect of ritual honesty: allowing the inherent tensions to live without resolving them. The tension of two perspectives is aptly illustrated in the story of Rick and Maureen.

Rick was sick of his job, but felt that he couldn't quit because he felt an overwhelming responsibility to provide for his family. While he usually didn't complain, he sometimes managed to relax and talk about his dreams, which entailed a very different life from the one he was living. His wife, Maureen, worried for Rick, since he was so obviously miserable and increasingly distant, but all her efforts to encourage him to quit and follow his dreams met with resistance and sometimes fights. When the day came that Rick found himself laid off from his job, Maureen broke out in spontaneous jubilation, thinking this was a blessing, opening up the possibilities he was avoiding. But Rick, already frantic about how he would meet his family obligations, exploded over her apparently crazy behavior. Maureen didn't seem to understand the direness of their situation, and Rick felt overwhelmed by rage, loss, and now loneliness.

What Scripture would you choose for a job-end ritualization for Rick and Maureen? How would you honor the honest risk, Rick's fear, and the huge unknowns, on the one hand, and yet allow the possibilities and promise to be present on the other?

In preparation for this ritual, it would be very important for the leader to acknowledge the tension between Rick and Maureen, and far from avoiding it, to help them work with it, through the developing of a metaphor. The tension is difficult, but true. It is creative. There is a gift in it that may be found if, instead of denying or disparaging it, the couple can be guided to enter into the tension with gentleness. For example, the leader might help this couple with a process of naming each one's thoughts and feelings, and helping each to generate a vibrant metaphor expressing the opposites and contradictions. Here is where a metaphor is exceptionally helpful, for metaphors hold tensions. If they can work with metaphor, they will be able to enter into the tensive middle ground just off shore where the tide seems to be both coming in and going out at the same time.

But this is *tensive*. Entertaining both his anger and her joy at the same event creates tension. In a highly stress-filled culture, many approaches to eliminating tension have been created, including laughing, minimizing, and deflecting. For a ritual to mediate any power to heal or transform disparity and honest conflict, however, the ritual leader must make a container strong enough to hold the tension of honest conflicting thoughts and feelings. This does not mean that every rite has equal parts of joy and sorrow or gives each thought or feeling equal weight. But one cannot plan the ritual without knowing truly the weight of all the feelings Maureen and Rick are carrying, and without allowing honest tension to be part of the rite.

In our current dominant North American culture, the word *tension* usually has a pejorative connotation: tension is avoided; tense muscles hurt. Without critical reflection, even religious leaders tend to avoid or mitigate tension with strategies that may become unconscious, as if stress were bad. Cultural quips invite sliding over stressful situations, relationships, feelings, thoughts: “Get over it”; “No big deal”; “Just do it”; “Whatever.” But actually, tension is what enables humans to walk and stand upright. Stress on bones makes them strong. The difference between “stress” (normal) and “distress” (not normal) is invisible.⁸ Unfortunately, “tension” is usually uncritically judged to be distressful.

Falling into the “Avoid: too tense” category, then, have been such topics as lament, sin, and death. The cultural context makes it easy to deflect attention from unpleasant realities, and to avoid engagement with people, places, things, and ideas that one would prefer not to face. Families stand smiling in funeral receiving lines thanking people for coming. With the notable exception of some indigenous peoples, Christian rituals of remembrance of a death, on the one-month or one-year anniversary, for example, are rare. Rick is having difficulty facing the loss of his job. Both are having difficulty facing the tensive difference in attitude between them. This is a case of tension, indeed. Whether it finally will become a life-giving tension depends partly on the skill of the ritual maker. Rick is deep in the throes of lament. But the common experience and repertoire of lament is woefully limited in this cultural era. The challenge is to allow the depth of his lament and the height of her joy to abide together, in the preparation and then in the ritual, so that (like a concerto) honest hope may be celebrated at the end.

There are important worship resources for emotional honesty and holding conflicting feelings together in the great church traditions.

Hundreds of years of prayer and poetry, Scripture and song, have enabled such sensitive subtlety and tensive truth to be biblically and artfully expressed. All human life experience has ups and downs, joys and sorrows. This is the stuff of novels and artwork; lament and praise fill the pages of the Bible.

The churches have found one significant way to honor the highs and lows of life over a broader sweep, so that extreme joys and tragedies may be honored without a weekly emotional roller coaster. Through the seasons of the church year, supported by the Bible readings selected in common lectionaries for proclaiming and preaching in worship, the great changes in life tone can be honored.

For example, Lent is a time fitting for lament, sorrow, repentance, and confession. Like rainy days, it provides a sorrowful context for allowing one's sadness, guilt, anger, and depression to find expression, yet without sinking into it as a way of life. There is room for mourning and crying out. When the music and colors along with the Scripture and words set an inward context for self-examination and honest naming of pain and uncomfortable memories, it is easier for people to face such truths, without having to swim up a stream of "stiff upper lips" or "just do it." Something as simple as the pastor's insistence that at coffee hour during Lent only pretzels would be served (with coffee and juice) makes the point. One notices a difference. Together, simplicity is practiced. It helps.

In contrast, the unfettered joy of the Easter season can dramatize the opposite and allow sublimated joy to arise from the dead and shout freely. The church year, seasons of our salvation, makes a place for tensions in our affective lives where they can be received and honored with a *rhythm*: a seasonal rhythm in which each has its time, and all can be expressed.

How will the rhythm of Rick's and Maureen's contrasting tones be expressed ritually? Perhaps their ritual will need several movements. Perhaps some of Rick's friends will help him express his worry and self-deprecation, and his anger and frustration at Maureen, telling his story and finding Scripture and other writings to express his angst. Perhaps he would help write a prayer litany to enable him to lay it all on the altar of the Lord. Perhaps this ritual would be in one corner of the room, and Maureen and her friends may be in the opposite corner, witnessing.

In the second movement, perhaps Maureen's friends would help her do the same: tell her story and express what she sees and how she feels, and enable her to name her longing for Rick's dream fulfillment and the

trapped sense of having had her hopeful insights considered unloving. Rick and his friends could witness this ritual.

Then perhaps the third movement, in which they approach one another, then stop, posing questions, expressing desires, perhaps yelling at first, dancing toward and away from one another. Bit by bit, the yelling becomes singing, the chaos turns to Scripture, perhaps some whimsy is included, and perhaps they repeat their marriage vows, as bit by bit, they move toward the center together. Perhaps a symbiosis in nature, two different creatures who give each other life, may be a defining metaphor. Perhaps, with the help of a caring and competent ritual leader, they may add new statements of avowal to their marriage vows, promises and assurances relevant to the vulnerable and creative moment in which they find themselves. The tension will keep them honest. The vows would assert union in its midst. Communion might complete this ritual.

The ritual being planned for Frank and Joanie would include the loss, the unraveling, of their marriage, yet also include thanks for what they had created together; some aspect of healing the pain between them; prayer to honor their now separate futures; and perhaps a new covenant to replace the marriage covenant. This is a wide range. The basic feeling-tone, however, would be one of lament. It would mark a new life of not-communion. On this occasion, there needed to be no main dish. And there needed to be a leader who could see this, and say it.

In Joanie's ritual, Barbara came to understand that after such a ritualized ending to the marriage, it would not be possible for the six of them to break bread as one body. Frank wouldn't want to be there; no one could have eaten. So she let go of the idea of a potluck, and gave herself to thinking of other ways to care for Joanie and Frank in this time.

So then, if there's no potluck at the end, no standard closure, how could Joanie's and Frank's ritual be ended? Would there be a way to finish such a ritual of ending or separation gently and send people off in separate directions without an abrupt stop or a forced communion? Here are some of the ways I imagine it could have been:

- They could have a reverse "unity candle"—one candle lit on the dining table, with two tall glass votives on either side, and two tapers. Each could lift a taper, light it from the single candle, then use it to light one of the tall votive candles. After extinguishing the tapers, together they blow out the single candle. Those who are there could ask God's blessing upon each of them, and call

upon them to honor one another and their past with its gifts to each other, and to honor the future of each one's individual journey. Then they could each depart separately, even in silence, carrying the tall votive light with them, leaving several minutes apart or leaving by separate doors.

- Or there could be a prayer, perhaps one person giving thanks for all they have shared, and asking God's blessing upon the children and each of them, and guidance and strength to honor each other. Then the peace of Christ could be shared. Perhaps they could each receive one of the piles of thread, which would signify both the togetherness of the rite that honored the marriage and now its unraveling, and the individualism of their lives as now unwoven threads. Perhaps the women could retreat upstairs together as the men carried out the agreed-upon furniture or left the house with Frank. In this way they could still leave separately, in silence, perhaps.
- Or perhaps they could go out to the back yard, with the piles of thread. In a designated place, with a trowel handy, they could dig holes, and each place her or his wedding ring in the hole with some of the thread, and cover it over—and then scatter some seeds over the ground, that out of this death, something new may grow. Then with a closing prayer, they could in silence walk around the house to the driveway, and each drive away separately.

It's hard to think about. The ritual makes stark the reality—which *is* stark, and one doesn't want to face it—which is exactly why the rite is needed. Together, gently, through symbol and symbolic action, those gathered can enable the facing to happen. Ritual makes anguishing truth possible to face and to bear. The communion between them is broken, and this is sad. But thinking about it this way does make it *real*. There's no covering over here, no pretending that it's no big deal. It is a huge "deal." It is life shattering.

There must be hundreds of ways to end a separation rite in honesty without the standard potluck. The only definite is a closing prayer—for they must each leave with a prayer for God's blessing upon the children and all the fruits of this marriage, for each to continue to receive and live the gifts given, and for each to honor the other. A prayer. Something given and received as an enacted sign. And silence to hold the sad and sacred tenderness, the holy honesty, which the six of them, by the grace of God, will have witnessed.

Such grace occurred also at Vivian's ritual, thanks to Julia's response after her luncheon with Vivian. Vivian confirmed Julia's instincts: they would not dwell on the painful decades, for finally, this was a time of celebration; but they would not gloss over them, either. Julia created a flow that included the primary interaction of giving, receiving, and thanksgiving, inviting everyone to come and to bring a gift. At the event, the hospitable space and pattern was like what one would do at any baby shower: greeting guests, a place to put the gifts, offering drinks. Then there was a sequence of story telling and sharing food, for in this case communion was right and good, needed and longed for. There were tears and laughter. The gifts were sensitively selected: a birthstone bracelet with three stones, and a place to add the fourth. Storybooks for children that captured the poignancy of Vivian's circumstance. Gift cards to enable her to take Vicki out to lunch. A balloon that said, "It's a girl!" And there was a talking circle: a candle passed around, each one free to speak while holding the candle. Some women affirmed Vivian, how glad they were for her, how much they respected the way she was handling this. Others briefly shared stories of their own pains. The circle had started next to Vivian, so that she spoke last. This gentle structure created for her the space to tell more of her story, however much she wished, of loss and hope, pain and joy. There were words, symbols, action. Vivian later expressed her thanks for the ritual structure which was strong enough to express any joy or anguish that needed to be said, yet without expectation that she would respond in any particular way: "Thanks for your support and celebration, in such contrast to the loneliness I'd felt when I gave my baby up for adoption all those years ago. Thank you for this gift of freedom, and of peace."

Once empathetic listening reveals that creating a ritual is what will enable healing or transition for one of God's children, we have reflected upon *who* should participate (a community of ritual husbandmen and midwives). And we have identified two answers to the question of *how*: enacting a defining metaphor and engendering ritual honesty. Before concluding with *why* we do this—leading the baptized to the experience of resurrection living—we examine the third answer to *how*: mediating the labor of holy sacrifice.