

Welcoming in the Day

Background

How might a day unfold in a more Spirit-filled, meaning-generating way, both in design and content? It was out of this searching, both personally and in retreat settings, that the ritual “Welcoming the Day” began to take shape. I came to see that how we started the day set a focus by which we look at the unfolding hours until sleep. Little did I understand initially how subversive this ritual might be and how beneficial it could be for those working on reconstructing their life narrative.

The search posed a forthright question: how revelatory will we let time be for us? There is a deep urge inside of us, connectedly intimately to the very core of being human, that searches for meaning in how life sequences unfold, be they marked by a few hours or several years. Yet this urge is severely quelled by the dominant metaphors we generally use for *time*. These metaphors seem to group into two themes: time as *resource* and time as *money*. Listen to how we talk about time – “saving time, wasting time, not enough time, too much time, budget my time, spent time wisely/foolishly, loss of time, effective-ineffective use of time”; so the collection goes. This way of mapping a day is so mechanical, so bereft of Spirit, thus resulting in the dehumanizing constriction of meaning affecting not only our self-perceptions and stories but also how we relate to the entire creation around us.

I’m not sure when, in the last four centuries, a mechanical reading of reality, laced with an economic ideology took over and replaced a more revelatory narrating. But the consequences are events being measured by their productivity. Time is used to measure work which then calculates into how much coinage can be secured in exchange for that work. People and events are thus measured for their value in the language of economic exchange. The rest of creation and the technology used to manipulate and process it all are evaluated only in what can be produced and what is marketable.

For many First Peoples life is experienced as far more revelatory than these ‘time’ and ‘resource’ themes permit. Events, sequences, the diurnal flow of day and night, animals and inanimate entities conveyed special, spiritual meanings, bring special messages, give correction and exhortation. The dimensions of awe and wonder still persist where the dominant culture has not completely overpowered the imagination. What can we learn from their perspective that will help transform the captivity we experience in our dominant mode of economic values while at the same time not romanticizing their history nor skimming some froth from the surface of their experience?

First People’s openness to the revelatory dimensions of time is not solely unique. There are spiritual traditions which approach time as revelatory. Some, like the Benedictine tradition, organize the day and night into key moments of intentional praise and gratitude. Using sacred texts these traditions call us to consciously place the variegated themes of human existence into sacred moments which attune us to the presence of The Holy. These traditions are a strong, compelling antidote to the mechanical modes of being

human, opening the mind and heart for recasting a day's unfolding story in themes of praise and gratitude.

Evidence of an even more ancient tradition is found in the Creation Story of Genesis 1.2-2.4. Each day of the week reveals new, magnificent, awesome manifestations of the Creator's work climaxing in rest being given Holy status. This tradition grew out of the excruciating painful experience of the Israelites being bound in exile, carried far from their homeland where bereft of temple and priests they could not even "sing the Lord's song by the rivers of Babylon." A marking of days into 7, each with their own signal of God's goodness incarnated in the very fabric of creation, gave the homeless not only a sense of identity but renewed hope. Their clinging to the 7 day week, a strange, isolated way for marking time in the 5th century B.C.E., demonstrates how critical the way we talk about time is to the meaning about life. Metaphors and values we use in our thinking about time are not mere casual meanderings of the mind, but are life-shaping and drenched thoroughly with meaning.

All of these threads caused me to ponder yet another question. If time is revelatory, what would I look for, what gifts, what motifs, what would I name as flowing from the heart of the Creator. What signals, in other words, are so embedded in the way life is put together, the way creation is constituted, pointing toward the flowing stream of creation? How should I focus my eyes so as to shift away from the dualistic treatment of dividing reality into material and spiritual, and begin to embrace wholeness? Some of the discoveries I made with these questions are found in enflashing this ritual over the years.

Why a Ritual?

A ritual is a performance of meaning. That is, it is a mini-drama that intends to convey a particular frame of reference. It is not merely story-telling or stringing together a series of gestures and words. It creates a narrative flow in which decisions and actions can be formulated. What we now know about how humans ponder and think, in whatever language they use, that there is a flow that brings together facts, logic, imaginings, realities, causes-and-effects into a coherent stream with a beginning and an ending that makes sense. These constructions, or what is known as "frames", are what enable us to think, make judgments, process information, weigh up values, decide and act. These frames either permit or constrain the options that are available to us. Rituals are "frames" that can speak us into new ways of being or confirm an existing construction of reality.

It is no small thing to note that humans are 'ritual-makers'. Making meaning, making sense out of life is the fundamental human vocation. Each day is lived in a landscape of meanings and values all of which are conveyed to us and from us through a wide range of rituals, or frames, many overlapping, some conflicting, yet by and large coalescing into a consistent perspective. It is for us individually to decide which portions of the landscape are oppressive, effective, liberating, irritating, satisfying, boring, challenging, and mundane. We then cast our selections into a frame which in turn determines what we will next select and report on. Changing what we select is possible only as we have access to a different frame of reference, enabling us to detect new information which we can then

evaluate the stories we are currently living into. This kind of change – a change of perspectives – brings a different way of looking at life, reframing life.

Such change does not come easily. It does not consist of merely doing more or less of the same thing, accelerating one activity and putting the brakes on another. Planning more time, for example, to meditate and less time for watching TV, usually results in a very short-lived resolution. A fundamental narrative frame has not been transformed. In this particular example, the primary metaphor for time, money, has not been replaced; one is still talking about ‘budgeting’ time, only with different activities, accounts, as it were. The landscape hasn’t changed, to go back to the notion of a frame being the landscape we choose to see and use; only a bit of furniture has been rearranged.

A transformative ritual has two ingredients: A new metaphorical frame and consistency in practice/performance. In the case of the “Welcoming in the Day” ritual, the metaphorical structure for time shifts to the revelatory, the giftedness, the awe and wonderment, the surprise, the empty vessel waiting to be filled – all of which stand in stark contrast to the metaphors of “resource”, “money”. The ritual has a consistency of gesture and language making it easily accessible and performed no matter what setting one finds one’s self. The evolution of the ritual into its present form draws upon the experience and feed-back of dozens of retreatants over the years, suggesting that it contains the essential ingredients to be transformative.

In what follows I have outlined the ritual and then provided some additional notes. I also have put together a compendium of additional background materials which are available by writing me: wford@azwest.net, requesting these additional comments.

WELCOMING IN THE DAY

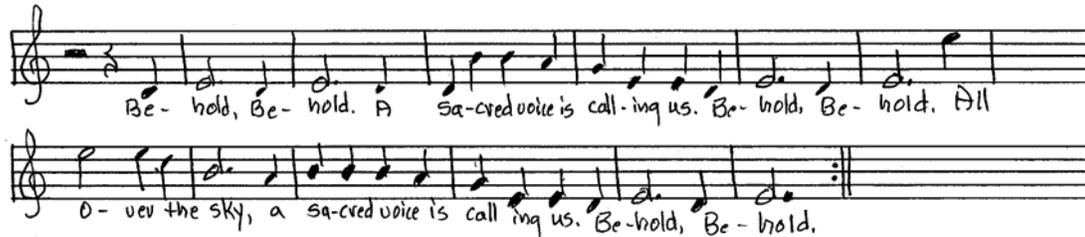
STEP 1

The ritual begins with a period of drumming. Usually there is an initial searching for the right beat which creates a sense of the Heartbeat of the Universe, the Pulsing Presence of the Spirit. The rhythm then settles into place creating a deepening mindfulness of being fully embraced in sound and pacing. It continues until that sense permeates the space around the participants.

(In some places and instances, using a drum would be inappropriate. I have found that tapping two carefully selected stones together will suffice, especially if one is doing the ritual in solitude. Also the use of a bronze prayer bowl can bring to consciousness the sense of pulsing revibrations.)

STEP 2

Continuing the beat, begin a simple chant, one easily memorized. The chant should convey an invitation into openness, a sense of awe. I have used the following over the last several years.



STEP 3

Reading from a sacred text and/or Prayer Book. (The selection should be an earth-centered Psalm, either traditional or contemporary)

STEP 4

Praying the Eight Directions

After turning toward each direction and invoking the gift of that direction, gesture receiving the gift by letting the hands pull the gift down toward the body and ‘washing’ the entire body with the gift. Repeat the gesture in each direction 4 times.

1. We (I) turn to the North and receive the gift of integrity
2. We turn to the East and receive the gift of illumination
3. We turn to the South and receive the gift of creativity
4. We turn to the West and receive the gift of wisdom
5. We turn to the sky and receive the gift of generosity
6. We turn to the earth and receive the gift of reciprocity
7. We turn to each other (Those around me) and receive the gift of community
8. We turn to our hearts and receive the gift of compassion

STEP 5

Having received all the gifts we need for the living of our day, let us turn to one another and give the gift of Peace, of Shalom, of Well-being. (If this is a solitary experience, name the persons whom you might meet this day and imaginatively send them this gift).

STEP 6

Blessing the Paths to be taken

(If outside, use ground corn-meal; if inside a gesture of sowing will suffice)

1. Standing, being centered, breathe in “I receive”, breath out “I give” – 4 times.

2. Take 4 steps to the east: with a pinch of cornmeal, touch the forehead, the mouth and the breast and say: “With my mind, my speech, my compassion I bless this path”
3. Take 4 steps to the south: with a pinch of cornmeal, touch the forehead, the mouth and the breast and say: “With my mind, my speech, my compassion I bless this path”
4. Take 4 steps to the west: with a pinch of cornmeal, touch the forehead, the mouth and the breast and say: “With my mind, my speech, my compassion I bless this path”
5. Take 4 steps to the north: with a pinch of cornmeal, touch the forehead, the mouth and the breast and say: “With my mind, my speech, my compassion I bless this path”

STEP 7

Conclude the ritual with this chant:

All shall be well;

And all shall be well

And all manner of things shall be well.

The Sketchbook for Welcoming in the Day: Notes Along the way

1. Why use 8 directions?

- a) Up, down, front, back, side to side these are the directions we sensually perceive and attach meanings to. “Above us”, “below us”, “in front”, “behind”, “aside/along with” all have metaphorical range. By attending in all these ways we as humans take in reality, we are ritualizing the comprehensive community of Earth, of The Universe. It recognizes that every aspect of creation is present to all other aspects.
- b) Nothing is left unattended in seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, and tasting all round us. We are, in effect, developing and strengthening our **qualitative** relationships with all of life which stands in contrast to the usual way of using creation **quantatively**, that is for what it can produce for us, routinely framing creation as natural resources to be used to satisfy human appetites. As soon as we began to see everything around us as a qualitative presence to be communed with, we set about restoring an integrated relational perspective.
- c) All life is infused with Spirit. Everywhere we look there is liveliness. No aspect of creation is devoid of consciousness, be it at the sub-atomic level or the fully animated, organic level. This does not mean we worship “nature” – pantheism; rather we recognize the presence of God is all of creation – pananthesim.

2. What gifts do we invoke?

- a) If the purpose of the ritual is to reestablish the qualitative relationship of ourselves as humans with all of creation around us through intentional openness to the revelatory nature of that relationship, then what we anticipate will come from the core of that relationship. There are, no doubt, a variety of ways to name the elements, the characteristics, the essential ingredients of this all-inclusive relationship. I have drawn on the insights of cosmologists, mystics, theologians who have reflected deeply on the question: what constitutes the core elements of our relationship as humans to all of creation, to The Spirit, to The Heart of the

Universe. There would be, of course, other ways of naming these characteristics, but for now these seem workable to me.

- b) **Integrity** All of creation is an intricate web of relationships, from the smallest conceivable entity imagined through chaos theory to the complex, vast stretches of the entire universe. The relationships cannot be escaped; reality is integrated. The human, it seems, does have the capacity to imagine that reality is not integrated, but is cut-up, dualistic, bifurcated. We do this probably because the way we think and speak, and therefore perform our meanings, uses language that has subjects and objects, me-and-the-rest. It gets us by. But also creates barriers: between the human and the rest of creation, between humans themselves, and even metaphorical barriers between “I” and “me”. The gift of **integrity** restores a sense of wholeness, a sense of life being lived relationally, and heals the destructive elements of our frames of divided reality. It is the first gift to which we become open, the healing touchstone to restore relationships around us and within us.
- c) **Illumination** The opening of the day celebrates the earth’s turn toward our immediate source of life-energy, the Sun. All of life is dependent on that flow of energy. Those waves of energy also make it possible for us to see our way throughout the day. “I can see clearly now” captures all the various themes we build around the experience of illumination. When the light is partially blocked or drastically reduced (as during the night), we find our way with less certainty, greater perplexity. The gift of **illumination** is necessary for us, not only for our physical survival, but also for our inner journeys.
- d) **Creativity** For some time we have been aware that every entity is in the constant process of inventing itself. Take for example, the human body, composed as it is of complex large visible systems the size of arms, legs, head as well as equally complex systems the size of atoms, molecules, cells. All of these are continually in the process of replacement, modifications, adjustments, the exercise of “novelty” as Alfred Whitehead once noted. . Creating, bring forth the new, is going on all the time in and around us. As humans, we also can self-consciously invent and re-invent – and do every day. By invoking the gift of creativity, we are in a sense reminding ourselves of a fundamental activity that is going on, much of which is beyond our conscious awareness. As humans the question becomes “What are we creating? What are we inventing?” does it contribute to the well-being of life around us or does it cause harm and injustice. As I, for example, invent my speaking today will what I create bring sustenance to relationships or cause them damage? The question can be applied to every act of intentional creativity which we as humans engage in the course of a day’s event. **Creativity** is an extraordinary gift. In invoking it, we are placing ourselves the role of responsible stewards for the use of that gift.
- e) **Wisdom** The human is not the only part of creation that learns from experience. Earth itself, having gone through several major catastrophes which almost extinguished all life forms, continued to learn from these experiences, learn from the evolutionary experiments and brought forth new forms of life while retaining important elements of the previous stages. Harvesting lessons – wisdom – is an integral part of the creative process. For us in our time there are vast resources of

wisdom in the human adventure alone, in addition to the multi-dimensional experiences found in all other aspects of creation. In invoking the gift of **wisdom** we become aware of the choices we have as to what lessons we will use, which we will set aside and why. Thus, the wisdom we chose to live out in the day ahead, signals what values we cherish. And alternatively, the wisdom we seek comes out of what we consider to be precious, of authentic, genuine value to us. This direction reminds us that it's not that we lack wisdom, it's which lessons we will attend to.

- f) **Generosity** The fecundity of creation is evidenced all around us. The air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat, all are rich in the necessary nutrients we need to life. There are, of course, seasons of scarcity which are intermingled with the seasons of abundance. The human can exacerbate the seasons of scarcity through excessive demands on soil and resources. Yet there is a vibrancy of offerings which seem to counter our poor stewardship of resources driven by wanting more, demanding more than is necessary to sustain life. The sky is a metaphorical drama of these offerings. Even when the humans pollute the atmosphere with toxicity, rains come to cleanse and bring quite literally fresh air. We humans can plant, but then must wait for the sky to create the conditions for growing the crop. The sky itself is flung wide and open, limited only by the shape of the horizon, reminding us of the generous openness of the Spirit which is limited only by the horizons we create and maintain. We invoke **generosity** to remind ourselves that we have a choice this day between trusting the abundance of life or pleading its scarcity, which requires us to hoard, protect, and seek to preserve with our bigger barns, which can diminish the size of our soul-fullness.
- g) **Reciprocity** The anticipation of the revelatory, moving into a frame of awe and wonder, requires a commitment to perceiving all of creation as relational. In our human activity we find it necessary to divide, subdivide, and on to the most infinitesimal unit we can conceive of. But these categories, useful that they might be, can also rob us of the sense of the whole, the sense of being at one with all of creation, with all of Earth. Reciprocity is an inherent quality of this oneness: there is a constant give and take occurring and upon which the whole is dependent. However, as humans, we can grow obsessive with the taking to the point of accumulating beyond what is required for a sustainable life. Our great human settlements also rob us of that direct connection with the sources of our food, our nourishments. Our abstractions, such as money, replace face-to-face reciprocity. Invoking this gift returns us to look for ways to express our gratitude in receiving, the satisfaction in giving, and the intimacy that results from these daily transactions.
- h) **Community** As the gifts we receive accumulate, we begin to appreciate how Earth is composed of a rich variety of communities, not just species and subspecies, not just what's useful and what's not, not just what natural, unnatural, not just what is human and non-human. These communities grow out of a consciousness of each other. If consciousness is awareness, than no entity is devoid of some kind of awareness. Even the rock, in its molecular construction is aware of the temperature, of its geological origins, the lichen which is living and feeding in its crevices. The dragonfly's community is visually much more

complex than the human. For the human, consciousness is layered with the capacity to ponder the meaning of what we are aware of. And so we give name and meaning to a variety of relationships, some human, some including other entities, other parts of Earth. In invoking the gift of community, we are opening ourselves to discover during the day the communities in which we live and what they mean for us.

- i) **Compassion** What is the glue that hold all of reality together, that evokes and sustain all the other 7 elements? Here we come to the foundational question, where we must stake our faith commitment. What is at the Heart of the Universe? Already I have stated my conviction in using this metaphor: Heart. I am willing to commit that it is compassion. I believe at the Center of all there exists there is *unconditional compassion*, having the *intensity* of the energy flowing from the initial flaring forth that birthed the Universe, having the *extensiveness* of the entire Universe so that nothing is exempt from its infusions, *enduring* from the very beginning moment so that there is no decline, no diminishment, being *adequate* for all conditions and states. In invoking this gift, I open myself to being totally infused with unconditional love and thereby by representing it throughout the day in however I am, even faltering ways.

Finally there is this: Morning is a time for setting the frame, the intentions for the day, planning, preparing for the days activities and relationships. It is a time for creating through ritual a frame that sets an alternative intentionality for the day that is not subject to the pervasive themes of production and self-aggrandizement that includes both the realistic demands for survival as well as the vocational work of awe and wonderment.

The work of setting the day's frame is done in anticipation of transformative moments during the day. These moments are the events of the small self – myself – meeting the great Self, the movement, quite consciously, between the particular mode of existence, my own, and the universal mode of relationships. Morning is a time for anticipating the connections between my life and the whole universe without “passing through the intervening space”, as Thomas Berry speaks of it, the “subjective presence of all things to each other.”