

A selection from:

OTHER/WISE
VOLUME 7
SPRING 2012

Autobiographical Discoveries

RITUAL — REMEMBERING — RETURN

BY RUTH NEUBAUER

First and foremost, I was delighted when I had the opportunity to present this paper at the IFPE 22nd Annual Interdisciplinary Conference, to esteemed colleagues open to creativity, new ideas, and imagination. When I left my own Passover/Seder table in spring 2011, the idea that the Passover story “from slavery to freedom” was analogous to the therapeutic process, simply popped into my awareness and rather than ignore it as I often do, I sent a proposal to the one group I know to be open to such musings, IFPE, with thanks for letting me play with these ideas.

If creativity is rooted in the complexity of the capacity to play --- and the capacity to play emanates from a sense of safety, an internalized sense of “the other” and “the capacity to be alone”, then to actually execute creativity implies having the ability to go inside, taking all that is known from inside and outside, messing around with it and constructing it anew - perhaps resulting in something like the analytic third - a new fusion.

So here I go - into the unknown, sitting still with thoughts of Return and Ritual and Remembering - each common to the Story of the Passover and the Therapeutic Process itself.

I have divided this paper into the three main topics of RITUAL, REMEMBERING, and RETURN and woven into each some analogous thoughts to the way we work as therapists.

I begin with a poem by Schlomo Carlbach about RETURN:

Return again, return again, return to the home of your soul,
Return to who you are,
Return to what you are,
Return to where you are,
Born and re-born again.
Return again, return again, return to the home of your soul.

This poem speaks to me of the essence of both the message of the Passover story AND the therapeutic process. It is the journey to the Promised Land, which the annual Passover celebration honors, both in ritual form, and as a mandate to experience the Exodus “as though you yourself came out of Egypt”;

Ritual – Remembering – Return

By Ruth Neubauer

AND it is the internal journey we set as an intention and hope for our patients to help them let go of old ways of thinking, behaving, and believing in order to return to their “true selves”.

Let me begin with **RITUAL**:

Ritual is defined by one of my old Webster dictionaries: as “a ceremonial act or action, a formal and customarily repeated act or series of acts - an established form of ceremony.

In and of itself, It does not have any deep significance.”

What is important about ritual is that it marks endings and beginnings and as such marks Time.

I would like to say a few more words about TIME, paraphrasing some of Arthur Waskow’s discussion in his book “Seasons of our Joy”.

In the Jewish year, there are two holidays bearing the significance of “Beginnings” - incorporating times of self-reflection with times of celebration. One is Passover in the spring, the other is Rosh Hashanah - the Jewish New Year, in the fall. These holidays of beginnings grow out of a notion underlying the Jewish calendar, based on the cycles of the moon. There are two kinds of Time - historical and cyclical.

Historical time is linear movement centered upon progress and development. It is time created by humans and is set arbitrarily. Its symbol is the constant sun - it is found in clocks and calendars.

Cyclical time is circular and consists of recurring patterns. IT is established by nature, found in the four seasons and symbolized by the moon with its phases.

Both are necessary. At Rosh Hashanah, we commemorate the new year of creation, when our successes and failures are tallied. As we mark the New Year, an evaluation of our own progress is required.

At Passover we note the coming of spring, which marks the beginning of the timeless natural cycle. The four seasons and the festivals of these seasons ask us to confront three great themes, liberation, revelation, and redemption, each and every year no matter where we are at that moment in our own life cycles.

We need the process of self-evaluation of historical time to rouse us to change and foster creation and progress. With only cyclic time each season would come to resemble its predecessor, nothing would seem to change. But we need cyclic time to give us perspective on the dangers of constantly seeking progress. If historical time teaches us that to be alive is to move, cyclic time teaches us that sometimes to wait in place is more important than moving on. Both kinds of time are present in this holiday. We are not concerned so much with WHEN something occurred, but rather with the MEANING of the events. Both kinds of time at moments merged, at moments separated, are required and guide us as we travel through life.

My image is of a spiral - each season we come back to the same place on the curve but we are at another level, another moment, another reality.

Ritual – Remembering – Return

By Ruth Neubauer

THIS TOO IS ANALOGOUS TO THE ON-GOINGNESS OF ANALYSIS AND PSYCHOTHERAPY.

IT TAKES BOTH KINDS OF TIME.

AND PERHAPS THINKING ABOUT TIME IN THIS WAY IS HELPFUL FOR US, AS THERAPISTS, TO HOLD AND CONTAIN IN DEEP UNDERSTANDING -

AS OUR PATIENTS OFTEN STRUGGLE WITH HOW LONG CHANGE AND THE PROCESS OF THERAPY TAKES.

BACK TO RITUAL:

Knowing that whatever we do, no matter how simple, has a halo of

imagination around it when we imbue it with celebration and ritual, can enrich life and make our lives and all that we honor, more precious, more worthy of our protection and care.

As in a dream, a small object may assume significant meaning. In a life that is animated with ritual, there are no insignificant things. When traditional cultures carve elaborate faces and bodies on their chairs and tools, they are acknowledging the soul in ordinary things, as well as the fact that simple work is also ritual.

However, RITUAL for ritual's sake distances us from that very same preciousness originally intended. This seems relevant both in rituals we perform in our personal lives as well as in psychoanalytic work.

How do we continue to imbue meaning into ritual and avoid the more unconscious compulsion to simply repeat?

I think the answer is that we must bring it back to ourselves in honest pursuit of conscious awareness; take the questions seriously each time; seize the opportunity for deeper understanding and for on-going practice; and do it with "evenly hovering attention" - making no assumptions, realizing we do not know, coming to the questions and the listening as a beginner each time.

REMEMBERING

Each year the Passover ritual mandates us to tell and re-tell a story of liberation from slavery to freedom. Why? Because we learn by repetition and because it is important to remember. How do we remember? By telling and by experiencing. We tell and re-tell the story of moving from enslavement to freedom - as symbol, as myth, and as spiritual truth. It is an old tradition involving conscious repetition in order to remember. It is not meant to be a form of unconscious repetition compulsion but rather a conscious, spoken spiritual journey from darkness into light in full awareness.

The story itself tells of the deliverance of the Children of Israel from Egyptian bondage, through peril and in the face of impossible odds. It is told and re-told "as though I myself" made this journey. This emphasis on each of us personally IDENTIFYING with the journey is what brings this telling and re-telling

Ritual – Remembering – Return

By Ruth Neubauer

into the present **insisting** we personalize the story in order to foster deeper understanding and the courage to continue through our own personal wilderness into the light. The Hebrew word for Egypt stems from the root word meaning “narrow, constrained, inhibited”. Thus to say we must leave Egypt is to say that each one of us must struggle to break out of our narrowness and free ourselves to attain full potential - spiritual, emotional, psychological. What could be more analogous to the analytic process?

The Passover Haggadah (the Telling) was arranged by some of our unknown ancestors and rabbis primarily as a lesson. They must have regarded it as a means of instruction. It is the child who is stimulated and invited to begin the lesson by asking questions. In ancient times, the Passover meal and its ceremonies preceded the recital of the story itself. The child would naturally ask why the observances of that evening took the form it did as it was different than usual. Today it is part of the traditional observance that not only children but also adults conduct themselves at the Seder as STUDENTS, asking as many questions as they can about the Story of the Exodus.

The Passover Seder is a moment to sit still, to ask questions, and to bring the questions and the root story home to Our Selves. The word “Seder” means “order”, suggesting both the formal “order” of the Passover Celebration and making Order out of Chaos.

With RETURN as the overall idea for our conference for which this article was written for presentation, I find myself thinking that the ritual itself is a reminder that to stay alive in the process of personal growth, we must tell and talk, reflect and self-reflect, and Return. Return to our soul, to our true selves, to our past history for understanding, and to our in-vivo process of living in the moment similar to how we understand transference in the psychoanalytic dyadic experience itself. The Seder ritual, as psychoanalysis, then becomes a way of addressing issues of personal honesty and awareness in remembering the journey from our own “narrowness” to opening up to beginnings, to spring and re-birth, to new ways of thinking, reminding ourselves to ask questions. Again and Again.

So many concepts of psychoanalytic understanding are common elements:

questioning and re-telling; going back into childhood (remembering); working through our narratives (returning); repetition (ritual); and the importance of the “examined life”.

RETURN

So we are told to return to the story, as we do in therapy, and to wonder and to ask:

“When I look at myself in the mirror after this celebration of freedom (after this insight; after this session; after this week; after this emotional experience; after coming to this revelation or understanding) - who will I see? Will I have changed? Will I have learned? What do I need to practice?

We return each hour we attend our therapeutic work.

We return to our therapist over and over again.

Ritual – Remembering – Return

By Ruth Neubauer

We return to our stories and our pain over and over again in order to understand and hopefully create new choices rather than fall into our old patterns.

We return and talk and tell in order to see and experience our old well-established patterns which we didn't even realize were patterns - hoping to be aware and able to make the necessary changes to open to new possibilities.

We return to our perils, traumas, impossible odds, "resistances" - in order to work through them with someone who helps us understand what we do not consciously know ourselves.

We return to our childhood, our parents, our siblings, our dinner table, our early teachings, our extended families, our environments, our deeply-felt and not-understood ways of coping - our defenses - to identify, recognize, see and come to behave in new ways.

We return to basic questions of ourselves, our relationships, our habits, our thinking patterns. QUESTIONING is a sign of freedom, proof that we are free to investigate, to analyze, to satisfy our intellectual and emotional curiosity. We may find that not every question has an answer and not every problem can be solved but the acceptance of that truth is another stage of liberation. It is in the answers for our SELVES that we experience and understand the true meaning of both the Analytic Process and the Passover story of the Exodus.

We believe that with RETURN we will acquire self-awareness, impulse control, and compassion for ourselves and others. We believe that with RETURN we will have more courage to face the unknown, to take the next step, to create our own story rather than simply enact and continue our same old ways.

Rabbi Brian Field of Judaism Your Way in Denver, Colorado says this:

"...Moses and Miriam and Aaron lead the Israelites on that journey through the wilderness to the Promised Land. We call the beginning of that journey the EXODUS and...that is the story of the Passover..... This is a version of one same story: leaving old paradigms behind that no longer help us grow and journeying towards the promise of something more spacious, something freer, something more purposeful....Jewish FAITH," he continues - "**is participation** in the story - .not simply a belief that it happened, but that it is happening all the time and it's happening to YOU, even NOW.....You have the potential to take the next step. You can move into the unknown. You can openly meet whatever the next moment brings."

In sum, it seems to me that the therapeutic process and the Passover Seder share the same basic intention, the same basic reminder, the same belief in the positive outcome in the journey from "slavery to freedom".

In that process we explore and must work through the meaning of constraints, patterns, how our minds work, what stories we are attached to, as well as the meaning and complexity of freedom itself, expressing our unique creativity, exploring our potential, and having the courage to renew and review what we believe about our identity.

Ritual – Remembering – Return

By Ruth Neubauer

We ask:

What tight spots do I need to leave?

What buds and sprouts of change do I see in myself and in the world around me?

What questions do I need to ask?

What tales do I need to tell?

What songs do I need to sing?

THANK YOU

Cactus Spiral



Ruth

Neubauer, LCSW practices psychotherapy in Denver, Colorado (rneubauertherapy.com) and is co-founder of “Retirement” or WHAT NEXT™ for Women Over 50 in Transition (retirementorwhatnext.com). As a Certified Instructor in Journal to the Self® Workshops, she also conducts small group journal-writing workshops for groups of Women, Retirees, Working Moms, and First Generation American Adult Children of Jewish Refugee Parents, or for any general group.

She is on the faculty of The Washington School of Psychiatry and continues to teach courses to non-professionals called: “Psychoanalytic Ideas for Everyday Living” at OLLI-DU-Denver (about which she spoke at IFPE in Nashville).

She is a graduate of the 3-year program of the Washington Center for Psychoanalysis New Directions Program, for clinicians and writers. Ruth plays Medieval and Renaissance music on recorder, is a published poet and serious photographer (www.liminalspace.com) who has often had her photography in the offices of colleagues in Washington, DC.