

# Psychodrama, Ritual and Ceremony

## As Katrina Prepares to Die

### Anna Heriot

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I have become very interested in the ways we approach dying and death, loss and grief, mourning and remembering in our culture. Often, these days, people have warning of their impending death, are able to take decisions about their efforts to remain alive and attend to the process and ways of their dying. Such fore-knowledge offers great opportunities to live fully in the mysterious cusp between life and death, to attend to unfinished business and say what needs to be said.

This is Katrina's story and the work we developed together. I have italicized particularly psychodramatic reflections.

#### **The Protagonist Forms The Group**

Katrina had breast cancer, emphysema, and then cancer of the perineum over a five year period; she had worked hard to heal herself. Virtually bedridden for over a year, she finally said "No" to further medical interventions. She came home to die. She wrote a group email to her friends and family, entitled "No more miracles."

Katrina was keen for us all to appreciate her desire for us not to be sad, though she accepted there would be some tears (not her favourite expression of emotion). Rather she looked to us to appreciate her relief at letting go of her life,

which for her had become intolerable. She let us know she was not afraid to die. Instead her fear was of pain, she had had so much. She described herself as a "control-freak to the end."

The core group of auxiliaries formed after the email

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| Barry     | her partner, to continue sharing her life and to look after her with help from her many friends. |
| Lisa      | her eldest daughter as her Medical Power of Attorney   |
| Brenda    | her oldest friend and soul sister who had offered to care for her if it was too much for Barry.  |
| Anna      | writer and conductor of her funeral ceremony and backup support.                                 |
| Carolanne | old school friend, provider of food and support.   |

As it turned out, though there were many visitors at different times, we were the core group who stood vigil with her till her death. I use the word vigil to describe the time we gathered around her, having arranged to stay with her till she died

Whilst Katrina's invitation to me was to write and conduct the funeral ceremony, I was also

a friend. Inevitably this meant being part of her preparation for dying, dealing with key relationships and unfinished business in her last months. I began immediately to tune in to her and her primary concern. At this stage I was working more from a Morenian framework than a ritual one.

My roles at this stage included that of a *Supportive Double* and *Mirror* as Katrina reflected on the ramifications of her decision, the responses of her family and friends and explored her arising doubts and fears. Such explorations had not been a common activity for her. When we met to discuss the ceremony she talked of her preparations. She often said she only cried with me. As we developed new ways of working together, I drew on my psychodrama training to build a good relationship and make an assessment of her.

*The protagonist has come forward. At this initial phase I saw her as warming up to a good, rounded conclusion of her life with courage and focus, well connected to her broad social atom.*

*She was determined to be herself to the end of her life, taking responsibility and attending to her own and others' needs as best she could, with as much direct truth, laughter and good times as possible.*

*I valued the way she had put herself forward. I felt she had established a good purpose, we had a good working relationship and I warmed up to working with her in a similar spirit and taking up my role/s as fully as I could.*

### **The Roles, Social Atom and World View of the Protagonist**

I knew something of Katrina's life already. I came to know much more. Such intimate knowledge was essential in the process of being alongside her in reflecting on her life and what the funeral should involve. I began to appreciate that Katrina had overcome difficulties in her life and made something of herself. She became qualified in a field she valued and applied and developed her knowledge through her

work. She valued and nourished a wide group of friends. Her social atom was diverse and enjoyable.

She was able to act for herself. She had her car sold, gave away her clothes, farewelled her email lists, let go of her books, all of which she had loved.

She also grappled with her criticism of her current partner and her desire for him to be different, her often tense relationship with her second daughter and her anger with her former husband. She had had strong relationships with her parents, now both dead. Her relationships with her sisters had always been quarrelsome. She managed to reconcile with one.

### **Subgroups on the Stage**

Through the next weeks the following overlapping subgroups emerged:

- Family members
- Old friends who came as much as they could, accepting her dying, sad yet enjoying their last days with her. A number of these old friends spoke to her of conversations they had had with friends and family about death and dying which they would not otherwise have had. Their experiences were very moving and they were filled with gratitude.
- Old friends who could not talk about her dying, yet came to visit her for the last time, not quite able to say good-bye.
- Young people (children of her friends), who loved to visit her and have their growing lovingly probed by her questions of their central concerns of love, sex, desire and ambition.
- Helpers, some of whom had just met Katrina, who loved to visit and talk to her.
- The Blue Nurses, skilled, calm and compassionate professionals who became friends.

As I articulated these subgroups to myself, I realised that all these people constituted her social atom. It also increased my appreciation

of the communities of interest surrounding Katrina. Each subgroup engaged in their own particular way and Katrina, having made such a bold invitation, was content with their different responses. She was able to appreciate the ways they came towards her.

She was sometimes bemused by their desire to be with her and their valuing of their experience. For herself, she allowed herself to surrender to enjoyment, as much as her pain would allow. I understand that, in Victorian England, it was deemed to be spiritually beneficial to spend time with the dying. I began to understand what they meant.

### **Spiralling in to the Centre of Katrina's Social Atom**

In this phase, three family dramas emerged: with Marilyn, Katrina's youngest sister, Toni, her middle sister and Peter, her former husband.

Marilyn, Katrina's youngest sister had relinquished her first born, Carol, for adoption in secret. Her estranged husband now threatened to reveal the truth to the family and seek his daughter out. Marilyn was deeply ashamed and wished to keep the secret intact, first telling Katrina and then seeking to bind her to continued secrecy. Katrina refused. She fought with her sister, declaring that all the children had the right to know their family. She set about organising this, all from her bed. Carol visited her, with her adopted mother. Through Katrina's interventions, the half brothers and cousins began to meet. There was much celebration welcoming the one who was lost, even if unbeknown. Marilyn maintained her determination to have nothing to do with her daughter.

This valuing of reconciliation and truth became part of the design of the funeral. In her final message Katrina enjoined her friends and family not to wait to attend to their unfinished business and to simply realise that love is the most important thing. She herself did not reconcile with Marilyn and, though sad, accepted the

result of the choice she had made.

*In my meeting with her we both wept as she spoke of Marilyn's decision, its results and her own determination to bring Carol back into the family. I valued her strength of emotional will and discrimination as she took up her role as family leader, speaker of truth and mentor of healing relationships. She was also sad, feeling some anger and compassion towards her sister whilst accepting of her decisions and the effect on their relationship..*

With Katrina's other sister, Toni, she took significant time to work through their pattern of life-long quarrels. Six months earlier I had conducted the wedding of Katrina's youngest daughter. Katrina had asked her daughter to invite Toni, who was after all her aunt, in spite of her fears that Toni would initiate a fight. We had taken time and effort to engage Toni in the wedding ceremony, with admirable success. Toni was very touched to be so included and the ceremony was very healing for her and for Katrina and her daughter as well. She and Toni had spoken several times on the phone, quite self conscious and a little shy in this new phase of their relationship. Toni was initially reluctant to share the vigil of Katrina's dying with her, but arrived for her final farewell just as Katrina was slipping away. It appears that Katrina had waited for her to come.

*I continued to mirror and double Katrina. I let Katrina know I was impressed and moved by her courage and persistence in her relationship with Toni. Whilst she had not, in her life, been at all averse to a good fight, she was keen to find other ways now and to conclude her relationships with peace where she could. We agreed that she had done well.*

Katrina remained angry, hurt and hostile to Peter, her former husband. These feelings kept bubbling up in spite of her best efforts. In this, too, she was determinedly honest. At the end, she was simply wanting them to let each other go. She tried to talk to him on the phone at different times, sweating with anxiety. He also made some attempt to respond, but sadly was

unable to meet her or respond to her off-beat offers.

*We understood, as we reflected together, that one cannot always be freed, just as Marilyn was unable to let go. At a certain point, Katrina simply acknowledged that she had done what she could and left it at that. I appreciated and mirrored her dignity in her recognition in herself that 'this is how it is' with them both.*

### **The Writing of the Funeral Ceremony**

Katrina had some things to say from herself; she wanted to appreciate Barry, her partner, honour her children in truth and love, as also her wider family and friends. She also wanted to leave a final message about the centrality of love and forgiveness in life and the importance of attending to unfinished business. She also invited three other people to speak of her: she directed Brenda to write the eulogy. She invited Frank, a former lover who, with his wife and children, were firm family friends. She also asked Phillip, a spiritual counsellor, former colleague and mentor. She required particularly that they each speak the truth about her and they accepted whole heartedly. She sent them web references to assist their writing. She intended to live as she was till her death: no shrinking violet, no humble, grateful invalid, at times a bitch. Her daughters and partner were invited to speak if they wished to - they each declined, they were satisfied that the ceremony would go well and relieved they did not need to gird themselves up for this extra effort.

*Katrina was directing her own drama at this stage. Katrina's choice of honest, loving presenters left them free to speak of her love for her, from the very centre of themselves, without fear of sentimentality or deception. At the funeral they told stories which rang true, made us laugh, cry, and appreciate the fullness of her. The speakers did as she asked; the guests were moved, delighted and enriched. Her family was able to relax, secure in the love and truth of the speakers, laughing and crying as they listened. As inevitably happens, everyone learned something new about Katrina.*

### **Dying: The Creation and Holding of Ritual Space**

Katrina was able to die at home, as she had wanted. We rearranged her room with comfortable couches making a circle with her bed. There were favourite decorations, flowers and candles and her things in easy reach. We in the supporting team kept the room clean and tidy and inviting throughout the vigil.

We took turns to sit with her when she was no longer conscious. We spoke to her and read to her and included her in our conversations. On the morning she died a final family drama emerged. Barry, her partner, had become distressed, overwrought with his own grief and had wanted to bring in nurses to care for her. He complained to the Blue Nurses that we weren't 'proper' nurses. They, in turn, appeared to suspect that we were activating an assisted suicide. Barry met the nurses at the door, his voice rising in distress. Brenda, Katrina's oldest friend, murmured that the shit was hitting the fan.

I drew Lisa (Katrina's daughter) and Brenda onto the verandah. As a group we acknowledged Barry's distress, affirmed Lisa's role as Medical Power of Attorney and Brenda as her support and reconfirmed our collective intent to continue carrying out Katrina's wishes. They went to out to the sitting room to talk with Barry and the Blue Nurses. I returned to Katrina to read poetry to her, holding her hand. Carolanne (her old school friend) sat quietly at her feet. I heard little of the meeting; Lisa and Brenda drew on their relationship with the Blue Nurses and their compassion for Barry and an agreement was reached. Just as they were scattering - to have showers, get a hamburger, check the children - Katrina opened her eyes wide and took a big breath. We just had time to assemble everyone, with Barry, Lisa and Brenda close around her, when with a soft breath, she died and everything was still.

*As Barry emerged as a protagonist, I took my authority to warm up Brenda and Lisa to their roles.*

*It seemed that we were all being tested in this final scene - tested in our roles, our commitment to our purpose and the quality of our relationships. In the moment we held our roles and Katrina left peacefully. In this way we created the container within which pain and distress could be accepted, our collective purpose re-affirmed and Katrina could die well.*

### **Enactment is Always Followed by Sharing**

For the core group, there were two quite formal sharings: at the bedside and then afterwards over food.

After Katrina died, Brenda and Carolanne washed and dressed her and we gathered around in a semi-circle around her bed to fare her well. Phillip, her old friend, colleague and therapist, led the sharing beautifully. He began by letting us know how deeply affected he had been by the constancy, strength and gentleness of the company of women who had cared for Katrina. We each spoke our final words to her and stood, with held hands, in silence.

Then, when the funeral directors had taken her body away, we had lunch together, which was more of a group-led 'letting down' sharing. We served each other food, paused so we could all start together. We sat together at the end and cleaned up together; our ensemble was quite gracefully 'in sync'.

With both sharings, there was a 'group breath' when we had finished, as in a good Playback enactment.

### **The Funeral**

At the funeral parlour I created the ritual space. The funeral director had invited me to arrange the seating as I wanted, though he was surprised I moved all the pews around to form a semi-circle around the 'stage' with the coffin and the lectern, back by a waterfall. There was space for people to walk to their seats and to come up at the end to place flowers on the coffin and write their messages. My group work and Morenian training supported me as I determinedly lugged

the benches around.

As the funeral celebrant I met the family and led them to their seats. Katrina's youngest daughter, who had arrived that morning, was included. Her partner Barry was able to sit in the midst of the semi-circle with his brother, Katrina's daughters and her sisters and their husbands. The cousins sat farther back, including the one who had been adopted out, with her adopted mother. With other friends, I greeted the guests and encouraged them to sit close to the front to hold the family well. We played Gregorian chants as we settled.

I welcomed the guests and let them know about Katrina's plan and the order of the ceremony. I spoke her introduction and her last message asking them to do the things they need to do, to recognize that love, giving love and receiving love and forgiveness are the most important things.

Frank spoke first - old lover and good friend, of her capacity for sustained love and fierce friendship. Then Phillip - colleague, counsellor and good friend, spoke of her spiritual life, her struggles and desires and what he knew of death. Barry's brother read an email from her on-line book club. Then Brenda, soul mate, colleague and fellow activist gave the full eulogy, the story of her life, her struggles and triumphs, her self. They were each invited to let nothing be unsaid.

Katrina's second daughter had wanted to sing 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot' but felt unable to. So we all stood and sang along with a great recording, clapping and stomping; we sang it twice, with full voice.

Then I read Khalil Gibran's poem on death, invited the guests to share together their memories of Katrina and then come up with flowers and messages for her coffin. In this way all the subgroups were involved: Katrina's family (acknowledged and unacknowledged); very close friends, people who had learned to

love her in the process of being involved in her healing efforts, Brenda's family, and Barry's friends and family (who were largely there for him and had not been particularly close to Katrina). There were others who could not come who sent emails and cards of support: former work colleagues, friends.

Of course, the funeral is a sharing in itself. With such a full warm-up, good relationships and attention to detail, the funeral went beautifully; we took two hours. We sang together, laughed and cried. Afterwards we gathered at her favourite restaurant and let off seven rainbow balloons to set her spirit free.

### **Holding My Leadership**

Max Clayton taught me that the leader of the group at any one time is the most spontaneous person in the group. With the benefit of negotiated roles and good relationships, we each led and followed at different times. There were some role conflicts around decisions of Katrina's care when she was no longer able to speak. These were resolved with the support of the original contract and the close working relationship of our core group. We paid attention to listening to each other and responding to our ups and downs as a group.

I had some challenges, which could be called role competition, from one of the speakers and the director of the funeral home, both of whom were respected and popular celebrants. Again, because the contract with Katrina had been clear and I had paid attention to developing good relationships, I was able to take up my main role clearly and engage them from their main roles of funeral director and speaker.

When decisions needed to be made, we naturally gathered in circles, seated, to take the time it takes to get a good result, as with the meeting with Katrina, Barry, the funeral director and me.

*The integration of the work of the dramas and the ritual became evident. Katrina's central concern had*

*been to be open and responsible in her dying and death and to save her partner and family as much trouble and distress as she could. Her efforts were rewarded manyfold, to her and all of us: we were all changed in the process and many of us felt especially blessed.*

### **Implications for Practitioners**

Both psychodrama and playback have strong elements of ceremony and ritual. I see them as forms of ritual. Ritual theory speaks of the three phases of ritual: separation, transition and incorporation (O'Donoghue 1993:76). Separation relates to the warm-up phase in a group where the protagonist steps out of the group to do their work. The transition phase, often referred to as 'liminal', is the place of change where the old world has been left behind and the new world is in creation. This occurs during the drama. At this liminal phase the protagonist and participants need to be able to surrender to the process of change. This phase must be well held by the ritual master: in Playback the conductor, in Psychodrama the director and in ceremony the celebrant. The incorporation phase occurs in psychodrama for the protagonist through the role test and for the group through sharing so the experience is integrated into the lives of all participants.

We begin our passage into the place of the liminal in each of these ritual forms when the decision has been made to create something together. The protagonist or teller has stepped forward, the conductor, director or celebrant has joined them in contract for the work, and the action begins.

We stood at the edge of the liminal when Katrina announced she had made a transition herself: "No more miracles." When we agreed to journey with her we stepped in. Whilst our lives continued in the non-liminal world, my experience was that I re-entered this liminal space each time I visited Katrina. I found it deeply affecting, moving and felt myself honoured to be present. In this space it was essential that I accessed directorial roles so that

the ritual developed and created progressive outcomes for those involved.

As I journey with my clients into the heart of ceremony I have learned the following:

- As with my former community work, there are no formal dramas.
- In my work as director I need to be warmed up to taking time with the participants at this crucial period, appreciating them fully in their self-conscious, self-doubting, vulnerable roles. When I first began, particularly with people who I knew were confident and outgoing, I became impatient when they resisted my efforts to have us get to the heart of the purpose of their ceremony. Then I remembered warm-up and the need to take time, and enjoyment (or at least appreciation) of the process and the opportunity, even when there is great pain.
- A good warm-up makes for a good ceremony!
- Even the most outward going people are shy and self-conscious at the idea of being the focus of sustained attention in front of their family and friends
- Sharing their stories assists people to warm up to themselves in a different way, appreciating more of the depth and dimensions of the change they are anticipating or experiencing.
- It is good to talk about what people fear, what they dread or don't want. The Focal Conflict model of motivating force and reactive fear has assisted me here.
- Ceremonies are a community matter. The community provides the love, support and mirroring for the 'protagonists' of the ceremony. My training in group work and my applications of systems thinking and role theory in my community work have been invaluable.
- Traditional weddings have 'attendants'. I have developed a real appreciation for this role and encourage attendants in every ceremony I perform. I was initially alerted to this when I spoke to a Philippino woman about her traditional Catholic wedding.

Both the bride and groom have up to five attendants each. It is their job to assist, not only with the preparations and execution of the wedding, but also for the rest of their lives.

- As I engage in the process of co-creation with my clients, through the times of chaos and fear, confusion and doubt, the ceremony takes on a life of its own, almost growing itself before our eyes, like a good drama.
- The study and formal practice of traditional and evolving forms of ritual and ceremony in contemporary family and community life requires me to take up my own authority in a different way. There is no organisation to establish my credibility for me.

Four years ago I left my last formal community work job. I had become increasingly engaged in administration and organisational matters, leaving the work of 'hands-on' community development to younger practitioners. I determined that my future work would be more direct, personal and generative. I worked out that community, creative individual and group work, Playback and story would be central. I have found my training, experience and practice in the Psychodramatic method and Playback Theatre provide a resilient and reliable, muscly ground under my feet as I deepen my practice in ritual work and public ceremony. This article is presented to invite your responses to this area of applying psychodramatic principles in the hurly burly of family and community cycles of life and death. I look forward to hearing from you. •

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