Sparks of the Cosmos:
Rituals for Seasonal Use

by Margie Abbot
(2001), MediaCom Education, Unley, South Australia.



Reviewed by Sally Swain and Rollo Browne

R We wanted to have this book reviewed because it is written by someone closely involved in psychodrama and I thought that exploring the link between psychodrama and ritual would be interesting. I'm curious about what you, as a person who uses ritual, found interesting and what stimulated your thinking as you read it. To get us started can I ask, what's your interest in ritual?

S That's a big question. Well, at times, the act of co-creating some sense of sacredness is important to me even though I'm not at all from a religious background. I like to find forms or structures for gatherings that are generous, that allow us to honour our experience of life in a way that we don't normally have time to do in our rushed lives. That's very important to me. Then there's the artistry and creativity that goes into it. Bringing beauty into our lives. Tapping into symbolism. Sitting in a circle. Using very simple objects. Ritual is an opportunity to connect more deeply with what's within, with each other, with what's around us. As part of my practice as a creativity therapist I regularly run a Heart Circle where people come together to explore and express whatever is going on for them at the time. Like Moreno's claim about psychodrama, I find that ritual is also a theatre of truth.

R What does *Sparks of the Cosmos* say about this?

S Margie describes rituals in several ways. "Rituals lead us into a deeper contact with our sacred kindom", "Ritual as living forms of prayer", and the one I like best is "Rituals can give us a framework and a focus for the sacred work of connecting not only with the divine energy within ourselves and also within the earth and all its inhabitants."

The book itself is organized in four sections corresponding to the elements of

earth, air, fire and water; each linked to a season and a cardinal direction. It was a book I dipped into easily. Each ritual is set out with a purpose at the beginning. I was quite engaged with the rituals in the winter section but less so with the fire section because most seemed associated with Easter. A lot of rituals are only one page, very readable and even have music suggested. I liked the range of voices used so it doesn't just rely on one person presiding. There's a sense of community and equality of participation and there's opportunity for people to bring themselves forward. I had a lot of fun with it. It is easy to read, easy to look at, completely experiential, a guide book with background philosophy.

I found myself reading it as a ritual user almost immediately. For example, I was thinking about how in our playback group last weekend we set up a ritual for the airing of concerns. We wanted to establish a safe container, a structure to hold respect for each other in our work. So when I read about using a prayer bowl, using a bowl of water in the centre of the circle with each person placing a pebble and saying what their intention was, I thought, "yes, what a great idea." It would be an elegant way to bring in the elements of earth and water. For me this creates a visceral warm up into the world of feeling and assists us to enter the sacred or transpersonal realm. I often think of doing similar things and I found that this book deepened my thinking and gave me ideas.

R What is it about the prayer bowl that makes it work?

S The bowl is a symbol, a concretisiation of the container of our work together, to hold what is potentially a difficult process. It is unifying that we all place a pebble in the bowl so that we are symbolically joined despite our various differences. The bowl says 'we are in it together.' It affirms us. It's OK to bring gripes forward. We can witness each other's worlds. Also the action of placing the pebble and then stating your intention creates an encounter with yourself. Almost all rituals use objects. Imbuing objects with meaning is very much what a child does with play. It's also what concretisation allows us to do. In this case it brings the spiritual realm into our immediate awareness.

R What other rituals or practices captured your attention?

S One ritual in the book is called 'Sorrowful Mysteries'. It is dedicated to parents who had miscarriages or cot deaths. I knew someone who had a miscarriage and she really appreciated it when I sent her the details of this. I also liked the use of a rice mandala. It stood out as a group enactment dealing with the nature of impermanence.

R Did you get a sense of what deepens a ritual or what makes it work?

S One important thing about these rituals is intentionality. People come together with a shared intention or make explicit what their intentions are within the ritual. The value here is directing the warm-up to honouring the god spirit in us. It is rather like making clear what your purpose is in a drama. Deepening a ritual involves giving participants time and space to really connect with what is going on internally, then linking that to a sense of our deeper self and to our purpose for being together. It helps a lot if there is a facilitator who can embody the spirit of the ritual by 'holding the space', being present and showing respect for the ritual itself. The extent and care taken in preparing for the ritual is also important and that is one of the strengths of this book.

Other elements of rituals described in the book included acknowledging the place where we meet; inviting spirit in; taking time to stop and reflect and creating objects that symbolize the a chosen text. Margie has designed a whole range of rituals. Some are an end in themselves, others are doorways, ways in to gatherings. One ritual in the book focused on the hopes and fears of participants at the start of a conference and so contained both the disturbing motive and the reactive fear in the group.

R When I think about opening a conference I think about the sociometry where we focus on getting participants linked with each other. In ritual do participants connect with each other or just warm up to themselves?

S Initially participants warm up to themselves and then become aware of others and connect to them within the ritual context The ritual to start a conference involves both – it has a blessing, a gospel text and uses a bowl of water and salt to symbolize a shared journey. Individual reflection focuses on: what inspires me, what blocks my energy, what is my sorrow emptiness and disconnection, what gifts do I possess, how will I use them. This is followed by some sharing in the group, - the bowl of water and the salt is passed around the circle and people take a pinch of salt and sprinkle in the bowl as they share a word or phrase from their reflections. The presider lifts the bowl of water and speaks a few words about how it symbolizes the shared journey, lost hopes, deep tears, thirst for justice and desire for reconciliation. So people listen to each other and there is a warm-up to connection in the here and now.

R Who do you think the book is aimed at?

S From some of the quotes and purposes for various rituals the book appears to be aimed at religious communities, a kind of a resource book for people already in those communities. The language of Christianity is strong. Yet some rituals are non-religious and could be used in a range of situations.

R I would have liked to have seen in the contents list some way of indicating the rituals that are generally focused and not religious. I do want to learn how to use ritual effectively where I don't feel faintly ridiculous. I like the boldness of the statements Margie has written for the rituals, the size of the vision. If there's a script then I can take the role more fully. It's the improvising that's difficult.

S Just the fact that they're written down is very helpful.

R In some groups I have been in, like a men's group, we have created our own rituals. This is a good thing to do but there is a lot to be learnt from holding the space for longer. For example, using a talking stick for a group round at the beginning of a meeting, becomes a ritual for catching up.

S Well this book would be a valuable resource. As I read it, I thought, "Wouldn't it be fun to try that?" We would develop a lot of roles from putting *Sparks of the Cosmos* into practice, for example noticing the sacred in everyday things, being a creative organizer, caring passionately about the environment, even valuing our humanity so that there is always room for diversity in expression.

R Let's focus now on how this is relevant to our work and training in psychodrama.

S OK. So, as psychodramatists, what benefit would we get from reading and using this book?

R For me it would be to learn how to deepen warm up through the use of symbolism, the particular uses of concretisation, and reflection. Ritual has the capacity to hold the spirit of the group in a larger, more expansive way than I am used to. That means we can bring more of ourselves to a gathering. I like the sequence of getting clear about the intention for gathering, creating a symbol for that intention, and each of us speaking to the deeper truth behind it and how it affects us individually. It is a powerful focus in its own right and as a warm-up to being together. I'm beginning to think that ritual is an aspect of group leadership that is easy to let slip in favour of the group task. Group leadership in psychodrama involves managing the ritual spaces that do exist in psychodrama. I'm thinking about the way we use the stage and also what we do at the beginning and end of a psychodrama. We could have another long conversation about this as it's good for us to be conscious of the rituals in psychodrama. Reading this book has been quite thought-provoking for me as a psychodrama practitioner and I am sure it would be for others.

S I agree. By the way I'm enjoying this conversation.

R Me too

The discussion on ritual in psychodrama continues …