



The ritual in endings

Matthew Cormack examines how faith-based ritual can inform therapeutic endings

Samhain, 31 October, is a sacred day in many Pagan calendars. It marks the end of the harvest but is perhaps best known as the time when the veil between worlds is thin. This can symbolise both endings and new beginnings.¹ For many in the Pagan community, this is a time to remember ancestors and loved ones who have died. Last Samhain was particularly emotional for me. My 'harvest' was my diploma in counselling, which I marked with a Pagan ritual to honour the end of this journey and celebrate new beginnings.

While training to work with bereavement, my class explored what rituals are and how to use them when working with grief. We discussed how personal and unique this can be and learnt how different cultures and religions use rituals in endings. Worden's ideas particularly resonated with me as they reflect how I personally use my faith rituals to process endings or loss. His theory states that to deal with a loss, we must undergo the four tasks of mourning.²

These are:

1. Accept the reality of the loss
2. Experience the pain of grief
3. Adjust to an environment in which the deceased is missing
4. Find an enduring connection to the deceased person while embarking on a new life.

Ritual

As I constructed my own ritual to mark the end of my training, I noticed the similarities with the counselling relationship and how Worden's ideas fit into this. The rite served as a microcosm: I noticed the parallels and considered how they might inform my practice and vice versa.

1 Accepting the reality of loss

Before starting my course-ending ritual, I take time to create a sacred space, inviting deities and spirits to be

alongside me, bearing witness. Within this space, anything that needs to be expressed can be. The process begins with being present in the space and stating the purpose of the day. Setting the intention helps to bring the reality of the loss, Worden's first task, into this rite.

This parallels my counselling work. I set an intention to honour the person's story and experiences and walk alongside them, sharing this moment. I also endeavour to create a space where clients can express anything that is needed.

2 Experiencing the pain of grief

During the central section of this ritual, I added different elements into the space, using them to reflect on the practical, emotional, motivational and intellectual aspects of my training. The earthly practical element was represented with salt. A glass of water symbolised the emotional aspects. A candle's flame stood for the motivation present in my training and, finally, incense in the air represented the intellectual facets. Using this process enables all thoughts and emotions to be expressed. As I embraced this, it allowed me to experience the pain of grief, of which Worden speaks in the second task. Being present with others as they acknowledge painful, often previously unspoken emotions, is an essential part of my counselling role. In my ritual, the deities I called upon in this Samhain rite performed this function. They did not judge how I process my emotions and instead they stayed with me.

This connects to the idea that endings will be individual to each client because the client makes sense of their world through their own experiences and perceptions

3 Adjusting to the environment

Next, came a time to reflect. I was able to explore how I accepted this change and what I might need. By taking this time to consider my needs, I began to plan this journey, adjusting to an environment in which the course was no longer a part of my day-to-day routine. I was able to ask the deities and spirits present in the ritual to offer support, or to help me with meeting these needs. Similarly, it can be helpful for clients to consider what their needs may be when exploring endings, including what they might find useful to have in place, such as techniques they have learned. This marks the third task of adjusting to the loss; but I recognise that this ritual is only a part of the process. Even writing this article formed a part of this for me.

4 Finding an enduring connection

Worden's final task is finding a way to remain connected to who or what has been lost. We can honour our thoughts and memories and forge our



own connections. For some in the Pagan community, this may be adding a photo of a lost loved one to a family altar or calling on them during ritual. Similarly, clients might write or make something at the end of therapy, their own talisman of the therapeutic journey. In this ritual, my course diploma offered a tangible and enduring connection to my training. However, I also took a photograph of the rite as my way of honouring this journey.

Reflections

In the days following my ritual, I reflected upon why endings are so individual to people. I believe that everyone experiences endings in a way that is unique to them. This ties in to Rogers' first two propositions.³

The first proposition explains that each person lives in their own ever-changing world of experience, known as the phenomenal field. This includes everything we experience, both consciously and unconsciously. One of the core ideas, according to Rogers, is that this phenomenal field can only be truly understood by the individual.³

Rogers expands on this in his second proposition and states that we respond to this world around us through how we perceive and experience it. This connects to the idea that endings will be individual to each client because the client makes sense of their world through their own experiences and perceptions. This can translate into the therapy space, or a ritual space. Two people can be in the same room, hearing the same things, but experience this differently, because it is processed through their own ways of understanding what is happening.



A few years ago, I was coming to the end of my own therapy with a counsellor who I had worked well with. She helped me to explore my feelings around endings and consider what I needed for finishing. Her way of working helped me to experience an ending that met my needs with acceptance and empathy. This is reflected in my own practice with clients. I strive to offer a space that

It might be that a client has shared something personal to them, such as art or nature or poetry, that they might want to incorporate into their ending

meets their needs and, as the time for an ending approaches, I invite clients to explore how they would like their ending to be and what will be important for them. It might be that a client has shared something personal to them, such as art or nature or poetry, that they might want to incorporate into their ending. By holding a space that welcomes client autonomy, I have noticed that clients are able to manifest a personal ending ritual that has meaning for them.

A client taking back their power may be seen as a form of magic. My own course ending ritual was a powerful experience for me. When clients choose to do an ending with me, it is special to be a part of, and I am grateful to share in that moment.

There can be magical moments between people—what some call ‘relational depth’.⁴ When a client is able to create a personal ending that resonates with how they understand the world, it can help them to process the ending.

One of the liberating aspects of Pagan practice, for me, is that you are able to form your own connection to the deities, nature or the Divine. Your path is your own, echoing the concept of Roger’s phenomenal field, and your experience will be unique to how you experience the world. Many Pagans create their own rituals, everything from setting intentions for the coming year to rituals surrounding end of life and death. Pagans may work creatively, using methods that resonate with them, such as drawing a talisman or blending an incense. There are no set rules about what a ritual should be. *The Pagan Book of Living and Dying* offers many rituals, poems, songs, meditations and more.⁵ While this book is primarily about death, it is a wonderful example of how endings can be expressed in any way that a person needs.

I believe bringing this freedom and creativity into counselling can be therapeutic for clients, especially with endings. I’m not suggesting counsellors need to bring ritual, or any faith, into the therapeutic space. However, by being open to a client’s unique experience of an ending, what works for them, and what an ending feels like, we can facilitate that free and creative space. This supports the notion that, as a person is developing an internal locus of evaluation, they are starting to trust in themselves when making decisions.⁶

Biography



Matthew Cormack MBACP is a person-centred counsellor and is the Mental Health and Wellbeing Officer for the Scottish Pagan Federation.

References

- ¹ Valiente D. *Witchcraft for tomorrow*. London: Robert Hale Limited; 1978.
- ² Worden W. *Grief counselling and grief therapy*. Fourth edition. East Sussex: Routledge; 2009.
- ³ Rogers C. *Client-centered therapy*. London: Constable and Company Limited; 1951.
- ⁴ Sanders P. *The tribes of the person-centred nation*. Second edition. Monmouth: PCCS Books Ltd; 2012.
- ⁵ Starhawk. *The Pagan book of living and dying*. New York: HarperCollins; 1997.
- ⁶ Sanders P. *The person-centred counselling primer*. Herefordshire: PCCS Books Ltd; 2006.