

Mighty stories, dangerous rituals: Weaving together the human and the divine.

by Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley
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On myth and parable:

“Myth bridges the gap between apparently irreconcilable stances, individuals, or situations and demonstrates that mediation is possible.” (13)

“The double function of myth is this: to resolve particular contradictions and, more important, to create a belief in the permanent possibility of reconciliation.” (14)

“Parabolic narratives show the seams and edges of the myths we fashion. Parables show the fault lines beneath the comfortable surfaces of the worlds we build for ourselves. Myth may give stability to our story, but parables are agents of change and sometimes disruption.” (14)

“Parable keeps us moving toward the edge, so that we can discover and chart a better tomorrow. Myth, on the other hand, establishes equilibrium and generates sufficient hope so that we can move on and explore that edge.” (32)

On ritual and narrative:

“constructing meaning through story.... the goal is not just to discover a world or provide an interpretation of the world that allows us to live in it but rather to discover and interpret a world that allows us to live with ourselves. We retell incidents, relate occurrences, and spin tales in order to learn what occurred, especially to *me*.” (5)

“Stories are mighty, however, not only because we shape our lives through them but also because they have the power to unsettle the lives we have comfortably shaped by them. In that sense, the narrative mode itself subverts our settled social realities. Our self-interpretation is not the last word, because our stories are not just our stories. When we weave together the human and the divine, we are attentive to another story that is not completely our own, a narrative that has the power to transform.” (7)

“... rituals are essential and powerful means for making the world an habitable and hospitable place. They are a basic vehicle for creating and expressing meaning. They are an indispensable medium by which we make our way through life. In this respect, ritual is much like narrative. Both are fundamental and irreplaceable means for creating a socially, psychologically, and religiously habitable world.” (22)

“.. ritual and narrative are analogous to our own existence, which is mediated by body and mind, flesh and spirit, touch and imagination. Ritual is embodied expression, and narrative springs from the human imagination.... Rituals shape our stories, and our instinct to perceive life as a narrative urges us to rehearse that narrative through our

bodies.” (27)

“The repetition of ritual also helps create a sense of continuity in our lives by linking the past to the present and the present to the future. In the midst of life’s discontinuities, rituals become a dependable source of security and comfort. ... They give tangible shape to our hopes and dreams. Although the power of ritual does not necessarily depend on shared beliefs, rituals do provide an effective mechanism for shaping what people believe by encouraging a particular construction of reality.” (49)

On weaving together the divine and human:

“When we are willing to admit the possibility of God’s presence in ordinary human events, we will be more likely to fashion our human narratives — composed of so many such events — in the light of that presence.” (40)

“A faith-filled public ritualization cannot achieve its purposes apart from the means that humans employ in other ritualized aspects of their lives.” (43)

“When we listen carefully to people, we will discover that they often live with competing stories but no narrative, no overarching way of weaving their stories together and little understanding of the ordinary, daily connection between the human and divine narratives.” (47)

“The spirit of reconciliation, which enables us to enter a world of contradiction, is the same disposition that allows us to embrace paradox without needing to resolve it. This is a spirituality that thrives only in paradox, between the mythic and the parabolic, around the human and divine story, and in the tension of the individual and communal. It is a spirituality that is nourished by the ambiguity of mighty stories and dangerous rituals. This experience of ambiguity is inevitable because pluralistic living is a permanent part of contemporary human society. If we are to flourish in this society, we need to learn how to tolerate opposing forces, both within and without.” (180)

“Ultimately, it is in the stories we tell and the rituals we enact that the great paradox is exposed: to live we have to die. In the meantime, we look for enough courage to love the questions and live the contradictions of the stories and rituals that bring them to life. To do so in a spirit of reconciliation does not demand resolution but allows transformation as we never imagined it and grace where we least expect it.” (183)