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► To cite this version:

Michael Houseman. Immersive hugging as a ritual act. Christina Welch; Amy Whitehead. Religion and Touch, Equinox Publishing, pp.236-252, 2021, 978-1800500327. halshs-03902337

HAL Id: halshs-03902337

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03902337>

Submitted on 31 Jan 2023

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Chapter 11
Immersive Hugging as a Ritual Act
MICHAEL HOUSEMAN

As the popular psychology and well-being literature attests, contemporary Westerners consider hugging to be both highly meaningful and intrinsically beneficial. The oft-touted (but seemingly apocryphal) quote from Family Therapy founder Virginia Satir says it all: 'We need four hugs a day for survival. We need eight hugs a day for maintenance. We need twelve hugs a day for growth.' Unsurprisingly, prolonged, intense hugging—between people, but also with trees, animals or visualised beings—is one of the hallmarks of ritualised practices associated with what have been called contemporary spiritualities: New Age-inspired movements, Contemporary Paganisms, Personal Development initiatives, etc. This chapter explores the interactive workings of such pointedly meaningful embracing which I will refer to as 'immersive' hugging. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and other illustrative material, I attempt to identify some of the recurrent features of immersive hugs in order to speculate about what is at stake in their performance.

HUGS GALORE

Hugging as a component of everyday interaction is both partially idiosyncratic and, like most everything else, governed by cultural codes. This has been made clear by the profusion of YouTube videos on hugging etiquette that has accompanied the recent upswing of hugging in the United States. Excluding the many videos on animal or tree hugging, as well as those on how to hug in a variety of online games, more than 150 such clips have been uploaded since 2007, the most popular of which, dating from May 2018, totals almost 15 million views. Consider, for example, the videos providing instructions on how to 'man hug' or 'bro hug'. Some with wacky humour, others in dead seriousness, advise men on how to avoid imbuing this same-sex embrace with homosexual undertones: keep your feet toes-to-toes, place one arm over and the other under your friend's arms, keep it short, don't talk while hugging, and no snuggling or stroking. Other videos specify the proprieties and

pitfalls of heterosexual hugging (interestingly, there are no videos on hugging between women, which seems to be deemed unproblematic). In principle, such ordinary, mundane hugs, regardless of the conventions that guide them, are presumed to reflect the everyday relations between the huggers concerned. All else being equal, the more intimate people are, the more intense their hugging is likely to be.

Hugging may also be a canonical ceremonial practice. Examples include the solemn *accolade* that confers military and other honours in France, the consoling, *darshan*-bestowing embrace of the Hindu guru Mātā Amritānandamayī (Amma, the 'hugging saint'), the three-fold hug that ushers in the Muslim festival of Eid al-fitr, and the liturgical greeting known as the 'kiss of peace' or 'holy kiss' in many Eastern and Western Christian traditions. While such hugs may be inflected by interpersonal ties, they are above all indicative of a more impersonal, ritual relationship the hugging parties are held to enact: allegiance to a higher authority, the communication of blessedness to a disciple, reciprocal well-wishing between members of a devotional community.

There are also hugs that stand midway between commonplace and ceremonial hugging, such as the warm, public handshake-hug sometimes performed by male politicians and celebrities. This one-armed embrace Wikipedia describes as a 'pound hug' (also dude hug, cootie hug, homie hug, bro hug and thug hug) is often announced in a visible yet understated I-know-you-know-I-know fashion by leaning slightly back with arms extended downward at a 30-degree angle, and consists in a tight handshake inserted between the huggers' bodies, accompanied by several firm, open-handed taps on the back.

In all these cases, hugging assumes a form that, as a rule, is consonant with the relationship between those who hug. The formal qualities of the hug itself—how long it lasts, the emotions it exhibits, the positions adopted, the body parts involved, the degree of pressure exerted, the symmetries or asymmetries brought into play, etc.—articulate the nature of this relationship. Immersive hugging, however, seems to proceed from somewhat different premises.

BEING INTIMATE WITH CASUAL ACQUAINTANCES

Immersive hugs, sometimes called 'spiritual', 'therapeutic', 'heart-to-heart' or simply 'real', are embraces of exceptional intensity and duration presumed to have salutary effects in and of themselves. Known in some circles as the 'Findhorn full-frontal' in reference to the renowned British New Age 'colony of seekers' (Sutcliffe 2003: 164), immersive hugging is an inevitable feature of Pagan festivals, well-being workshops, spirituality training sessions and personal development practices of all sorts. In the wake of a mutually accepted invitation (a smile, an eyebrow flash, an opening of arms), people wrap their arms around each other and enter into a tight, face-to-face embrace. Eyes closed or unfocused, bodies still or gently rocking, participants appear to be fully absorbed in a blissful, self-contained whole. As their hug lengthens, they rearrange their grasp several times, repositioning their arms, moving their heads closer or further apart, pulling slightly back so as to fit their bodies together once again, as though exploring new ways of expressing their caring attentiveness and of savouring the sensations of safety and warmth their hugging provides. After a long while, they gently draw apart, wordlessly communicating feelings of gratitude and affection with a knowing smile, a kiss, a caress, a slow blink or a quick final hug.

What is remarkable about this way of hugging is that it acts out a heightened interpersonal familiarity between people who usually know each other only casually, if at all. Indeed, one of characteristic features of immersive hugging is the striking hiatus between the intense personal intimacy it displays and the lack of interpersonal commitment this display might ordinarily be expected to imply. In this regard, it is significant that immersive hugging typically occurs in the context of semi-public, structured events whose specialness is readily acknowledged. Speaking for example of personal growth-oriented dance practices like Biodanza or 5 Rhythms in which immersive hugs abound (Houseman and Mazzella di Bosco 2020), one participant explained that at such venues 'you can connect with [people] on another, higher, [...] but then, outside, it's as if we suddenly don't speak the same language anymore'. Another said she feels 'moments of profound connection with other dancers, [...] but after the dance session, if I try to speak and socialize with them, it's as though everything has flattened out, the magic is lost'. The expectations that hold sway in

such contexts diverge significantly from those of everyday interaction. I learnt this to my cost when, on the train platform going home from my first Pagan festival, my open-armed invitation to hug was violently rebuffed as an unwarranted aggression by someone I (wrongly) assumed had been at the festival as well. Inversely, as one person put it: 'If I go to a Pagan festival and encounter a few people I know well, I'll also hug them with a similar intensity to those strangers I hug at the same event.' Thus, partaking in an immersive hug with someone neither presupposes a close relationship with them, nor does it anticipate that such a relationship will follow. Immersive hugging tends to take place between those Karen Fingerman (2009) has called 'consequential strangers': people one may be familiar with, but with whom one feels free *not* to entertain a close relationship.

In light of this, one might be tempted to see the immersive hug as a ritual act. I will be arguing precisely along these lines. Specifically, in keeping with Véronique Altglas's analysis of contemporary religious exoticism (2014: chapter 7), I see immersive hugging as a ritualised enactment of certain Euro-American middle-class aspirations and sensibilities closely linked with the emergent sociological category Pierre Bourdieu, writing at the end of the 1970s, identified as the 'new petty bourgeoisie' (1979: 409–431). However, because the 'spontaneous', 'heartfelt qualities of immersive hugs are such a far cry from the distanced conventionality typical of ceremonial hugging generally, the idea that immersive hugging might be a ritual practice needs to be spelled out in detail. This will then allow me to envisage immersive hugging as a possible model for thinking about much contemporary Western ritual.

FEELING ONESELF WITH OTHERS

To get some idea of what immersive hugging as a ritual practice might be about, let us look at some of its formal features. Immersive hugs are voluntary and emphatic. Whether they are entered into gently or with force, they are enthusiastic and intense. Huggers hold each other tightly, and often tenderly caress each other's bodies (firm back-tapping almost never occurs). However, such hugs are also markedly undifferentiating. An immersive hug is a full-body, frontal embrace that emphasises participants' personal presence while being largely indifferent to individual-specific

attributes like gender, age, size and physical condition. As was made clear to me during one Pagan festival, although huggers increasingly seek consent, it is because personal peculiarities are so earnestly disregarded in this way that some attendees make it known beforehand that they do not wish to be hugged.

Immersive hugs are deeply resonant with feeling and yet carelessly generic. They are performed to be highly expressive emotionally and intentionally, while being at the same time conspicuously depersonalised. Now, the depersonalised, generic nature of immersive hugging is fully congruent with the idea that the relationship it enacts is a conventional, ceremonial one. But what, then, are we to make of the intense intimacy and exacerbated affectivity its performance also displays? I suggest that the latter bears witness to the fact that unlike ceremonial hugging generally, immersive hugging is centred less on the acting out of a special (ritual) relationship, than on the acting out of special (ritual) selves. In other words, the value and meaning of an immersive hug pertain less to participants' shared experience of an extra-ordinary connection with one another, than to their respective experiences of becoming exceptional individuals capable of making such a connection.

To see how this might be so, consider another 'obvious aspect' (Rappaport 1979) of immersive hugging: it is inordinately long. In contrast to the three (plus or minus two) seconds of both everyday and ceremonial hugs (cf. Nagy 2011), twenty seconds is often presented as the minimum duration for a 'real' hug. According to popular renderings of some experimental work done between 2005 and 2015 (see Field 2019 for a review), this is the time needed for huggers' oxytocin (dubbed the 'love hormone') to be released. Now, several laboratory studies have demonstrated the comforting effects of touch before and during stressful situations (Field 2019: 375). However, it remains that a close embrace between adults, if prolonged, tends to make people anxious, as borne out by popular 'prank' videos documenting overly-long hugs between strangers (e.g. YouTube posts by Angrypnic, BigDawsVlogs, and The Daily Dropout). This is especially true in the absence of an intimate relationship that provides extended body contact with shared meaning. As a result, immersive huggers inevitably experience what marital and couple therapist David Schnarch calls 'the jolt' (1997: 166). This is the sudden dawning of a heightened self-awareness that occurs when a hug which normally would have broken off (after three

to four seconds) keeps going. It gives rise to noticeable shifts in muscle tension, balance and breathing. Indeed, immersive hugs always have two phases: a short coming together part during which huggers grasp each other in a tight, fusional clinch, and a lengthy staying together part during which they self-consciously explore the sensations and feelings that accompany each other's bodily readjustments and gestured initiatives (changes of grip, caresses, eye-contact, etc.). When initiating an immersive hug, participants surrender to rushes of compassionate intention and to the diffuse pleasures of bodily touch. In doing so, they jointly aspire to the deeper connection their intense hugging is presumed to exhibit and/or bring about. However, because their hug is so long-lasting, their efforts are inescapably modulated by various complications—a flash of erotic excitement, a sense of disquiet, moments of physical discomfort, an unexpected smell, an awareness of possible observers, etc.—the handling of which prompts them to attend to their own personal sentiments and attitudes. Continually jolted in this manner, hugging partners are repeatedly thrown back upon themselves, moved to harken to and acknowledge their respective thoughts and feelings. In the case of prolonged hugging between intimate partners, Schnarch explains, making such 'a solid connection with *yourself*' is 'the key to [the] interdependence' that life as a couple entails (1997: 167). However, immersive hugging typically takes place between non-intimates who do not aspire to this type of open-ended interdependency. Instead, becoming aware of one's own feelings during sustained close contact with another takes on meaning and value in its own right as an intimation of one's capacity to successfully 'connect'.

Immersive hugging allows participants to demonstrate—to themselves, to each other, to onlooking parties—their respective capacities for 'really' hugging and for being 'really' hugged. It lets them experience themselves, and be experienced by others, as individuals endowed with certain exemplary if difficult-to-define qualities of thought and feeling deemed essential to the fulfilment of contemporary (middle-class) Western personhood: 'spontaneity', 'authenticity', 'deep feeling', 'self-awareness', 'openness to others', etc. In other words, those who partake in immersive hugs do not so much enter into intense, intimate relationships with others as they are afforded salient experiences of what current Euro-American understandings of personal identity invite them to construe as their 'potential' to do so. In this respect, purposeful,

fervent hugging can be seen as a ritualised process of self-construction in which participants willingly act as resources for each other's development.

This reciprocally enabled, self-directed quality of immersive hugging comes out clearly, for example, in the 'Hugging meditation' video posted on YouTube in 2010 by journalist and writer Todd Aaron Jensen, author of *On Gratitude* (2010). This meditation, Jensen earnestly explains, is a 'simple' practice that 'works with everybody' to help us 'be [...] our higher selves'. It requires a partner, who 'can be a child, a parent, a friend, a lover, a complete stranger', and is made up of three successive hugs. The 'meditative thought' for the first embrace is 'I may not be here long, but I am here now', for the second 'This person may not be here long, but there're here now', and for the third 'there is a mutual acknowledgement: we may not be here long, but we're here now'. Jensen concludes: 'If we can practice our love with that level of mindfulness, and acceptance, and surrender, and gratitude, we are truly free, and our heart truly open to give and to receive.' There exist a number of other versions of this practice, such as that promoted as a mindfulness exercise by the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh and others. It entails bowing ('offering a lotus') to each other and then taking three deep, long breaths together while hugging 'heart-to-heart' (left sides touching). During the first breath participants think 'I am alive', during the second 'This person is alive', and during third 'I feel happy' or 'I feel gratitude', before finishing with a closing bow. In 'absorptive' (Luhmann, Nusbaum and Thisted 2010) practices such as these, as in immersive hugging generally, hugging partners' personal identities are plainly subordinate to the role each plays in affording the other with an intensified experience of whom they feel they can become.

Immersive hugging takes full advantage of the potential two-facedness of hugging as a close interaction in which participants do not meet each other's gaze. In the absence of eye-contact, sensations aroused by the prolonged pressing of another person's body against one's own easily take on a life of their own, with the other person being temporarily abstracted from the picture. In this light, it is tempting to take tree hugging, not to prevent logging but to promote well-being, as an exemplary model. As many Internet sites attest, this pleasurable display of embellished intimacy with an unfamiliar other involves consciously imbuing one's behaviour towards one's (other-than-human) partner with heart-felt, well-meaning intentions, all the while

paying careful attention to one's own perceptions and feelings. And, in the course of tree hugging as it is usually construed (but not always, cf. Pike 2017), what personal agency this partner might have becomes sublimated into a source of 'energy' or 'connection' that allows the human hugger to knowingly raise their vibratory level, commune with Nature, recycle their worries, and reduce their stress. There are virtual adaptations of this in which the tree is materially absent, such as the Qigong meditation exercise of 'hugging the tree' (also called 'standing like a tree'). Some Personal Development advocates recommend a still more radically self-serving form of immersive hugging in which one (physically or mentally) hugs oneself (see wikiHow staff 2019 for a simple illustrated example). Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) therapy, for instance, promotes the self-administered 'butterfly hug' to alleviate the distress associated with traumatic memories (Shapiro 2013; Artigas and Jarero 2014). During the 2020 Covid-19 lockdown, British massage therapist Sally Morris provided a mindfulness-inspired 'self-hug meditation' YouTube video as a self-care support for those 'who are missing that physical contact with other people', and Becky Rosenthal posted a self-hugging meditation 'to soothe and take care of ourselves' on the UNION SA YouTube channel ('We empower positive transformation'). Finally, somewhere between another being such as a tree and one's own body are a variety of special vests and other electromechanical devices that generate heat and/or pressure to simulate hugging.

PERFORMING A TRANSCENDENT SOCIALITY

It would be a mistake, however, to understand immersive hugging as directed solely towards individual self-fulfilment. An immersive hug not only requires the presence of a consenting partner, whose reactions (and my reactions to their reactions) I am expected to be aware of, but like many spiritual practices, typically takes place in the company of still further attending others who are often similarly engaged. In short, another formal feature of immersive hugging is that it is exhibited. Now, to the extent that immersive hugs are presumed to be witnessed, their enactment becomes a performance. Participants' embodied representation of the ideal dispositions to which they aspire becomes addressed, and the participants themselves become both the wellsprings of desire that inspire hugging to happen, and the distanced, monitoring observers of their own feelings and behaviour. This assumption of an outside point of

view underscores the conventional aspects of immersive hugging. It also forestalls possible abusive misconduct and acts as a hedge against the interpersonal alienation that prolonged bodily contact can easily bring about. The performative dimension of their embrace allows hugging parties to interact in a highly intimate, affectively engaged fashion while minimising the risks of the emotional commitment and interpersonal 'interdependency' (Schnarch 1997) or 'contamination' (Moisseeff 2020) such behaviour would naturally imply if they were on their own. To the degree to which an immersive hug is freed in this way from the sticky, endlessly negotiated entanglements of close interpersonal ties, it provides an exceptional—ritual—space in which participants' individual autonomy is preserved, allowing them to more fully explore, physically and emotionally, whom they feel they might *really* be. In this regard, the profuse picture-taking and video-recording that accompanies Free Hugs campaigns and other 'social experiments' involving pointedly meaningful hugging is a telling example of the attendant third-party perspective immersive hugging implies (see for instance ikizlerTV's 2014 'I Trust You, Do You Trust Me? Hug Me' video on YouTube).

Moreover, as previously mentioned, immersive hugging usually takes place as an expected feature of certain special venues or practices: festivals, self-development workshops, etc. It may occur in an impromptu fashion, or may be purposely initiated by others, such the Hug Patrols 'who wander around [Rainbow] Gatherings hugging people' (Niman 1997: 289). It is often provoked by those leading or facilitating these special activities or events. In this respect, immersive hugs, whether they are tacitly anticipated or explicitly encouraged, generally happen in response to incitements that are less directives than verbal or non-verbal 'invitations' whose authority-depreciating quality is characteristic of power relations in the context of alternative spiritualities (cf. Wood 2007). Archetypal in this respect is the paradoxical injunction that ended the closing ritual of a four-day English Druid Camp I took part in in 2015: 'Let the spontaneous hugging begin!'

Finally, a purely egocentric appreciation of immersive hugging is belied by another of its constitutive features which are the expressions of mutual recognition and gratitude

it invariably occasions. Immersive hugs always end with participants looking deeply into each other's eyes and with some kind of concluding sign: a knowing look, a shared smile, a bow, a slow blink. By ratifying their common involvement in this way, participants acknowledge the part each willingly plays in allowing the other to experience the more accomplished self—spontaneous, authentic, emotionally expressive, open to others, etc.—they have momentarily become. More than the act of hugging itself, it is this shared awareness of oneself-with-another as the enabling environment of one's own self-discovery that underlies the sentiments of glad companionship and fortuitous like-mindedness that participants generally take away from a rewarding immersive hug. When immersive hugging occurs with multiple partners within the context of regular or extended activities—weekly dance sessions, weekend workshops, week or month-long festivals, etc.—such feelings of reciprocal recognition and demonstrative gratefulness easily reverberate outward to include the group as a whole, prompting invocations of 'family' or 'home' (cf. Pike 2001: 13, 29–37) as well as drawn-out group hugs ('cuddle puddles' in Rainbow parlance [Niman 1997: 285]). Inversely, as several long-time Pagans have pointed out to me, immersive hugging, as the embodiment of a shared world-view and set of attitudes, can also lose a measure of its ritual character to become a customary expression of community membership (cf. Prince and Riches 2000: 116). In such cases, the final mutual acknowledgement phase of immersive hugging tends to prevail over the warm but abbreviated embrace itself, the latter becoming an index of the antecedent hugs that are presumed to have taken place between the parties concerned.

Recall, however, that immersive hugging does not imply ongoing interpersonal intimacy. Mentions of 'home' and 'family' notwithstanding, those taking part in groups and/or networks in which immersive hugs regularly occur are rarely embroiled in the ambivalent co-dependencies and continually renegotiated accountabilities so characteristic of lasting emotional ties. Their interactions, undertaken in a spirit of affable complicity implying limited interpersonal liability, are upheld by a more ephemeral, freer sociality in which each is expected to pursue their personal fulfilment while acting as a willing resource for the personal fulfilment of others. Thus, while the social dimensions of immersive hugging are assuredly present, they pertain less to everyday relations than to this special, ritually circumscribed mode of

relatedness in which the culturally constructed opposition between individual autonomy and collective solidarity is happily resolved. Indeed, in many respects immersive hugging is emblematic of this eminently Western utopic social model that one of Tavory and Goodman's (2009) informants, in reference to Rainbow gatherings, dubbed a 'collective of individuals' (cf. Houseman 2020 on 'collective individualism'). This is a situation, explain these two authors, in which 'both solidarity and individuality are constructed simultaneously—as an ongoing set of pragmatic achievements, mutually shaping each other in the field' (2009: 262–263; see also Pike 2001 on Pagan festivals generally, and Batchelor 2014 on New Age yoga and Sufi dance practices in England). In this perspective, it is perhaps no accident that intense, meaningful bodily contact between 'consequential strangers' so often occurs in contemporary spiritual practices that configure individual realisation and community fellowship as conjunct ideals. It may well be that such close dyadic interactions that accentuate feelings of personal presence while downplaying interpersonal commitment, notably when deployed in a round-robin pattern, are especially instrumental in mediating the connection between these two allegedly antagonistic poles (cf. Moisseeff and Houseman 2020). Exemplary in this regard, as far as new religious movements are concerned, is the YouTube video in which 'People from all over the world meet at Osho Humaniversity in the Netherlands celebrating the international Hugging Day 2009'. As several dozen people tenderly embrace one another, a deeply resonant voice, accompanied by soothing music, slowly explains:

I know we can make Osho's dream into a reality, just by hugging you right now, exchanging warm vibrations of love and allowing our hearts to say yes. ... We are one, and God is happy. ... Hugging is only a [unintelligible] of love, of want, of gaiety. ... I know we can make Osho's dream into a reality. You see, together we can create a beautiful world to live in, filled with friends and lovers.

A POSSIBLE MODEL?

Immersive hugging, then, is an (1) overly emphatic, (2) markedly indiscriminating (3) protracted embrace (4) between non intimates that is (5) exhibited, (7) enjoined and

(8) gratefully acknowledged. I have suggested that it is best understood as a ritual act. As such, it affords participants with memorable, conventional if somewhat hard to pin down experiences in which supposed opposites—close intimacy and interpersonal remove, absorptive bodily engagement and heightened self-consciousness, individual autonomy and mutual recognition in the service of collective solidarity—are made to go hand in hand. In the manner of rituals generally, to the extent that these special experiences remain difficult to account for in terms of everyday attitudes and patterns of behaviour, they are ill-suited to provide participants with viable models for their daily lives. What they do provide them with, however, are largely unassailable, lived-through touchstones in light of which their everyday interactions can be customarily appraised. Close contact with non-intimate others during immersive hugging can, for example, act as a privileged yardstick for appreciating what intimate contact with close others might and should be. Concomitantly, on a collective level, immersive hugging is one of the myriad ways whereby simply through the performance of certain acts, the axiomatic idea-values (Dumont 1979) of a particular cultural tradition—‘spontaneity’, ‘authenticity’, ‘deep feeling’, ‘bodily pleasure’, ‘self-awareness’, ‘openness to others’, etc.—are enshrined, embodied and passed on.

I would like to conclude by using the analysis offered here to think about ritualised practices linked with contemporary spiritualities in general. Immersive hugging displays on an easily accessible scale many of these practices’ characteristic properties, the foremost of which is a kind of built-in reflexivity. As we have seen, because immersive hugs are so long-lasting, hugging parties are repeatedly jolted into becoming attentive to their own thoughts and feelings. This type of heightened self-consciousness is not a necessary component of ritual *per se*. Indeed, in many rituals in which certain ordained actions must be undertaken correctly, it is important that participants pay attention to what they are doing (Smith 1987:103), but it is not necessary that they be knowingly aware of their own frame of mind while doing so. This is because the distinctive complexity of such rituals that gives their performance special potency pertains above all to the somewhat mysterious actions participants are expected to undertake. Take, for example, the case of a priest declaring ‘This is my body’ during a Catholic mass while displaying a wafer of bread. This construes

what he is holding to be at once bread and the body of Christ, regardless of what his personal dispositions might be. He may be heedful of his own thoughts and feelings, but his vigilance in this regard is not constitutive of the ritual act he performs, which, as the reiteration of behaviour presumed to have been undertaken previously by more authoritative others, is deemed to have value and efficacy in and of itself.

In contrast to this, mindful reflexivity is an integral aspect of many ritual practices associated with contemporary spiritualities. This is often thought to be because these practices have yet to become part of established traditions. However, new rituals crop up all the time in many cultural contexts without self-attentiveness being emphasised. In light of this, it is tempting to link such an emphasis to Western modernity. Tanya Luhrmann (2012), for example, has argued that the 'self-conscious epistemological complexity' found not only in Contemporary Paganism and Neo-Shamanism, but also in evangelical Christianity, is strongly stimulated by participants' awareness of how much their practices and beliefs deviate from mainstream secular thinking. At the same time, from a historical perspective, the self-conscious epistemology she refers to can be understood as but the latest religious expression of a cultural tradition—what Colin Campbell (1987) has called 'the romantic ethic'—deriving from Pietistic Protestantism and dating back to the eighteenth century. All told, it would seem that the exacerbated self-awareness characteristic of many present-day spiritual practices, while perhaps not exclusive to Euro-American culture, is particularly well-developed in the contemporary West.

I understand this type of enhanced reflexivity to be an essential component of a specific mode of ritualisation that has gone largely unrecognised, at least by anthropologists. As I have suggested elsewhere (2007, 2016, 2020), the distinctive complexity of ceremonial activities organised according to this mode relates less to exceptional items of behaviour participants are supposed to undertake, than to special ways of thinking and feeling their behaviour is alleged to embody. For example, many ritual practices, ranging from Contemporary Pagan ceremonies to New Age inspired guided meditations begin with acts of 'centring' or 'grounding'. Participants may be invited to form a circle holding hands, quiet their minds, take a deep breath, become fully present and feel their connection with the earth. While the

actions involved—standing in a circle, holding hands, taking a deep breath—may be unusual, they are readily intelligible in and of themselves in a way that calling a piece of bread the body of Christ, for instance, is not. More puzzling, on the other hand, are the special dispositions these actions are taken to express and/or bring about: the ability to ‘quiet one’s mind’, ‘become fully present’ and ‘feel a connection with the earth’. Now, what bridges the gap between the participants’ unremarkable actions and the remarkable things their performance of these actions allows them to accomplish are the participants themselves, construed as at once ordinary and extraordinary beings. Indeed, the mysterious, highly salient focus of rituals such as these—equivalent to the priest holding something that is both bread and the body of Christ—is the two-fold experience of self they engender and display.

Participants are induced both to experience certain special ways of thinking and feeling, and to consciously experience themselves as doing so. Immersive hugging incites huggers to appreciate themselves and each other as exceptional individuals able to ‘connect’ with others in a singular fashion, and also as regular men and women thankfully moved by their (more or less successful) attempts to do so. Similarly, by taking part in rituals structured in the manner of our centring/grounding example, participants are encouraged to feel themselves both as endowed with certain extraordinary aptitudes, and as ordinary persons affected by the performances in which they aspire to put these aptitudes into effect. In other words, rituals such as these give rise to refracted, dilated identities in which participants experience themselves as becoming more than what they seem (e.g. magical beings, higher selves, shamans, etc.) without ceasing to be whom they recognise themselves to be (e.g. members of a Western or Westernised middle-class). This happy uncertainty as to who exactly participants become within the context of the rituals they perform is upheld, for themselves and others, by a built-in reflexivity that these performances prompt them to entertain.

Under these conditions, what Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw (1994) have called the ‘stipulated’ quality of ritual takes on a specific form. Thus, one of the hallmarks of much contemporary ceremonial is a tendency to replace appeals to prescriptive traditions (that require participants to do X, Y and Z) by appeals to

regulatory auto-injunctions (that incite participants to ask themselves how they can best do X, Y and Z). What we might call a canonical 'action-centred' mode of ritualisation, posits, for example, that participants must light a white candle with their eyes closed to call upon the Goddess; if a candle of another colour is used, or if one opens one's eyes, the Goddess has not been properly called upon. On the other hand, in the 'actor-centred' ritual mode typical of many contemporary spiritual practices, having one's eyes open or closed can be left up to each of the participants who, having been informed that lighting a white candle is usually thought to be best, are invited to ponder what they feel the candle's colour should be in order for them to call upon the Goddess as properly as possible. This does not mean that anything goes. Nor is it simply a matter of acting according to what one thinks and feels. Rather, it is a question of acting according to what one thinks and feels one should be thinking and feeling. There is a correct, optimally effective way for each of us to call upon the Goddess and we need to draw on both others' knowhow and our own personal sensibilities to identify what it must be.

The reflexive dynamic built into immersive hugging and other 'actor-centred' rituals underlies the distinctive efficacy of these practices. The inherently unstable, two-fold sense of self it engenders allows participants to experience their potential to become extraordinary beings without deceiving themselves. Ritual experiences, however, are notoriously difficult to put into words, and the lived-through quality of this in-built reflexivity is no exception. One might be tempted to describe it as an inner dialogue or as an act of reasoned introspection. But such discourse-inspired or vision-based 'conceptual metaphors' (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), because they proceed from a clear distinction between interlocutors or between an observer and the observed, seem basically misleading. As is applying a relational vocabulary—to speak, for example, of 'a relationship with oneself'—to an experience that clearly lacks the latent uncertainties, shifting accountabilities and ongoing negotiations that any interaction with a genuine Other necessarily entails. The reflexivity involved here seems to be more a matter of enfolding oneself, of becoming one's own customarily sanctioned 'holding environment' (Winnicott 1960). In this light, conceptualisations based on hearing, touch or even proprioceptive sensation might be more appropriate to convey the process of intimate self-encompassment whereby those taking part in

these practices can become newly present to themselves. It is more like listening to one's own breathing, or feeling one's weight—or giving oneself a hug.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am very grateful to Laurent Gabail, Ron Grimes, Graham Harvey, Arnaud Halloy, Marie Mazzella di Bosco, Marika Moisseeff, Sarah Pike and Steven Sutcliffe for their helpful comments on earlier drafts.

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