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Rituals of an Unconference: The Emergence of Anti-Structure Through the Liminality and Communitas of Community Engaged Scholars

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Bringing community engaged scholars together is always a worthwhile endeavor, to allow them to share their experiences, exchange their ideas and practices, and to commiserate around their concerns. The 2024 Unconference was one of these experiences, gathering like-minded researchers and scholars in one place to bond, find new contacts, and engage in important discussions and problem solving. At first glance, this appeared as a temporary community of engaged scholars and cultural workers constructed around shared practices and epistemological assumptions. Or was this experience and others like it, something else, even more powerful and transformative?

As an anthropology major in the 1990's, I was continually drawn back to the works of humanistic anthropologist Victor Turner. Reading Turner's *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1991), Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (2004), and Rabbi Arthur Green's *Tormented Master: The Life and Spiritual Quest of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav* (1992) side-by-side my senior year in college was a transformative experience. It crystalized my expanding fascination with the active interplay between structure and agency, societal forces and individual freedoms, and the tensions between social progress and the preservation of traditions.

Years later, while crafting a theoretical framework for my doctoral dissertation, sitting in the warm Middle East sun in Jerusalem at an outdoor table at a café on Emek Rafa'im (Valley of Ghosts) Street, I once again wandered through Turner's work, specifically *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (1974). This exploration of his ethnographic works deepened my understanding of the historical and intellectual roots of modern symbolic interactionism and social practice theory.

Turner was particularly and personally significant at each of these moments as those were times when I found myself in a state of *liminality*. Turner defines liminality as in-betweenness, outside of the typical cultural and societal structures that keep one grounded in everydayness. Liminality is not meant to be a permanent place or time, where one can transcend and live outside of structure, but rather a phase in which one can become transformed and then participate in bringing about broader cultural shifts. Liminality is a process of becoming, growing, and transforming in which the individual actor adopts new ways of being and doing by uncovering new ideas and practices through experience and exchange to bring that new knowledge and ways of doing back to their ordinary, everyday lives.

Much like Campbell's hero's journey in which the protagonist is transformed by acquiring boons and attaching oneself to a guide, liminality is not a solitary event. Encountering others undergoing parallel liminal experiences can result in *communitas*. *Communitas* develops through a shared experience of liminality so that a fluid network rooted in practice and experience emerges, joining people together in solidarity to develop, grow, create, and imagine possibilities.

Everyday life is grounded in structure, reflecting "patterned arrangements of role-sets, status-sets, and status-sequences consciously recognized and regularly operative in a given society" (Turner, 1974, p. 237). From the shared time, experiences, and relationships of liminality and *communitas*, *anti-structure* emerges. As much as antimatter in physics does not mean there is an absence of matter, antistructure does not mean there is an absence of structure. Rather than representing prescribed patterned arrangements as structure does, antistructure emerges through experiences of liminality and *communitas*.

Community engaged research is in many ways a network of liminal practices and epistemologies compared to the structure of traditional forms of scholarship in the academy. While traditional research prioritizes documenting, controlling, and predicting, community engaged research is inter- and transdisciplinary, pragmatic, and locally focused. Community engaged research prioritizes honoring community knowledge and capital, accepts diverse outputs, and values transformative goals. This stands in contrast to traditional research's reliance on gatekeeping and abstract metrics.

Compared to the structures encoded into how we carry ourselves in our everyday disciplinary or departmental settings, community engaged research—as liminal assemblages of practices, epistemologies, and values—is a set of networks and relationships that allow for the emergence of anti-structure and the opening of possibilities. Co-constructing and navigating the anti-structure of community engaged research doesn't always lead to the traditional measure of academic success – that ill-defined concept of "reputation." Instead, it offers the potential for real transformation, benefiting both the communities involved and the research teams themselves.

The Unconference provided those of us in the liminal status that community engaged research practices engender a hearth to gather around in *communitas*. In gathering around this hearth, we sat and shared stories and concerns to support each other, knowing we are not alone in our endeavors even if it feels that way within the structures of our home departments, disciplines, and offices. In gathering around this hearth, we stood and discussed and planned an agenda to be with communities, reaching in partnership through research and ongoing work with the goal of bending structure to reflect the justice, equity, health, and wellbeing that we know is possible.

We know it is possible because, in our liminal space of *communitas*, we imagined it together. That same senior year in the 1990's, I took an archaeology class to fulfill the "Four Fields" requirement of my anthropology major. As an introduction, we read David Macaulay's *Motel of the Mysteries* (1979) which documented an imagined future where the world as it is now was buried in junk mail, uncovered and analyzed by archaeologists of the future. If archaeologists were to uncover that ballroom in Indianapolis on that day, frozen in time, I wonder what they would see? How they would interpret this assembly at the physical fringes of the campus, would they see a small village at the outskirts of a larger settlement on the banks of a slow moving river? A gathering of magicians or healers? A guild of thieves? The performance of a cult ritual meant to usher in the rains of spring?

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I write this knowing that these interpretations would only make sense if future archaeology was undergirded by the same arrogance that is a hallmark of contemporary science and social science.

Such assumptions and interpretations should be problematic now and in the future. Instead, I hope the archaeologists would recognize the evidence of anti-structure in that ballroom, the distributed nature of knowledge and authority, and the work being done to co-construct and co-facilitate mutually transformational infrastructures and practices for equity, justice, honor, and wellbeing for all communities.

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