

Session Six: Celebrating ourselves and our work

"No matter what our attempts to inform, it is our ability to inspire that will turn the tide."

Syracuse Cultural Workers

Goals: of

- ★ To provide your group with information about the importance of people's cultures.

- ★ To develop ways in which your group can discover and create ceremonies and rituals to celebrate themselves and their accomplishments

- ★ To bring a sense of closure: that your group has experienced something important together, that they understand how critical and complex these issues are, and that they have begun to acknowledge and address them.

Materials:

- ★ member's hands, bodies, voices, feet
- ★ music
- ★ food
- ★ symbols, objects (group to determine these)

Time: 1 to 1 1/2 hours

Culture is a critical dimension of organizing and activism, lending spirit to work which is often frustrating, crisis-laden, and brain-logged with strategies, tactics and little joy. In our efforts to build community, we find that cultural expression can help us experience the power of rich, redemptive, healing power, helping us to transcend the often tragic characteristics (racist, sexist, ageist, consumerist and heterosexist) of our contemporary culture. To heal ourselves and our communities requires we recognize our inherent value. What we value, we nurture and preserve (Starhawk, 1987). An empowering process unfolds with the recognition that our sense of self-worth is dependent in many ways on our ability to sustain our lives, on our capacity to create a sustainable culture, and our capacity to create a society which meets our needs.

Fundamental to the success of the Women's Advance was the integrate role of cultural exchange within the structure of the gathering. The sharing of rituals brought people together to work. Integrated throughout the three days were cultural exercises, rituals and presentations for those who wished to participate. The following paragraphs elaborate on a model by Susan Perlestein, director of Elders Share the Arts, of the cultural work -- both invented and traditional -- practiced at the Advance.

Opening warm-ups

The purpose of group warm-ups is to encourage trust, release tension, and establish

supportive connections among participants. People arrive preoccupied, and these disparate energies need to be channeled in to a unifying direction. This process of centering -- of moving from the world of daily activities to creative exploration -- enables people to experience heightened states of receptivity, spontaneity and imagination. It awakens the senses and prepares the group for more involved forms of activity.

Warm-ups should be fun and playful and can bring people together on a physical and emotional level. Attention should be paid to the creation of a warm, open atmosphere in which people can learn from each other. We use non-verbal communication, including breathing exercises (yoga), songs, sound and motion, rhythm and gestures. For example, in the video we saw a clip of an activity called "movement pass around":

Rather than introducing yourselves with your work titles, each person contributes a movement (keeping it simple so others can follow) until everyone has taken a turn.

In the video, you see an energized group, affirming our collective presence, first clapping hands and then stomping feet. Joining together in these ways enhances our ability to work together on the Advance.

The ritual seen at the end of the video is actually an opening ceremony that was contributed by two Lakota Native American women from South Dakota, Madonna Beard and Karen Artichoker. It is a ceremony called "smudging" and its purpose is to help purify and cleanse participants so they can feel centered and open. In this ceremony, each woman in the circle stood and in turn had sage and cedar smoke waved over her with a feather. Eibun Adelona is doing this for the group. The sage takes away what is negative, the cedar brings what is positive. One again, we were brought together in ways which celebrated cultural expression and understanding.

Problem solving through culturally expressive ways

Often misunderstanding occurs because of lack of information and familiarity. Misinterpretations occur because what we say is only a fraction of what is conveyed in a conversation. The *way* we say it, show it, and tell it conveys meaning and is culturally interpreted.

Conveying commonalities and differences

Cultural expression such as song, dance, poetry, drama and art provide ways among many, of deeply appreciating and learning about difference. For example, we sang songs from the women's movement, such as, "We Are a Gentle, Angry People" by Holly Near. The lyrics exemplify a way of bridging cultural difference, bonding, building, and establishing a positive tone for the conference. Joining our voices in this way provided an open door for the didactic, more formal information to be exchanged. We could, therefore, more easily understand and support the various presentations on how to establish multicultural organizations.

On the other hand, cultural values are expressed in many different ways -- sometimes directly or at times communicated by behavior. As well, cultures have developed ceremonies that have religious roots and in recent decades, alternative celebrations have developed as a replacement for traditional ceremonies. The

important thing is that no one group imposes their cultural ways upon another. There is also a question of appropriating a group's ceremony in a trivializing way, thereby appearing to be disrespectful. An example would be the use of Native American regalia as a Halloween costume. Some aspects of a group's culture can be experienced as oppressive, especially by women. The group needs to address this issue as well.

Si Kahn suggests that we try out techniques in small group meetings which encourage people to talk about themselves, their histories, their hopes and dreams, their values, where they came from, where they're going. (see Organizing, page 284)

Closings

In closing, it is important to express what we experienced. How do we communicate what we will take with us as well as what we will leave with the gathering? Group poems are an effective way of collecting associations and giving them back to the community. In the videotape, Perlstein demonstrates a closing group poem called "goodbye and hello." Women expressed the values of sharing, cooperation, exchange of information and ideas. For example:

Each woman speaks to what she will leave and what she promises to take with her. "Goodbye to victimhood, hello to leadership"... "Goodbye to inspiration that encourages me to speak and hello to action."

Conclusion

Ceremonies help bring a sense of trust and openness to people in a group, and a sense of community and connection. Beginnings, endings, and transitions are good times for ceremonies, as are celebrations of group victories and holidays. Sometimes events that acknowledge personal or community tragedies or hardships can help mobilize the strength of the group.

"As people begin to organize together, they also begin to learn from each other's values. We are not simply building an organization, we are also re-establishing people's culture. We are creating a shared sense of history and democratic values, a common set of expectations within which to develop our strategies and tactics...that can help make more possible and powerful a real majority movement in our country." (Kahn, 1991, page)

Notes:

See Starhawk's *Truth or Dare: Encounters with Power, Authority and Mystery* (1987, New York: HarperCollins) for a rich discussion of ritual, myths, games and ceremonies which empower and create a new culture for positive change. Also see *Women's Rituals: A Source Book* by Barbara G. Walker (1987, New York: HarperCollins).

Si Kahn's 1991 book, *Organizing: A Guide for Grassroots Leaders* (revised edition, Maryland: NASW Press) is an excellent discussion of culture as an organizing tool and how to build peoples' cultures into our organizing.

This chapter was written by Barbara Joseph with the materials from Susan Perlstein, who coordinated cultural activities at the Advance conference.