

Conference as Ritual: Structures for the Unsave Mind

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Can anyone take conferences seriously after reading David Lodge's *Small World*? Lodge's book is a satirical examination of academic groupiness, set in a never-ending cycle of conferences. He introduces his subject by declaring,

The modern conference resembles the pilgrimage of medieval Christendom in that it allows the participants to indulge themselves in all the pleasures and diversions of travel while appearing to be austere bent on self-improvement. To be sure, there are certain penitential exercises to be performed - the presentation of a paper, perhaps, and certainly listening to the papers of others. But with this excuse you journey to new and interesting places . . . and at the end of it all, return home with an enhanced reputation for seriousness of mind (Lodge, 1985, prologue).

A number of people, in spite of the insinuations of persons like Lodge that it is all rather a giggle, take conferences quite seriously: enough to make a study of them as a social phenomenon that aids in generating cohesiveness and a sense of occasion. A conference, they would argue, is not just experience, but *an* experience. It has dimensions that mark it off as something extraordinary, in the literal sense of that term.

Anthropologists like Victor Turner and Edward Bruner focus their attention on the experience of experiencing (Turner and Bruner, 1986). Their approach is to make an initial distinction between behaviour, which is noted in other people, and experience, which is personally felt. It is a germane distinction, for anthropologists of their persuasion are more inclined to describe how it felt to be there, rather than what went on. Their stance is closer to phenomenology than to ethnography, and their efforts are concentrated on what gave the occasion its special flavor, its extraordinary character. Their approach suits my present purpose admirably, since my question is, What makes an NAEA conference special?

First, the fact that NAEA holds its convention once a year is significant. Edgar Wind, the art historian, once remarked that you may blow the Last Trump once, but you must not blow it everyday. To make an occasion out of events, there must be a period of non-occasion preceding and following. One might be tempted to say that the longer the period between occasions, the more significant the occasion: witness the excitement over the appearance of Halley's Comet. There are however, practical reasons for NAEA conventions to happen more regularly than once every two hundred years. All things considered, once a year is a decent compromise.

Second, NAEA conferences are significant because they provide opportunity to organize experiences into ritual. For an event to be properly savoured, it must have certain predictable elements. Children are very conscious of this, and resist any attempts on the part of their parents to alter even the smallest aspects of Christmas or Hanukkah or Chinese New Year. NAEA gives its convention ritualistic overtones through the regularization of events in the form of conference program with a familiar format. It provides, in its regional and special interest lunches, opportunities for feasting, a traditional and omnipresent part of ritual, a milieu for the reinforcement of small group or familiar bonding, and for eating and drinking to excess, with attendant guilt and catharsis. Ritual extends to the rewarding of exemplary individuals: in the case of NAEA, those who have personified group norms or distinguished themselves in academic warfare. And finally, ritual is developed and reinforced through language that serves to illuminate material and to identify roles held by participants. "Disciple-based Art Education", for example, serves immediately to identify particular positions that will be taken by those who speak on the topic, and may indeed result in one thinking that those positions have a certain universal familiarity of tone or custom.

Third, the conference creates a world in microcosm, where everyday reality is suspended. The opportunity exists to have a drink with someone who was hitherto only a literary citation. Overnight visibility is possible as a result of one judicious question posed at a general session, or through a presentation that strikes a sympathetic chord with the audience. The particular and the universal, for once, are one. The convention is all there is: art education provides a license under which to operate, and the participants endorse their collective identity while competing with each other individually.

Fourth, the conference creates a sense of theatre, in which key actors or groups emerge, and within which mysteries are performed. One of the most intriguing of these, from my personal perspective, is the Delegates' Assembly. I meet the participants in elevators, and I am always struck by the number of talismanic badges each of them wears. I had always assumed that their purpose was to ward off the evil eye, but recently I read that in Japan, businessmen go to conferences where, for the first day or two, they confess all their shortcomings. Every shortcoming is marked by a ribbon of shame that is attached to the individual's clothing so that the more self-effacing may soon be festooned with them. As a result of every positive act of redemption performed at the conference, a ribbon may be removed, and by the end the participants' grey pinstripe suits may be restored to their original condition. I am now playing with the idea that the buttons on

Delegates' Assembly members may serve the same purpose; though it is troubling to note that, far from atonement being apparent in a decrease in the number of buttons worn, most of the delegates seem to register an increase as the days go by. Obviously, a recalcitrant group!

No mystery would be complete without its shamans, and NAEA is no exception. Shamans in this organization are of three groups. There are comfortable shamans, whose role is to confirm our solidarity. There are prickly shamans, who let us see what a thin veneer separates us from total chaos. And there are inspirational shamans, who tell old stories and create new myths and encourage us to believe that we are at least as good as we think we are - and maybe even better.

In this communal theatre, each of us has a part. Not only do we construct our world in microcosm, but we watch ourselves conducting it. Hence the presence at every event of this kind of photographers and video cameras, validating the existence of the actors as well as supplying testimony that the event actually took place. Experience, like Vitamin C, has to be constantly replenished; but if we cannot in the months following the conference relive the experience itself, we can at least benefit vicariously from images of the event reproduced in the *NAEA News*.

Having considered what gives the conference significance, I turn now to the question of how it is related to the broader conceptual framework of experiences. Over twenty years ago, Claude Levi-Strauss wrote *The Savage Mind*, in which he dealt with three ways by which people in non-industrial and often non-literate societies organized their lives. They have, he said, a tendency to see things synchronically, as horizontal patterns and relationships, rather than diachronically, as sequences operating over time. They operate experimentally, making do with whatever is at hand: a process known as bricolage. Their existence is revealed to them through dialectical situations in which polar opposites are set up, each containing the seeds of the other. A haiku illustrates the life-death dialectic,

The butterfly
Follows the bier
Whereon the coffin lies

For the unsavage mind, however, the kind that is in evidence at art education conferences, Levi-Strauss's categories have limited applicability. The context is diachronically experienced: elements exist and draw strength from their own history, rather than being seen as relationships among elements or components. So it was that at one regional lunch, the history of that region formed one of the presentations to the delegates. The program, rather than being organized thematically, across interest groups, was instead divided along traditional lines, into elementary, secondary, supervisory, and higher education categories, with a catchall "Theoretical Concepts," a kind of conceptual Other, or leftover, collecting anything that did not fit those major, historically established components.

There is a tendency to work from a fixed agenda, rather than play the part of bricolage, picking up and adapting circumstances as these occur. Were we to take bricolage seriously as a means to conduct business, we might invite submissions for presentations in the normal way, but then put

them all into a hat, draw them out randomly and assign them arbitrarily to the participants.

Dialectical polarities are generally exchanged for a middle ground at NAEA conferences. The preparation of papers and the submission of abstracts in advance ensures that issues are already partially worked out, rather than constructed from different positions on site. Consequently, there is little of the dialectical clash of competing ideologies; rather, small like-minded groups share common perceptions, and surprises are few.

In any large organization, minorities create their own rituals, to let the organization know how they relate to it, and to ensure the propagation of their own ideas. Fragmentation has its price: it may take the form of feeling that we fail to speak with one voice. But it also has its advantages. Complex organisms have more options to draw upon than do simple ones when it comes to responding to new situations. Whether NAEA conferences are judged to be successes or failures may well be a function of an individual's perception of the engagement of that person's conference affiliate with an issue of substance or relevance. There will never, for this reason, be a conference that is universally lauded or deplored.

The anthropology of experience serves to remind us that we live in three worlds: the world of physical reality, the world of experiences (or, life as lived), and the world of expression (or, life as told). It enables us to affirm that we are experiencing a complex, multi-channeled, polymorphic event. And it allows us to maintain that position with a fair amount of self-righteousness in the face of these inevitable accusations made by families and colleagues following our return to home and campus, that we have been simply frittering away the days and nights in unintellectual drinking, carousing, and the telling of scurrilous tales.

References

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