

**"Its not your fault, but...":  
notes on the ritualization of corporate culture change  
in firing practices**

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*Abstract:*

This paper examines ritualizations of corporate firing practices that have developed in the last 15 years. First, there is an examination of the role of outplacement professionals acting as ritual specialists. Second, there is an examination of one "script" of a firing "ritual". Finally, there is an examination of the purpose of ritualizing the firing practice. The paper is based on continuing research into the Outplacement industry including interviews with Outplacement counsellors, and an examination of their firing scripts.

## **1.0 Introduction**

The life of an individual in any society is a series of passages from one age to another and from one occupation to another. Whenever there are fine distinctions among age or occupational groups, progression from one group to the next is accompanied by special acts,... (Van Gennep, 1960:3)

When Van Gennep wrote his work *Les rites de passage*, he believed that Western industrial society retained only two primary categories between which rites of passage were necessary: the sacred and the profane (1960: 1-2). To support this position, he argued (1960: 1) that the necessary conditions for other transformations was based solely on economics and intellect. In short, "modern man" was rationally and economically motivated. Since the publication of *Les rites de passage* in 1909, the concept has been extended, reworked, and refined by a number of authors.

The pattern noted by Van Gennep, however, appears in modern Western society in guises that do not invoke the concept of the "sacred" in its "traditional" sense. This pattern is based on the idea that individuals undergo a symbolically guided transition from one social status to another via a transition through a liminal zone. In the rituals studied by Van Gennep, and later by Turner, access to and from the liminal zone, and the liminal zone itself, were considered to be "sacred space", and were marked as such. But this classification as "sacred" relied on a generally shared, cultural perception that the "worlds" of the sacred and the "profane" interpenetrated and interacted on a constant basis.

This constant interpenetration, coupled with culturally developed techniques for moving through the space of the sacred world, creates a situation where there are specific "paths" between various lifeworlds. The difference between a transition through a liminal zone and what Turner has called a "liminoid" zone, is the phenomenological effect on the person undergoing the transition.

In a liminoid transition, the individual shifts from one lifeworld to another that is already familiar. In effect, a liminoid transition is a "role shift" where the "actor" is familiar with both roles, and is phenomenologically "at ease" in them. A liminal transition marks a shift from a familiar role to an unfamiliar role, and the actors must, in their journey to the new state, learn to think and perceive reality from that new role.

Transitions through the liminal zone may or may not be culturally recognized and ordered. If they are, then the "path" between the two states will, in all probability, be marked with symbolic "blazes"<sup>2</sup>. In addition to the marking, if the culture or society values the pathway highly enough, then there will be certain persons and/or institutions whose responsibility it is to guide travellers along that pathway. In the societies studied by Turner and Van Gennep, these guides were, frequently, ritual specialists.

In modern Canadian society, we no longer live in a world that closely mingles the sacred with the profane. Western society has, by and large, rationalized the world of the sacred out of our everyday perceptions. However, we still have people moving from one lifeworld to another. And we still find people who help the travellers of these paths on their journey through the liminal to the unfamiliar.

The purpose of this paper is to examine a single component of one particular modern path of transition. Specifically, I have chosen to examine one form of termination ritual in Canadian corporate cultures. This is part of a larger research project dealing with the creation of a ritualized path between "employed" and wherever the travellers on that path end up. It should, however, be considered as a preliminary inquiry into termination rituals and outplacement ideology.<sup>3</sup>

The data that has been incorporated in this paper comes from a number of sources. First, I conducted eighteen months of fieldwork in the Ottawa office of one major Canadian outplacement firm which I will call "Work Transitions Canada" (WTC). This took the form of participation in seminars and workshops, indepth interviews with senior counsellors, *ad hoc* interviews with managers and program participants, and an extensive examination of corporate, academic and popular literature. Given the nature of the data, and the requirement for strict confidentiality, the analysis presented in section 3 conducted at the level of exegetical meaning (Turner, 1967:50-51).<sup>4</sup>

This examination will start with a consideration of the role of the outplacement counsellor as a ritual specialist. Next, I will examine a termination script that has been developed by Work Transitions Canada. Finally, I will offer some thoughts on why the process of outplacement in general, and terminations in particular, are becoming ritualized.

## **2.0 Legal considerations and the outplacement counsellor as ritual specialist**

For most people, the journey from employment to an unknown future starts with termination. The actual termination may come in any form from one years advance notice, to turning up at the office and finding out that your key doesn't work. Most corporations, however, don't have the luxury of being able to give one years notice, and few are foolish enough to change the locks as a termination notice. Most terminations fall somewhere in between these two extremes and involve a specific termination meeting.

Once a corporation decides to use a termination meeting format, there are a number of structural factors that condition the meeting. First, assuming that the dismissal is as a result of either a downsizing decision or individual poor fit in the organization,<sup>5</sup> the terminating manager must present the dismissal as a) inevitable, and b) non-prejudicial. In essence, the manager must convey to the dismissed employee that the dismissal is not for *just cause* (i.e. performance).<sup>6</sup>

These two criteria, inevitability and non-prejudice, are important for several reasons. First, if a dismissal is inevitable, for example as a result of a general downsizing, then the corporation may claim that the dismissal is "due to an unforeseen event".<sup>7</sup> By claiming an "unforeseen event" as the cause of termination, and by stressing that the termination is not due to poor performance or for "*just cause*", the employer significantly reduces their chances of being involved in a wrongful dismissal suite.

This point is supported by several practices. First, a large majority of corporations require a release agreeing to the terms signed by the employee before any severance payments are made.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, corporate policy often requires the withholding of some or all of the severance package if a dismissed employee launches a legal action.<sup>9</sup> Finally, many consultants' termination scripts contain injunctions such as

### **These Meetings are NOT intended to be:**

- ◆ A forum to justify the company's decision.
- ◆ The place to discuss performance issues or grievances.

(Emphasis in the original)

While I have concentrated on legal strictures that condition the termination meeting, there is an equally important point that must be considered. Furthermore, according to Murray Axmith & Associates (1993: 9), "firing employees is the **most stressful task** performed by managers, according to 71.1% of the participants [in their 1993 Canadian Dismissal practices survey]".<sup>10</sup> And, unlike the terminated employee, the manager will continue to work for the corporation and directly influence its economic performance.

I want to consider the role played by the outplacement counsellor as ritual specialist (or shaman) in these proceedings. First, at least in the more ethical outplacement firms and when there are sufficient funds, there is usually a meeting between the outplacement counsellor and the terminating manager before the termination meeting itself. During this meeting, the counsellor and the manager go over the essentials of both the severance package for the employee and complete an assessment of the employee geared to their future job search. The counsellor also rehearses the manager in their script (considered in section 3.0).

On the day of the actual termination meeting, the counsellor may be in one of two places: either in the room with the manager, or in an adjacent room. Their role in the termination meeting depends on their location. If they are in the room during the meeting, then they will act as a witness and as an expert on the severance terms. If they are in an adjacent room, which is the preferred location, then they will act as the person who takes the dismissed employee out of the building and makes sure they get home. Regardless of their physical location, the counsellor acts as a psychopomp withdrawing the terminated person from the land of the employed and taking them down the path to their future.<sup>11</sup>

This psychopompic function of the counsellor is a very necessary one for a number of reasons. First, there is an obvious fear that an unwatched terminated employee will choose to cause major damage to the former employer. This fear leads some corporations to use security guards in place of counsellors. Second, if the act of terminating an employee is the major cause of stress for managers, how much more stressful would it be for them to have to escort the former employee out of the building?<sup>12</sup> Finally, most outplacement counsellors are trained to handle a variety of reactions from terminated employees and are usually able to gage the individual's reaction.

The counsellor also plays another role for the terminating manager. During the rehearsal and pre-termination meeting session, they serve to reassure the manager that the termination was inevitable. The pre-termination meeting rehearsal becomes, in effect, a ritual for the manager to reduce their anxiety by converting potential guilt into a recognition of "fate" or "circumstances beyond their control".<sup>13</sup> The termination "ritual" is

completed with the manager turning the terminated employee over to the counsellor at the end of the meeting. This act marks the conclusion of the first stage of the relocation "rite of passage"; entry to the liminal phase.

This section has concentrated on two primary points. First, I considered the legal strictures that serve to structure large parts of the termination meeting. Second, I examined the various roles of the outplacement counsellor surrounding the termination meeting. I want to now turn to a consideration of the actual termination meeting itself: the "firing ritual".

### **3.0 The Script**

Most of the scripts developed over the past 15 years by outplacement consultants are very similar. I have decided to concentrate on one main text, produced by Work Transitions Canada in July, 1990, since it is a good exemplar of the genre. Physically, the script is 3 pages long, and is printed on a high quality, medium *ecru*, rag bond paper.

The document is entitled "Preparing for the termination", and is divided into two primary sections:

- A. The Termination Interview, and
- B. How to say it.

Part A contains an overview of how the interview is to be conducted. It centres on two primary areas. First, it details what the interview is supposed to be and what it is not supposed to be. Second, it contains a number of short aphorisms for the terminating manager.

Part B, "How to say it", is the actual script, including both suggested wording, stage directions, and props lists. It is structured into three main parts, each with appropriate monologue and stage directions (see appendix A). These three parts are titled:

1. The News
2. The Support
3. The Close

The script itself assumes the presence of three main characters: the terminating manager, the terminated employee, and an outplacement counsellor. As I noted above, all of the script lines are "rehearsed" by the manager and the counsellor before the termination interview.

The first section, "The News", is the shortest of the sections, being only a single paragraph in length.

*"John, I am afraid that I have bad news for you today. It is with regret that I must advise you that, as a result of the reorganization and changes in the department, your employment will cease effective today, May 10th, 1990."*

This section focuses on two major points. First, it acts to annunciate the termination of the individual effective immediately. Second, it serves to place the reason for the termination outside of the individual, in effect stating that the termination is brought about by "fate" ("... as a result of the reorganization and changes in the department...").

While these points are obvious, they both deserve a closer examination to uncover their implications and assumptions. The first point derives, in part, from the second so it will be useful to examine them in reverse order. In the late 1970's and early 1980's, a cultural meme developed that centred around the phrase "lean and mean" (Beck, 1992).<sup>14</sup> The source of this meme may be traced to three primary nodes:<sup>15</sup>

1. the growing inability of North American corporations to compete with Japanese and German companies in the international marketplace;
2. the prevalence of "Man the Hunter" and military motifs in general corporate cultures; and
3. the rise of corporate "raiders", and the dismantling of numerous multi-layer corporate empires.

It is not my purpose in this paper to present a detailed cultural history of corporate development in North America. It is, however, important to note that the corporate culture that developed as a result of the Fordist revolution and, later, the post-war compromise, was both "totalitarian", in that it entered into all phases of life, and "imperialist", in that it sought to constantly expand its "imperium" or "sphere of influence".<sup>16</sup>

The Fordist culture that developed relied on what Whyte (1956) has termed the Social Ethic which traded the individualism of the Protestant Ethic, for a guarantee of security within a corporate collective. This shift from individualism to corporate security can be seen in any number of artifacts from the increasing size of labour contract to the development of a *sub-rosa* paternalistic culture. For the purposes of this paper, the central memes of this culture which concerns us are the guarantees of increasing rewards, constant security, and the belief that a person only lost their job due to incompetence.

The meme of increasing rewards ran into trouble in the mid-1970's during the period of stagflation. Nualla Beck (1992:95), speaking of the disinflation part of the corporate life cycle, has noted that "...[managers have] discovered to their shock and horror that in real life nothing grows forever." This same period, the mid to late 1970's

marked the appearance of the phrase "lean and mean" which Beck (1992:95) "translates" as

"Maybe, if we lay off lots of workers and cut out some extravagances, like sales meetings in exotic locations, our shareholders will become happier with our performance."

This reaction attacks the second meme, constant security. However, the responsibility for the reaction is not placed on the executives who made the decisions. Rather, it is placed on both the corporate "Other", usually Japan and Germany, and/or on the operation of transcendent "fate" as embodied in the abstract concept of "The Global Economy".

While the first two memes lost much of their power due to various "reality shocks"<sup>17</sup> (stagflation, downsizing "panic"), the third meme retains much of its power. In part, this situation arises because of the vulnerability of the first two memes to external disproof, while the third meme requires both internal and external disproof.<sup>18</sup> In many cases, the external disproof of the third meme is available in the rhetoric against the corporate "Other" and/or "fate". It is this form of external disproof that is invoked in the phrase "... as a result of the reorganization and changes in the department..." used in the first section of the script.

The second section, "The Support", consists of two paragraphs and aims to produce five main effects. The two parts of this section may be described as "material support", and "psychological support".

#### 2a. Material Support

*"What I would like to do now is to review with you the details of your termination package. The company is prepared to offer you a separation package which includes statutory requirements, plus a severance for a total of ....., etc."*

#### 2b. Psychological Support

*"The company has retained, at our own expense, the firm of Work transitions Canada to help you in your job search. While it is entirely up to you, I would encourage you to take full advantage of their services and programs to help you find other employment."*

I mentioned that there are five main effects that this section aims to produce. The first two are descriptive, in that they describe first the material support and second, the psychological support available for the terminated employee. The third effect is an attempt to stop the employee from arguing with the decision.<sup>19</sup> The fourth effect is an attempt to reduce the guilt of the terminating manager.<sup>20</sup> The final point is that the section serves as a bridge between giving the employee their notice and getting them out of the office.

The third, fourth, and fifth points need to be examined in somewhat more detail. First, by forcing the terminated employee, who may or may not be in shock, to concentrate on what resources they will have available to them, the section attempts to shift the employees internal time focus from the past (e.g "Why me? What did I do wrong?"), to the future. This phenomenal time shift to the future serves to fix that future as being a state of unemployment. By this I mean that the employee is forced to accept the future, "unemployment", as fixed. This should serve to reduce the chance of them attempting to argue the decision. One of the aphorisms in the first section of the script clearly illustrates this:

You [the manager] should not use this meeting to sort out differences or allow the employee to bargain his/her way back into the company. Be firm. The termination is a business decision which is final and non-negotiable.

The fourth effect, reducing terminating manager guilt, is a result of forcing the manager to enumerate everything the company is doing for the terminated employee. This should reinforce the message of the pre-termination meeting with the outplacement consultant, that the termination is a result of "fate", and is not the fault of the manager. By reinforcing this message, the act of termination may become less stressful for the manager.<sup>21</sup>

The fifth, and final, effect is the section serving as a bridge between the termination notice, and removing the employee from the office environment. Such a bridge is necessary for a number of reasons. First, the bridge serves to stabilize the terminated employees reactions. Second, the bridge is necessary to fill "dead air". By "dead air", I mean the awful feeling of there being nothing left to say, on the managers part, after they have just emotionally hurt the terminated employee. Finally, the bridge serves as vocal sensory input to draw the terminated employee's perception out of any internal emotional turmoil they may be in, and to ground them back in material reality.

The third and final section of the firing ritual is "The Close". In many ways, this section is the fulfilment of the grounding process for both the terminated employee and the terminating manager. As with the previous section, "The Close" consists of two paragraphs, the first of which is a psychological "close", the second is a physical "close".

### 3a Psychological Close

*"I am really sorry I had to tell you this, John. I know you are going to have a lot of questions and that is quite understandable. I will be available to discuss them with you later today, tomorrow and through the next few weeks. However, because I have a number of*

*people to speak with, let me take you and introduce you to \_\_\_\_\_, of the consulting firm."*

[Ensure that the employee has a contact name in human resources for questions]

### 3b Physical Close

*"You probably have a number of personal effects to take home from your office. If you would rather do this later, let me know and I will arrange a time for you to return. John, there is not much more that I can say, except that I have enjoyed working with you and I would like to take this opportunity to personally thank you for your commitment and loyalty. It goes without saying, if I can be of help, let me know.*

[Escort the employee to the consultant, introduce them and shake the employee's hand as you leave.]

The first paragraph, the psychological close, serves as an attempt to sever the current emotional bonds between the manager and the employee. If we look at the structure of the paragraph, we can see that each sentence places the terminated employee at an increasing emotional distance from the manager. The first sentence is still highly personal, "I am really sorry I had to tell you this, John." It also implicitly places the blame for the termination on some transcendent factor, since the manager is sorry that s/he had to "tell" the employee, rather than had to "fire" the employee.

The second sentence serves to objectify and transform the employee's emotions into "questions", while the third sentence puts the temporal locus for resolving these "questions" into the future. The final sentence completes the psychological distancing process by transforming the employee from an individual, "John", into just a member of a group; "... I have a number of people to speak with...". The implication is clear, "John" is merely one of a number of people who are being terminated. The phrase "... let me take you and introduce you to..." completes the distancing by transferring responsibility for continued interaction with the employee from the manager to the consultant.

The second paragraph, the physical close, completes the closure process. The first sentence draws attention to specific material objects, "personal effects". The second sentence reinforces the temporal future of any additional interaction. The third and fourth sentences attempt to modify the effects of the psychological closure and to reinstate a new form of emotional interaction. In effect, these two sentences reinforce the attempt to shift further interaction into the future ("... if I can be of help, let me know."), and to shift the emotional relationship into one of "friends" rather than business associates.<sup>22</sup>

The final "stage direction" completes the closure process:

Escort the employee to the consultant, introduce them and shake the employee's hand as you leave.

The employee has already been psychologically distanced, now there is physical movement to reinforce that distancing. As I mentioned earlier, the preferred placement of the consultant is in an adjacent room. This requires that both the manager and the terminated employee leave the "scene" of the termination, an act of both physical distancing and psychological closure. The action of introducing the employee to the consultant is a physical reinforcement of the psychological closure noted above. Finally, the act of shaking hands and the manager walking away completes the process of closure. The termination ritual is now completed, although this set of ritual actions constitutes only the "separation phase" of the rite-of-passage.

#### **4.0 A ritual, but for what purpose?**

Throughout this paper, I have used the terms "ritual" and "rite-of-passage" and have taken for granted a specific relationship between them. I believe that before any examination of the "purpose" of the termination ritual can be undertaken, it would be best to examine the relationship between "ritual" and "rite-of-passage" in further detail.

In *Les rites de passage*, Van Gennep had noted that many rituals involved a three stage structure; a) separation, b) margin or limen, and c) reaggregation. As such, a "rite-of-passage" may be seen as a sub-set of the general class "ritual" which conforms to this three stage format. However, as Turner (1974:197) points out, there are certain aggregates of rituals which also exhibit this three stage structure. Furthermore, these aggregates of rituals, or in some cases ritual cycles<sup>23</sup>, contain separate components that are in and of themselves fully recognizable as separate embedded rituals. It is in this later sense, a three stage aggregate of rituals, that I use the term "rite-of-passage" (with the hyphens).

Given this usage, the term "ritual" then refers to specific clusters of symbolized and scripted actions which take place at symbolic "nodes" in the overall rite-of-passage. As such, for the terminated employee, the termination ritual is a ritual of separation, the opening ritual in the relocation rite-of-passage. The termination ritual forces the employee to enter into the liminal stage, and introduces them to the psychopomp or teacher who will mediate their transition.

In discussing the liminal stage of rites-of-passage, Turner(1974:196) noted that

... the process and state of liminality represents at once a negation of many, though not all, of the features of preliminal social

structure and an affirmation of another order of things and relations. Social structure is *not* eliminated, rather it is radical simplified: generic rather than particularistic relationships are stressed.

Many of the points noted by Turner are apparent in the analysis of the termination ritual. There is a negation of most of the "preliminal" social structure and relations. The terminated employee no longer has an occupationally defined social role except "unemployed", which is certainly "...an affirmation of another order of things and relations."

The social structure is not eliminated: the corporation still exists, and personal relationships outside of that corporate structure still continue. However, the scope of the individual terminated employee's social relations is radically reduced with the severance from their occupational relationships. Turners' final point of generic versus particularistic relationships is shown in the process of closure where the terminated employee is shifted from an individual to a member of a group with whom the manager shares exactly the same relationship.

The conclusion that a termination ritual is a ritual of separation is obvious. However, that conclusion is based on an assumption that the ritual is centred around the terminated employee. I would suggest that termination rituals are equally centred around the terminating manager and, in this case, the termination ritual is not a separation ritual, but a cathartic and cosmologically integrative ritual.

As evidence to support such a position, consider the following. First, the ritual scripting is solely for the manager. In effect, by attempting to control the managers' actions through the script, the consultants try to provide the manager with a specific set of categories to comprehend the emotional forces and changed social relations brought about as a result of the termination.

Second, the script continually invokes transcendent "fate" as the reason for the performance of the ritual ("... I must advise you that, as a result of the reorganization and changes in the department..."). The category of transcendent "fate" as a cause of terminations already exists in most corporate cultures (see section 3); it was the original justification for downsizing. As such, it is a readily available meme that allows for the transference of anxiety, guilt, and blame to some "Other". As such, it has a cathartic value, but since it is also part of most current corporate cultures, it also has the effect of reinforcing the current "just-in-time" cosmology.<sup>24</sup>

Third, the second section of the script ("The Support") aims to produce within the manager a belief that s/he has attempted to do everything they can for the terminated

employee. As Scheckner has noted, the repetitive performance of actions may well induce an preselected emotional response. I would argue that one of the effects of managers performing repeated termination rituals is that they may well come to believe the words they are scripted to speak, and that this belief would serve to reinforce the cathartic and integrative effects of the termination ritual.<sup>25</sup>

Fourth, the aphorisms section of the script (section A) consistently argues that the terminated employee should not "... use this meeting to sort out differences or allow the employee to bargain his/her way back into the firm...". While the injunction is placed on the employee raising these issues, there is also an implicit injunction against the manager raising these objections. The manager is forced into a double bind where they must suppress any resentment they feel at the dismissal. If they do not suppress this resentment, then they may well hurt the employee or the corporation which they will continue to work for.<sup>26</sup> One result of such a double bind may be the development of a survivor guilt syndrome within the corporation.<sup>27</sup>

I believe that these four points support an argument that the termination ritual is not only a ritual of separation for the terminated employee, but is also a cathartic and integrative ritual for the manager.

## **5.0 Conclusions**

The purpose of this paper was to examine one example of a firing ritual that is used in some modern Canadian corporations. This examination began with a consideration of the legal strictures surrounding firing, and the role of Outplacement counsellors as ritual specialists. Next, I analyzed one firing ritual "script". Finally, there was a consideration of the purposes of the firing ritual.

The conclusions as to the purpose of the termination ritual raise more questions. The argument that the termination ritual is a ritual of separation, the start of a relocation rite-of-passage, suggests that a detailed examination of the entire rite-of-passage should be undertaken and, in addition, an examination should be made of other modern, economic ritual activities.

Furthermore, the argument that, for the manager, the termination ritual is a cathartic and integrative ritual suggests that control over corporate integrative rituals is passing from the corporation itself into the hands of private consultants.<sup>28</sup> I would suggest that this possibility, a trend towards privatization of corporate rituals, might be the result of increasing human resources specialization coupled with a growing corporate desire to engage in contracting specialists on an as needed basis, rather than to have the capacity themselves.

Finally, I would suggest that the very acceptance of the outplacement profession has some very serious implications for concepts such as "loyalty", "network", and "career". In the organizational culture which took place as a result of the post-war compromise, these concepts were all primarily focused within a given corporation, or at the least, within a single industry. Given the general changes that are underway due to restructuring and the increasing integration of national economies into a global composite, I would suggest that the concepts of "loyalty", "network", and "career", are shifting their foci (see Bridges, 1994; Tyrrell, 1996)

The question of "who the ritual is for" is complex and, in some ways, misleading. While there are clear purposes behind the ritual for corporations (legal protection, reinforcement of corporate ideology), managers (catharsis and cosmological integration), fired employees (a rite of separation), and outplacement counsellors (reinforcement of role as ritual specialist and consequent income generation), there is no single, clear purpose which is solidified in the social structure, as in many rites-of-passage (e.g. Turner, 1967, 1969).

Rather, I would suggest that the rite-of-passage which is inaugurated by current termination rituals is temporary and indicative of the ideological and cosmological restructuring that is occurring in the wake of global economic restructuring. As such, the ritual itself, and the rite-of-passage it introduces, might best be seen as a social "stop-gap" evolved to meet immediate emotional and education needs of a segment of the working population. If this is so, then we can expect that this rite-of-passage will gradually disappear as the tension between structural and ideological factors that produced it does.

Until this happens, if it does, we are left with what we do know, namely that the scripting and production of termination rituals, and the concomitant rites-of-passage of "Outplacement", has become a multi-million dollar industry affecting tens of thousands of lives. As such, this is clearly a case for urgent ethnography.

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## **Appendix A: One Termination Script**

### **1. The News**

*"John, I am afraid that I have bad news for you today. It is with regret that I must advise you that, as a result of the reorganization and changes in the department, your employment will cease effective today, May 10th, 1990."*

### **2.0 The Support**

[Quickly summarize the contents of the termination letter (avoid having the employee read the letter in your presence)]

*"What I would like to do now is to review with you the details of your termination package. The company is prepared to offer you a separation package which includes statutory requirements, plus a severance for a total of ....., etc."*

*"The company has retained, at our own expense, the firm of Work transitions Canada to help you in your job search. While it is entirely up to you, I would encourage you to take full advantage of their services and programs to help you find other employment."*

[Give the employee his/her envelope]

### **3.0 The Close**

*"I am really sorry I had to tell you this, John. I know you are going to have a lot of questions and that is quite understandable. I will be available to discuss them with you later today, tomorrow and through the next few weeks. However, because I have a number of people to speak with, let me take you and introduce you to \_\_\_\_\_, of the consulting firm."*

[Ensure that the employee has a contact name in human resources for questions]

*"You probably have a number of personal effects to take home from your office. If you would rather do this later, let me know and I will arrange a time for you to return. John, there is not much more that I can say, except that I have enjoyed working with you and I would like to take this opportunity to personally thank you for your commitment and loyalty. It goes without saying, if I can be of help, let me know."*

[Escort the employee to the consultant, introduce them and shake the employee's hand as you leave.]

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting, North Eastern Anthropology Association, Geneseo, New York, in April 1994. The author wishes to thank Dr. Brian J. Given and the two anonymous reviewers for the suggestions and critiques. Address inquiries to the author, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Carleton University, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1S 5B6.

<sup>2</sup> While the term "symbolic blazes" may refer to a single encapsulating symbol, I also use it to refer to a symbolic "node". Such a node is defined as a recognized and symbolized psychological process which, following Turner (1969:52), "... exhibit[s] the [symbolic] properties of *condensation, unification of disparate referents, and polarization of meaning.*"

<sup>3</sup> My thanks to the first anonymous reviewer for this observation. S/he is, of course, quite correct. This analysis is a preliminary "framing" of the place of this ritual in Canadian society.

<sup>4</sup> This lead, in the words of one reviewer, to "the analysis ha[ving] a curiously disembodied and decontextualized quality." This "quality" is the result of synthesizing individual exegetical meanings into a Weberian ideal type which encapsulates the counsellor's (ritual specialists) understanding of the ritual.

<sup>5</sup> According to Murray Axmith & Associates *1993 Canadian Dismissal Practices Survey*, (p. 2) major reasons for dismissals included: poor performance/fit - 76%; "economic staff reductions" - 50-60%; "*Just cause*" - 45%.

<sup>6</sup> "*Just cause*" is a legitimate reason for termination without notice in Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, Nova Scotia, Ontario, Prince Edward Island, Saskatchewan, the Nort West Territories, and under the Canada Labour Code. The term itself is only defined in Manitoba and Ontario.

<sup>7</sup> "due to an unforeseen event" is an acceptable reason for termination without nitice in Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, Ontario, and Quebec.

<sup>8</sup> Murray Axmith and Associates (1993: 8): release - 73.6%; occasionally require a release - 16.6%; no release - 9.8%.

<sup>9</sup> Murray Axmith and Associates (1993: 9): statutory minimum paid - 32.5%; all payments withheld - 22.4%; paid without prejudice - 20.3%; no experience with litigation - 21.6%; Other - 3.2%.

<sup>10</sup> According to the same survey, giving negative performance reviews was the second most stressful task (23.4%).

<sup>11</sup> The term "psychopomp" comes from religious studies. It refers to a figure who carries the souls of the dead from this "world" to the next (e.g. Death, Anubis, Charon, etc.).

<sup>12</sup> Especially if the employee decides to focus their anger and resentment on the person of the manager. The added threat of personal danger would induce an unwarranted burden of additional stress on the manager.

<sup>13</sup> Of course this assumes that the manager is feeling guilt about the termination in the first place. While this is a potential situation amongst managers who grew up in paternalistic corporate cultures, there are, however, other situations where the managers feel little or no guilt.

<sup>14</sup> The concept of a cultural "meme" was developed by Richard Dawkins (1976). In short, a me/me is the cultural equivalent of a "gene" in human evolution. In general, it is argued that memes are the result of the ability of human to externalise stimulus response sequences, store them in non-human media (e.g. stories, books, art, etc.), and the re-introduce them into new members of the human species. While I do not agree with some of the more extravagant claims concerning the independance of memes from humans (cf Goodenough, 1995 for an examination), I have found that the concept of memes is useful (cf Tyrrell, 1996).

<sup>15</sup> The concept of a "node" is used to describe conditions within a culture's operational environment (cf Rappaport, 1968) which serve as environments favourable to the maintenance and development of specific memes. These "conditions" may be either material (technological, geological, biological, etc.), structural (e.g. organizational), or they may be symbolic (e.g. linguistic, cosmological, etc.).

<sup>16</sup> For an examination of the "totalitarian" and "imperialist" impulses, see Whyte (1956)

<sup>17</sup> For a more indepth analysis of the dynamics involved in this, see Tyrrell (1996). For usage of the term "reality shock", see Holzner (1968:11-13).

<sup>18</sup> The creation of such an internal disproof is a large part of the rite-of-passage, along with the concomitant building of an alternative.

<sup>19</sup> And, by arguing, attempting to turn the dismissal into a *just cause* situation.

<sup>20</sup> Of course, this assumes that the manager is feeling guilty or stressed over the termination decision, a situation that does not always exist.

<sup>21</sup> As already noted, the action of firing is considered to be the most stressful task performed by 71.1% of managers in Murray Axmith & Associates 1993 Dismissal Practices Survey.

<sup>22</sup> It is hard not to draw a parallel between this attempt, and the "But we can still be friends, can't we?" that frequently accompanies the breakdown of sexual relationships. However, much more research would have to be conducted before such a parallel could be shown to have more than superficial and intuitive validity.

<sup>23</sup> The difference between an agregate of rituals and a ritual cycle lies in the specificity of the rituals involved in the agregate. The class "ritual cycle" is seen as a sub-set of the class "agregate of rituals", and the sub-set is defined by the strict adherence to set rituals in specific order. I would argue that the relocation rite-of-passage is an agregate of rituals, rather than a ritual cycle.

<sup>24</sup> For more on this, see Tyrrell (1996). The cathartic value and the reinforcement of cosmology derives from the interjection of meaning interpretation by a ritual specialists, the outplacement counsellor amongst others, in the cycle of meaning (Laughlin, n.d.) that is coming into existence as a result of corporate globalization (cf Bridges, 1994; Tyrrell, 1996).

<sup>25</sup> This point raises a number of additional issues. First, there are other possible reactions to the repeated performance of termination rituals. Second, I would argue that there is a difference between terminating managers who have gone through a positive relocation rite-of-passage and those who have not. The difference would be the difference between belief (or faith) and knowledge.

<sup>26</sup> Of course, this assumes that the manager feels distress at the termination.

<sup>27</sup> For an examination of survivor guilt syndrome in corporations as a result of downsizing, see Noer (1993)

<sup>28</sup> This suggestion is also strengthened by the growing number of morale rebuilding contracts now being filled by private consultants.