Rituals, Emotions, and Changes in Behavior

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**Rituals as part of human existence**

Human beings have used rituals as far back as history records to deal with major life transitions. Birth, death, coming into adulthood, and marriage have all commonly been the subject of rituals.

However, rituals are actually highly incorporated into much of the rest of our life as well – we have rituals for the transitions of the seasons, rituals for celebrations, rituals for accomplishments, rituals around sports, and rituals regarding a host of other transitions.

**What do these rituals do?**

Rituals act to validate that a transition has happened. Since many things that transitions are not clearly defined by tangible changes, and others have emotional or other psychological (and hence sensorially imperceptible) aspects to them, rituals provide us with an outside-reality verification that the change is real, not “just in our head.” If I should question whether the transition has in fact taken place, I can look to the ritual as confirmation that it has.

Rituals thus also provide a kind of closure. This is especially important when unconscious patterns are in play and something is blocking them from getting to their expected outcomes. This creates, as discussed at length elsewhere, pattern-completion anxiety. This anxiety often escalates in inner urgency and intensity, especially if the pattern is well-established, highly associated with other patterns, or perceived as essential. Rituals act to deflect these patterns into completing through the outcome of the ritual itself, putting the completion-anxiety to rest. In a sense, rituals provide an acceptable alternate conclusion or outcome.

Finally, rituals both validate and give permission for a person to publically express emotions that may normally be restricted or stigmatized. This includes obvious ones such as grief and sadness, but also includes pride, love, anger, joy, and even fear, to name a few others. Rituals encourage expressing non-rational thinking, whether that be emotions, associational connections, or ideas and beliefs that rest primarily on our inner realities more than our shared outer one.

**Components of a ritual**

Rituals can have an astounding varieties of forms, but all need to have at least the following components: 1) there must be a tangible (clearly outer-reality) component to them; 2) they must directly identify the transition that is or has been made; 3) they must involve a set pattern of actions and/or choices; and 4) they must have a defined ending.

It is important to note here that rituals are not intended for your conscious, rational, logical brain. That part of your thinking registers the fact of the transition as a simple, cold fact. It is the rest of your thinking – the associational and habitual thinking and the resulting emotions and feelings – that finds rituals so helpful and satisfying.

As a result rituals often contain elements that do not contain rational sense, or provide rational meaning. Judging them on rational grounds is interesting, but largely irrelevant. What is important is that the ritual; “feels right,” not that it can be rationally justified as “correct.”

**Deliberate use of rituals to enhance your life desires**

In addition to cultural, societal, and family rituals, you also can and do use personal rituals. Most people who work find they develop some sort of beginning of work-time and ending of work-time rituals. Most people develop relationship rituals for transitions such as separating from each other or coming back together. You may also have developed rituals about what you do when you are sick, or how you celebrate a major personal accomplishment, or a vast variety of other transitions.

Typically, some of these rituals are consciously chosen and developed, whereas others we simply “fall into,” sometimes for reasons we cannot even make conscious.

However that may be, because we can consciously and deliberately create rituals, we can use them in situations where validating a transition is helpful and/or important to us. (If you like, challenge yourself now with these questions: Is there some important-to-me transition I have made that lacked a ritual to validate it? Would having a ritual help act to make the transition feel more complete, more tangibly real, or give it more of a sense of closure? What kind of ritual would do that for me?)

Two areas where consciously using ritual may be helpful are these: 1) defining a transition from an emotional state (grief, anger, fear, helplessness, love, etc.) that is resisting the clear ending it needs for your further growth, and 2) using ritual to define a transition from a set of choices or behaviors which you are in the process of ending.

**Using a ritual to signify an end to a period of emotion**

Although there is no consensus on how long a particular emotional state “should” last, individually we can come to realize that an emotional state is lasting too long for us, that it is blocking our further normal path of growth. Often there is a feeling that we have become “stuck” in the emotion.

One possible explanation for this is that our emotional and associational thinking is struggling with the problem of pattern-completion, or “closure.” The transition lacks a defined, outer-reality validated end. Because the unconscious patterns are still trying to complete, can’t do so, and have no acceptable alternate conclusion, the brain keeps on trying to resolve an unsolvable situation. It gets stuck.

Ritual may provide a way out. Rituals can assist both in letting go of the old pattern outcomes and in accepting, even coming to embrace, the new ones. A ritual can allow the release of emotions that have been suppressed while your brain tried to find some way to get to the old, expected outcome.

In such cases, you may look to an existing ritual (on the internet, for example) or create your own from scratch. (Note that the phrase “from scratch” doesn’t mean you don’t already have the ingredients, it just means you’re not using an already-established recipe.)

In either case, make sure the four components listed previously are there: tangible part, defined transition, set pattern, and clear ending. Remember that this isn’t about satisfying your logical rational thinking, but about your associational and habitual thinking. It can rationally look crazy as long as it “feels right” associationally.

If it’s time to draw a clear transition between what was and what is or what will be, that’s what rituals do very well. Find one or create one, but try using one.

**Using a ritual to signify an end to a former behavior**

The same dynamics also apply to transitions we are making in our choices and behaviors. Often these transitions are essentially being made “in our head,” so there is little outer-reality validation whether we’ve actually made the change or not.

Ritual provides a way to deal with that.

Often these kinds of transitions also involve unexpressed feelings, or ones we feel we “shouldn’t “ express. We may feel it’s “not OK” to grieve the loss of a former “bad” pattern, such as smoking, alcoholism, or others. But most often we will feel grief over these losses. We’ll also most likely want to talk about all the associations they had for us – but is it OK to remember the excitement of the first drink, or the sense of accomplishment and pride at “holding my liquor” better than someone else, or the fun of some of the parties, or how drinking helped me through a rough time, or how good it felt to celebrate that success with a glass of the best booze?

Ritual can provide an opportunity to do these things in a way that is acceptable and helpful. Just as people reminisce at weddings, graduations, and funerals about good and bad times (associations), so do rituals for other transitions provide such an opportunity.

And we’re not talking here just about getting rid of bad habits – there are many other times in life when our choices and behaviors change in significant or dramatic ways. Starting a new career, reading e-books instead of hard copies, deciding it’s time to stop the party circuit, moving to a new place – all of these are transitions, and some of them may be enhanced or helped by using rituals.

Many transitions just happen: we accept the change with little difficulty, and our lives simply flow on into different forms. Sometimes it’s not that easy.

When it is not, consider if a ritual would help. As with emotions, sometimes we get stuck on a transition because we need an outward validation that the change is real, or we need the permission to express ALL our emotions and associations about the change and what it means, not just the acceptable ones. Sometimes we need rituals to remind us that we’re not alone, that going through transitions (big and small) is what we all as humans experience.

Whatever the reasons, consider if a ritual would help. It was a wonderful invention our ancestors came up with. It is a wonderful tool you can use today.

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