

Sense and Psychotherapy

Thoughts on Psychotherapy and Living

Winter 2001

Dear Reader,

During the holidays I was struck once again by the number of small and large rituals we engage in during special occasions, and I found myself fondly remembering rituals from my childhood. One of my favorites was getting up very early on Christmas morning to attend the 6:30am Mass. The sun would just be coming up as we drove home, and we'd all line up, youngest to oldest, almost trembling with excitement as we prepared to head down the stairs to the basement where the tree and presents were laid out in all their glory.

I've also been thinking about the rituals that we've developed over the years in my own family. This has led me to think about what purpose these and other rituals serve. I believe in the power of rituals to transform the mundane. Rituals give us fixed points of reference in our rapidly changing, overly stimulating lives. They provide a sense of connection to something greater than ourselves, and allow us to look beyond the immediate moment. We use rituals to help define who we are as individuals and as members of our community.

Go ahead, create your own ritual.

Just the facts...

- There is evidence of hunting and eating rituals dating back to approximately 150,000 BC.
- Initiation rituals date back to the time of Ice Age hunters.

Rituals

Rituals affect us on many different levels. Although we often tend to focus on large, highly symbolic or religious rituals, there are many different kinds of ritualized behaviors we engage in throughout our lives. Participating in public rituals, whether grand, public spectacles, or small, quiet affairs, allows us to collectively recognize important times and give meaning to what has occurred. Small, private rituals, on the other hand, create a sense of comfort and familiarity that adds stability to our lives and help us through difficult periods. During particularly challenging periods for my clients, for instance, I often suggest they design their own rituals as a way of creating meaning and order amidst the chaos they are experiencing. This may be an act as simple as lighting a candle and breathing in a moment of silence.

We're all familiar with the most common public rituals, such as showers, weddings, and graduations. Many rituals help clarify for all the rights, privileges, and responsibilities associated with the major transitions in our lives. These rituals help create a sense of shared purpose and connection between community members. Often, they also offer instruction on "proper" behavior during significant events.

Private, individual rituals comfort us and give meaning to the inexplicable. This is especially true during periods of loss and grief. Although we have generally recognized rituals surrounding the death of a loved one, such as sending flowers and cards, visiting the funeral home, and memorial services, we rarely give thought to developing rituals when we experience the other losses in our lives. Sometimes burning, burying, or throwing away a symbolic item associated with the loss can help free us to move forward through our pain and begin to heal.

We often fail to recognize the importance of all the little rituals we develop in our daily lives until we no longer engage in them, and suddenly feel a vague sense of unexplainable loss. By developing a greater awareness of our ritualistic behaviors, we are more likely to appreciate the ways they add comfort, security and depth to our days.

Under some conditions, ritualized behavior can be taken to extremes. Those who suffer from obsessive-compulsive tendencies are plagued with the need to perform a series of prescribed behaviors, and when this is interfered with, they experience extreme distress. Although most of us are able to get through the day if our rituals are interrupted, we all experience a certain level of discomfort and it may take us a while to feel back to normal.

As our lives become ever more hectic and disjointed, we tend to forget the comfort and richness that rituals provide. It is precisely during times of uncertainty and stress that we need these rituals the most. We are protected and strengthened when we engage in the numerous, often unthought-about rituals that are woven through our lives. We hold the power to not only resurrect traditional rituals, but also to create new ones. I believe it is important to give ourselves the permission and the time to recognize large and small events of our lives in a manner that honors who we are and what is happening.

What's for Breakfast?

One of the few benefits of being a small child in our house was that we got to stay home while the school age kids went off to church on Sunday mornings. Some of my earliest (and fondest) memories are of crawling into bed with my father while Mom and the rest of the gang got dressed and left for church. I'd sit and chat with Dad, rub his back and laugh with delight while he made his funny noises when I'd walk along his back.

We'd soon get up and he'd put on his records, usually Herb Albert and The Tijuana Brass Band, or his box set of Arthur Fiedler's Boston Pops. I'd march circles around the living room, envisioning myself part of a marching band, parading down Main street of some imaginary town. As the smell of bacon or sausage began to waft through the house from the kitchen, I knew the others would be coming home soon. The house would fill with the pent-up energy of my brothers and sister, and we'd all sit down together for a big breakfast of fried eggs, pancakes, or my favorite, French toast. We'd linger around the table and fight over who got the biggest slice of coffee cake.

Even as a college student, I could never quite shake the ritual of the big Sunday breakfast. Through the week, I'd always eat cereal or toast, but Sundays just never felt complete unless I'd done something special for breakfast.

Through the early years of our marriage, my husband and I would often grab the newspaper and go out for breakfast on Sundays. For a couple of years after our son was born, we seldom went out to eat at any time of day. However, we continued to find ways to make Sunday breakfast an important part of our week.

These days, it is not uncommon for our weekends to start with Eugene asking if we'll have a "family breakfast" on Sunday. Although our morning ritual is very different in many ways from when I was a kid, he's made it clear to me that he also values those times when we all sit down together for a leisurely, cholesterol laden, old-fashioned breakfast.

Even if we don't consciously think of this as a "ritual" in the traditional sense, we, like other families, have developed set patterns of behavior that add meaning and depth to our life. We set aside this time each week just for each other, and this simple act helps us define who we are as a family. Not only are so many of the same elements of Sunday breakfast that I remember so fondly from my childhood now present for my son, they were also part of my mother's childhood.

I am grateful my parents honored Sunday mornings with such a regular, predictably special meal. I feel fortunate to be able to give my son the same gift, and hope that as he goes through his life, he also will take the time to sit down with his loved ones and celebrate their presence with a hearty breakfast.

Maureen R. Johnston, MA
Associated Counselors of Silicon Valley
1101 S. Winchester Blvd., Suite A-101
San Jose, CA 95128

Rites require us to treat both life and death with attentiveness.
Hsun Tzu