



Touchstones Project

a monthly journal of Unitarian Universalism

June 2023

Ritual

Wisdom Story



in the Tsodilo Hills in Botswana. It features an image of a python chiseled on a cave wall using small stones 70,000 years ago. Among its thousands of artifacts were over 100 decorative spearheads sacrificed to the python. Yet ritual art goes back 300,000 years, given the discovery of colored pigments, like bright red, that humans used to paint bodies, objects, and rock walls.

Flowers Have the Gift of Language



He was born in Bohemia in 1870. She was born there in 1888. Bohemia became part of Czechoslovakia in 1918.

He was raised Roman Catholic. Her religious background is unknown.

She was a librarian, and he was a Baptist minister. Both came to the United States at different times and for different reasons. She moved to New York City with her family in 1907 when she was 19. He came to the United States in 1914, fleeing government reprisals because he was very outspoken. Then World War I consumed Europe from 1914 until 1918.

She was single. He had been married twice, but both of his wives had died. He was the father of nine children. The three youngest came to America with him.

She worked at the Webster Branch of the New York Public Library. He was the minister of the First Slovak Baptist Church in Newark, NJ.

In 1914, she became head of the Czech section of the library. In 1915, he was tried for heresy by a Baptist tribunal, although he was acquitted.

Norbert Fabian Čapek [pronounced chah-peck] met Majà Veronica Oktavec at that library. They married on June 23, 1917, and Majà resigned her job. In 1919, they bought a home in Belleview, NJ. Norbert became the minister of another Baptist church. But, by September of that year, his many years of doubt caused him to resign. He wrote in his diary, "I cannot be a Baptist anymore, even in

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Introduction to Theme

Dimitris Xygalatas, author of *Ritual: How Seemingly Senseless Acts Make Life Worth Living*, writes, "No other animal uses ritual as extensively and compulsively as Homo sapiens. In fact, archaeologists often consider ritual to be one of the core defining features of behaviorally modern humans, because it is related to the capacity for symbolic thought." While there is evidence of ritual behavior in animals, especially in chimpanzees and elephants, ritual among humans has been pervasive.

Evidence of ritual includes burial sites established 120,000 years ago in caves at Mt. Carmel and other locations in Israel and Syria. Human rituals also involved cave art, like the Python Cave

Stories are part of some rituals. Kathleen Jennings writes, "Rituals can be a way to ...summon a story and peel apart a world, and then at the end to stitch through many layers, to mend and make new. And of course, ritual brings with it ...the numinous brushing the physical, a way of altering the world...." The Python Cave, with a picture of a giraffe and elephant, pairs with the creation myth of the *San* people of Botswana, which explains that their python ancestor created the ancient, arid streambeds around the hills surrounding the cave, by circling them in its endless search for water. In another *San* story, when the

Ritual & Regeneration

Ritual preserves and renews tradition, conveys values, makes meaning, draws on deep springs, evokes feelings, goes beyond words, connects past and future in the present, and gives cause for hope. It can both contribute to and symbolize regeneration. Walter Miller writes, "Generation, regeneration, again, again, as in a ritual...." In the wheel of the year, ritual marks time and makes it sacred, holidays and holy days. In the arc of a life, ritual can be as simple as a birthday party or as momentous as a rite of passage marking birth, marriage, death, and more. Ritual is an artistic undertaking that utilizes story, poetry, music, and more. Done well, it is a shelter and a pathway, a blessing conferring holiness and wholeness.

A Theme-Based Ministry Project

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Regeneration

Flower Festival

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compromise. The fire of new desires, new worlds, is burning inside me.”

Many people who left Bohemia began returning because Czechoslovakia had become independent. In 1920, the Čapeks decided to go back. They sold their house, but departure delays forced them to rent an apartment in East Orange, NJ. Norbert and Majà encouraged their children to attend Sunday Schools at different churches and decide which one they liked best. Their favorite was the First Unitarian Church in Orange, NJ. Then, Norbert and Majà attended, finding “not only clear heads but warm hearts, too.” They became members on January 10, 1921. Joining seemed like fate because Norbert, who had met Unitarians in Berlin in 1910 at the International Association for Religious Freedom meeting, had been called a Unitarian by professor Tomáš Masaryk, who became the first president of Czechoslovakia. The minister in Orange, NJ, Dr. Walter Reid Hunt, introduced Norbert to Dr. Samuel Eliot, the President of the American Unitarian Association. Eliot agreed to support their work to start a new religious movement in Czechoslovakia. Norbert and Majà left for Prague on June 30, 1921.

By February 1922, Norbert and Majà had organized the Liberal Religious Fellowship. Majà was ordained as a minister in 1926. The Czech government in 1930 officially recognized the Unitarian Church of Czechoslovakia. By 1940, the church had 3,200 members and six fellowships. In addition, 8,000 Czechs considered themselves to be Unitarian.

Quite memorable in all of this was something that happened on June 24, 1923. Norbert and Majà created a Flower Festival. Each member who came to that Sunday service brought a flower and placed it in one of several vases. Then, during a moving ceremony, Norbert blessed the flowers saying, “Infinite Spirit of Life, we ask thy blessing on these, thy messengers of fellowship and love. May they remind us ...of the value of ... friendship as one of thy most precious gifts.” The service also included singing

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Science & Ritual

For Small Creatures Such as We Why Ritual?

In his novel, *Contact*, Carl Sagan quoted his wife, Ann Druyan, writing, “For small creatures such as we, the vastness is bearable only through love.” Sasha Sagan, daughter of Ann Druyan and Carl Sagan, weaves it into the title of her book, *For Small Creatures Such as We: Rituals for Finding Meaning in Our Unlikely World*. It is part memoir, secular manifesto, a love letter to the Cosmos, and a recipe for meaning-making. Likely, channeling her father, she writes, “We don’t teach children science (or math, for that matter) with the passionate enthusiasm of the best preachers. And we ought to.”

Despite her atheism or, perhaps, because of it, she experiences transcendence because of and within nature, within the cosmos. And so, she writes, “We needn’t resort to myth to get that spine-chilling thrill of being part of something grander than ourselves. Our vast universe provides us with enough profound and beautiful truths to live a spiritually fulfilling life.”

Sasha continues, “In a way, it’s really science that’s been inspiring rituals all along the way. Beneath the specifics of all our beliefs, sacred texts, origin stories, and dogmas, we humans have been celebrating the same two things since the dawn of time: astronomy and biology.” For her, the universe without, informed by how Earth orbits the sun and the phases of the moon, and the universe within, consisting of birth, puberty, reproduction, and death, are worthy of reverence and ritual. She notes that “rituals are ... tools that help us process change.”

“Nature is full of patterns and we humans love finding them, creating them, repeating them. This is the core of ...ritual, which is the repetition of words or actions deemed worthy of representing something bigger than ourselves. ...These are ...vital in their ability to help us face the nature of time and change, life and death, and everything else we cannot control.”

In her book, Sasha sets out to map a year of rituals grounded in the ancestor’s traditions, but not shackled by them.

Source: Touchstones

Born of Deep Need

Teddy Prout

The need for ritual is innate. It is born of a deep need to articulate times of profound experience and transition, and is an essential part of what makes, and keeps, us human. Over human history, as we encountered those life-changing events, we naturally highlighted them by adorning them with art, music, poems, and prose. We created meaning in the collection of activities that heighten the moment of change, as we forged activities into ritual.

In turn, rituals can act as the punctuation marks in our life, providing us with a sense of structure. On the grand scale, they support a narrative of our lives, building a bank of shared memories and shared experiences. On a smaller scale, they are a chance to take time out from the routine and chaos of our day-to-day lives and express those things not often expressed.

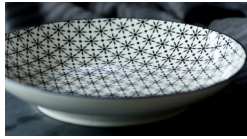


We find we need ritual to enable us to connect with our deepest thoughts and feelings in those profound occasions, our highest hopes and most debilitating fears. We need it to face the realities of our changing bodies and relationships. We use language that authentically articulates our experience of ourselves in the world, to ourselves and to those closest to us. In fact, it is an acknowledgment that we are, at our core, a social species, and we feel the need to mark the important moments in our lives with the people who matter most to us.

Source: <https://www.futurelearn.com/info/courses/humanist-lives/0>

Readings from the Common Bowl

Day 1: "The very ritual practices that the New Atheists dismiss as costly, inefficient and irrational turn out to be a solution to one of the hardest problems humans face: cooperation without kinship." Jonathan Haidt



Day 2: "Rituals are a good signal to your unconscious that it is time to kick in." Anne Lamott

Day 3: "For me starting the day without a pot of tea would be a day ...out of kilter." Bill Drummond

Day 4: "Rituals keep us from forgetting what must not be forgotten and keep us rooted in a past from which we must not be disconnected." Tony Campolo

Day 5: "The function of ritual, as I understand it, is to give form to human life, not in the way of a mere surface arrangement, but in depth." Joseph Campbell

Day 6: "Any ritual is an opportunity for transformation. To do a ritual, you must be willing to be transformed in some way. The inner willingness is what makes the ritual come alive and have power. If you aren't willing to be changed by the ritual, don't do it." Starhawk

Day 7: "Ritual consists of the external practices of spirituality that help us become more receptive and aware of the closeness of our lives to the sacred. ...I can light a candle because I need the light or because the candle represents the light I need." Christina Baldwin

Day 8: "Ritual affirms the common patterns, the values, the shared joys, risks, sorrows, and changes that bind a community together." Starhawk

Day 9: "Religion becomes a hollow shell of its former self when ritual remains and thoughtful reflection disappears." Nouman Ali Khan

Day 10: "The first ritual that you do during the day is the highest leveraged ritual, by far, because it has the effect of setting your mind, and setting the context, for the rest of your day." Eben Pagan

Day 11: "Ritual is necessary for us to know anything." Ken Kesey

Day 12: "Ritual links together our ancestors and descendants, those who went before with those will come after us." Starhawk

Day 13: "It seemed to be a necessary ritual that he should prepare himself for sleep by meditating under the solemnity of the night sky... a mysterious transaction between the infinity of the soul and the infinity of the universe." Victor Hugo

Day 14: "...Ritual ...is a symbolic transformation of experiences that no other medium can adequately express." Susanne Katherina Langer

Day 15: "Bedtime rituals for children ease the way to the elsewhere of slumber—teeth brushing and pajamas, the voice of a parent reading, the feel and smell of the old blanket or toy, the nightlight glowing in a corner." Siri Hustvedt

Day 16: "I have the greatest love for the rituals of organized religion—the sense of community and belonging it can confer to people." Kabir Bedi

Day 17: "I have rituals for cleaning out resentments, disappointments, heartbreak, depression, and for work." Hubert Selby, Jr.

Day 18: "It's so important to engage your kids to create rituals and moments that they will always remember." Josie Bissett

Day 19: "Ritual is, therefore, a primary site of contact between self and society, a place where our individual selves are transformed into collective selves." Mark Pedelty

Day 20: "In our society, many of the old rituals have lost much of their power. New ones have not arisen." R.D. Laing

Day 21: "We not only nurture our sacred relationships through ritual, but we are nurtured by them as well. In ritual, we move, and we are moved." Allison Leigh Lilly

Day 22: "In addition to facilitating a sense of security and predictability, a childhood history steeped in family rituals also provides a robust template of belonging and meaning to take into our adult years. Who doesn't want that for the next generation?" Sabina Read

Day 23: "When we light a candle in our ritual space, we ignite a flame within our-

selves. When we pour water or burn incense as offerings, we offer ourselves as well, to soak into the earth or rise in gentle wisps of smoke towards the sky." Allison Leigh Lilly

Day 24: "The telling and hearing of stories is a bonding ritual that breaks through illusions of separateness and activates a deep sense of our collective interdependence." Annette Simmons

Day 25: "Rituals are those repeated actions done again and again in the interest of things like focus, grounding, tradition, cultural symbolism, predictable life rhythms, and feeling a part of something." Craig Kelley

Day 26: "It reminds me that ritual and symbol are as necessary to human beings as air and water. They mark us as human, and give us identity." Kathleen Norris

Day 27: It is important to embody the sentiments and fundamental ideas of religion. Life can no more dispense with symbols than language with metaphors: a ritual is an acted metaphor. Alexandre Rudolphe Vinet



Day 28: "Ritual is able to hold the long-discarded shards of our stories and make them whole again. It has the strength and elasticity to contain what we cannot contain on our own, what we cannot face in solitude." Francis Weller

Day 29: A handshake. A kiss. A coronation. A parade. A dance. A meal. A graduation. A mass. A ritual is the performance of an intuition, the rehearsal of a dream, the playing of a game." Frederick Buechner

Day 30: "Stories and rituals are used in different cultures to help individuals and communities heal from trauma." Oscar Perez

Day 31: "Rituals are like electrically powered transmitters sending stimulating sparks of electric current or inspirational feelings that connect us to our inner being or soul." Wes Adamson



Faith and Theology

New Wine into Old Wineskins

A theology of ritual takes seriously how rituals express diverse Unitarian Universalist theologies, connect to our principles and sources, draw upon diverse voices, promote inclusion, and seek transformation.

The principles are the horizontal dimension of our religious tradition. They connect us in widening circles from the self “to the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.”

Our sources are the vertical dimension. They reach downward to connect us with the past, draw on wisdom, acknowledge insights from world religions, and express values that ground our faith. They stretch upward as aspirations and forward as guideposts into the future. Notably, our first source goes back to the dawn of human time. It expresses the origin of ritual as a “direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder” and the goal of ritual as “a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.” While our sixth source, drawing on the wisdom of indigenous peoples, invites us to “celebrate the sacred circle of life and ...live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.” Our sources can enrich and ennoble our faith and our rituals.

To keep our faith fresh, grounded, and powerful, we should view the rituals we have been using as wineskins. Sometimes we must fill an old wineskin with new wine, as UU minister Carl Seaburg did with the rituals compiled for his 1993 resource, *The Communion Book*. Beyond traditional communion services, he included those that focus on the church year, like *End of Summer*, *All Souls*, and *Spring Communion*. There were also twenty-one using unlikely elements like maple syrup, bread and honey, yarn, rocks, shells, seeds, and rice cakes. These included *A Salt Communion* focused on Gandhi, a *Hunger Communion* pointing to the ongoing tragedy of hunger despite abundant harvests, and several flower communions and water communions.

quire consideration of a communion service, but it should embrace the thoughtful innovation illustrated by these uncommon

services that poured new wine into very old wineskins. Seaburg wrote, “When old forms are no longer seen as serving people’s needs, some people abandon them, while others search for new dimensions to meet the perceived needs.” He added, “Eating and drinking are parts of a universal experience; to exalt this common experience into a unifying human ceremony ought to be seen as useful and worshipful.” Good ritual seeks to touch the universal.

Seaburg then quoted Kentucky farmer, environmental activist, and author Wendell Berry who wrote in his *Agrarian Essays*, “To live, we must daily break the body and shed the blood of Creation. When we do this knowingly, lovingly, skillfully, reverently, it is a sacrament. When we do it ignorantly, greedily, clumsily, destructively, it is a desecration. In such desecration we condemn ourselves to spiritual and moral loneliness, and others to want.” Berry raised the stakes in our communal meals by demanding that they include environmental care. Perhaps it is time to replace the old wineskin of the Last Supper/Passover Seder with the wineskin of Earth Day? What might a communal meal ritual look like that honors the Earth? In what ways could it be sacramental?

The future of good rituals is uncertain as society empties old wineskins of wine, and rituals are stripped of significance and meaning. With declining church membership, connection to ritual decreases. Family rituals persist, but they need a link to collective rituals to avoid becoming impoverished. The French writer Antoine de Saint Exupéry warned of this writing, “Do not neglect the ceremonies of our passage: when we wed, when we die, and when we are blessed with a child; when we depart and when we return; when we plant and when we harvest.” He knew the value of ritual, concluding, “We live, not by things, but by the meanings of things. It is needful to transmit the passwords from generation to generation.”

Many countries have an Independence

Day holiday, which often means independence from a colonial power. In what ways do rituals mark such a momentous occasion? In November 2021, Barbados declared independence from Great Britain, just as Canada did in 1982. In Barbados, November 30th is an important day filled with fanfare and pride, including a large parade in the Garrison Savannah, a special snack called *Conkie*, fairs, and other festivities.

What does Canada Day, which superseded the 1879 Dominion Day, mean to Canadians whose country’s name comes from the Huron-Iroquois word *Kanata*? On July 1st national pride is visible, writes Ryan Yu, as “communities across Canada light up in a sea of red and white as fireworks fill the sky and residents gather to celebrate Canada Day.” Beyond this, what rituals celebrate and challenge what it means to be Canadian for citizens, landed immigrants and permanent residents (who account for 23% of the people in Canada), and members of First Nations? Meaningful rituals often must deal with complex realities. Sometimes the purpose is not to seek harmony but to reveal tensions that have no apparent resolution. Canadian Georges Erasmus, who is both Tlicho (Dene) and Cree-Métis said, “Where common memory is lacking, where people do not share in the same past, there can be no real community. Where community is to be formed, common memory must be created.” A ritual need not be simple, but it must be true. So, a ritual about complex realities may invite people to dwell in the unresolved in-betweenness while cultivating a common memory.

And what does July 4th mean to Americans? Parades, displaying a flag, fireworks, barbecues, or picnics, and clothing and home décor sales are typical fare. Sometimes it is just a day off. This ignores that the realities surrounding the *Declaration of Independence* in 1776 were complex, though unseen by most of the elite and, therefore, unacknowledged, and that they are complicated today. Rituals and observances of July 4th are grounded in patriotism and American exceptionalism, but there has always been dissent. Many have never read the entire Declaration. Its reference to “merciless Indian savages” goes

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Rituals of Connection

Melissa Benaroya, MSW, LICSW

All children's behaviors are purposeful and driven by a need or desire. Dr. John Gottman calls these "Bids." A bid is simply an attempt to get attention, acceptance, or connection. ...Negative behaviors are ...bids for 1) attention or connection or 2) a sense of power or control.

...One way to prevent these challenging behaviors is to establish Rituals of Connection ... [which] are structured activities you do with your child, intentionally and consistently, that facilitate connection. ...Children will be more cooperative when they know that they will get their special time....

Some natural times to incorporate rituals of connection are during morning or bedtime routines, ...mealtimes, and when you depart and reconnect....

For young children, it might look like a kiss and a hug the first moment they open their eyes each morning or a special activity you do together before you drop them off or right when you return in the evening.

These rituals don't have to be for long periods of time. They can be as simple as getting down on the floor for five to ten minutes to play a game, color, or read a short book together.

For tweens or teens, it might be a weekly date going out for frozen yogurt, watching a favorite show together, or taking the dog for a walk.

During these times, the children get your full, undivided attention.

Connection rituals help ...young children lengthen their attention span, increase cooperation, and ...self-esteem.

...These rituals are invaluable investments ...because they strengthen and deepen the parent-child relationship.

Source: <https://www.gottman.com/blog/rituals-of-connection-the-antidote-to-big-emotions-and-challenging-behaviors/>

Sunday, Sunday

As a child, I became aware of ritual by the way each Sunday unfolded. It pervaded life for most of the day, beginning with breakfast. We ate hot cereal, winter and summer, either oatmeal, cornmeal mush, or cream of wheat.

Getting dressed included shining shoes and my uncle tying my necktie. Then my uncle drove my grandmother, sister, and me six miles to my great-grandmother's home. Then, we all walked the two blocks to the Methodist Church, and all attended Sunday school and the worship service except, my great-uncle, who lived with my great-grandmother. He never went to church.

After church, we returned to my great-grandmother's home. My uncle read the Sunday paper in the parlor, while my sister and I read the comics. My great-grandmother and grandmother put on aprons and prepared Sunday dinner in a tiny kitchen. Every Sunday, they argued about every dish despite the fact that the menu never varied: chuck roast, mashed potatoes, coleslaw, and a canned vegetable, either green beans or yellow wax beans. My sister and I had the privilege of choosing which beans we would eat.

After dinner, which was always tasty, we played a card game in the parlor. It was called 500 Bid, our poor family's water-downed bridge. My great-grandmother pulled the window shades down so no one could look in and see the blasphemy of card-playing on Sunday. My sister and I had to learn the game when we were very young to ensure that there would always be four players.

Later in the afternoon, we drove back home, the rituals of another Sunday dutifully completed. One might assume that the unvarying ritual would have become boring. That never happened. In fact, Sunday was my favorite day. The daylong ritual provided order and security in a somewhat chaotic life. Many decades later, I still look back with fondness on those Sundays.

Source: Touchstones

Family Activity: Family Rituals

Share rituals from your childhood. Invite your children to share their favorite rituals. Then discuss what rituals you can create for mealtimes, holidays, and other occasions. Ideas? See <https://biglifejournal.com/blogs/blog/family-rituals-teaching-responsibility-positivity-kindness-compassion>

Drop Your Troubles

Elizabeth Gilbert

...I was stuck on a crosstown bus in New York City during rush hour. Traffic was barely moving. The bus was filled with cold, tired people who were deeply irritated.... Rage was in the air....



...The driver got on the intercom. "Folks," he said, "I know you have had a rough day and you are frustrated. I can't do anything about the weather or traffic, but ...as each one of you gets off the bus, I will reach out my hand to you. As you walk by, drop your troubles into the palm of my hand, okay? Don't take your problems home..., just leave them with me. My route goes right by the Hudson River, and when I drive there later, I will open the window and throw your troubles in the water."

It was as if a spell had lifted. Everyone burst out laughing. Faces gleamed with surprised delight.

...At the next stop, ...the driver reached out his hand, palm up, and waited. One by one, all the exiting commuters placed their hand just above his and mimed the gesture of dropping something into his palm. Some people laughed as they did this, some teared up but everyone did it. The driver repeated the same lovely ritual at the next stop, too. And the next. All the way to the river.

...This bus driver taught me, that anyone can be the light, at any moment. ... He possessed real power, and he used it beautifully for our benefit.

...This is the only way the world will ever be illuminated, one bright act of grace at a time, all the way to the river.

Source: <https://www.awakin.org/v2/read/view.php?tid=2557>

These Are Holy Things We Will Not, Cannot, Find Again

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python fell into a lake, a giraffe rescued it. The elephant's long trunk may be a representation of the python.

Some rituals include creation myths. For example, in an Egyptian ritual from 744 BCE at the Great Temple of *Ptah*, a priest recited the creation myth inscribed on the *Shabaka* stone, with some scenes presented by actors. During *Akitu*, the Babylonian New Year festival, *Enuma Elish*, the Babylonian creation myth, was recited in the temple each spring as early as 750 BCE. In Israel, laymen read sections of the Genesis creation account while the priests and Levites performed sacrifices in the Second Temple beginning in the 5th century BCE.

Rituals known as rites of passage reach back to antiquity and further. Burial rites are primeval. Evidence of marriage ceremonies goes back to 2350 BCE in Mesopotamia. In Egypt, dating back to at least 2055 BCE, childbirth rituals included medico-magical spells, amulets, and other objects to seek to ensure the survival of the mother and child. While they may be much older, puberty rituals appeared in ancient civilizations like Athens, Sparta, Rome, Japan, China, Mesoamerican cultures, Australian aboriginals, and many other indigenous cultures.

Rituals appeared to become critical 12,000 years ago when small hunter and nomadic peoples transitioned to larger, sedentary agricultural societies. Anthropologist Harvey Whitehouse suggests that the challenges of larger groups of people living close together required rituals to unify people. So if the question is, "Which came first, religion or ritual," Whitehouse believes rituals did. Religions, however, became the custodians of many rituals encouraging participants to deepen connections, affirm values, experience powerful feelings, find emotional and spiritual fulfillment, learn about the religious tradition, and live faithfully based on the religion's ethics.

Religious rituals vary by faith tradition and include corporate prayer, blessings at meals, communion, fasting, pilgrimages, christenings or naming ceremonies for infants, ritual meals like the Jewish

Seder, ordination of clergy, new mem-

ber ceremonies, and unique ritual elements within worship services. Rituals are prominent in the observance of holy days like Christmas, Lent, and Easter; Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur; Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr; All Saints and All Souls, including Día de los Muertos; Samhain/All-Hallows Eve; Divali; Wesak; and so many more.

In a religious context, rituals may employ words, gestures, symbolic actions, music, movement, and links to the past or notable events of the tradition, all of which encourage people's wholehearted participation.

Our hominid ancestors used controlled fire as early as one million years ago. This consequential invention contributed in untold ways to our survival and still does. The creation of candles to produce light using fire began in many places, including 5th-century Rome. Today candles are omnipresent in religious rituals. As the flaming chalice is a defining symbol of our faith, candles undergird rituals in other religions, including votive candles, altar candles, and Advent candles in Christianity; Shabbat candles, Yom Kippur candles, and menorah candles in Judaism; the Kinara candles of Kwanzaa; Diya oil lamps or candles for Divali in Hinduism, Jainism, and Sikhism; Eid al-Fitr candles in Islam to conclude Ramadan; Yin and Yang candles in Taoism; and the huge Vassa candle in Theravadan Buddhism that burns for the three months of the rainy season in Cambodia and Thailand. Faith in the power of light over darkness echoes across time.

Using candles creates a bridge to family rituals, beginning with birthday candles. While the rites of passage listed above are considered religious rituals, they are uniquely family-centric. Further, many holy day observances involve family rituals that extend and deepen the observance. Family rituals also embrace major holiday observances, often involving food like a barbecue on July 4th or Canada Day, and good luck foods in different cul-

tures associated with New Year's Day. Finally, anniversary celebrations and family vacations may also have ritual elements.

Unitarian Universalist minister Max Coats connected the importance of religious rituals and family rituals when he wrote, "When love is felt or fear is known; when holidays and holy days and such times come; when anniversaries arrive by calendar or consciousness; when seasons come—as seasons do—old and known, but somehow new; when lives are born or people die; when something sacred is sensed in soil or sky; mark the time. Respond with thought or prayer or smile or grief. Let nothing living slip between the fingers of your mind, for all of these are holy things we will not, cannot, find again."

Rituals are a staple of religion. They are also woven throughout civil religion (aka civic religion). Civil religion expresses the values of a nation through public rituals and symbols as well as ceremonies on sacred days and at sacred places. These include an oath of office, swearing to tell the truth at a trial, a pledge of allegiance to a flag, observing national holidays like Canada Day or America's Independence Day, visits to monuments like Canada's National War Memorial or the Vietnam Wall and Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC, and, related to Lincoln, reading, reciting, or quoting the Gettysburg address. Civil religion and its rituals create and sustain national identity and cohesion.

Rituals are also personal. They differ from habits or routines because they are intentional, mindful, meaningful, and, sometimes, sacred. For example, many people start their morning with a beverage, but some make this a ritual. Jonathan Stroud writes, "Making tea is a ritual that stops the world from falling in on you," Muriel Barbery adds, "When tea becomes ritual, it takes its place at the heart of our ability to see greatness in small things." Likewise, spiritual practices like meditation, prayer, or yoga are rituals, as are placing flowers at the grave of a loved one

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Tilling the Soul

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or taking the same walk over and over again, a kind of walking meditation, and paying attention to the subtle changes bestowed by nature as one season follows another.

Social psychologist Shira Gabriel writes, “Rituals give us a feeling of going beyond the ordinary—of having a moment that transcends that, turning events into something special and meaningful.” People can enhance rituals by engaging them creatively. For example, consider the poem, *The Hill We Climb*, delivered by Amanda Gorman at the inauguration of US President Joe Biden. It transformed this democratic ceremony of America’s civic religion into something transcendent (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LZ055i1iN4>) and made it more precious in the aftermath of January 6th.

Rituals can reinforce ethnic or racial pride, like Saint-Jean-Baptiste Day in Quebec, Mardi Gras in New Orleans, Juneteenth for Blacks, or the Lunar New Year for Asians. But some rituals, like Columbus Day or Thanksgiving observance, are problematic for many Native Americans and their allies. Also, as we consider rituals prized by ethnic groups, especially minorities, we should practice cultural appreciation rather than cultural appropriation.

Thus, the value of rituals can be momentous, and when we live mindfully and act with intention and compassion, even work can be ritually transformed and transforming. As Allison Leigh Lilly writes, “The act of tilling the soil

Flower Communion

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some hymns that Norbert wrote. (Did you know he wrote 90 hymns, and three are in our hymnal?) At the end of the service, people took a different flower home with them.

Unfortunately, war came to Europe again. In 1939, shortly before the German occupation of Czechoslovakia, Majà left for the United States to lecture and raise funds for a joint Unitarian and Society of Friends program to help refugees. When Germany invaded Czechoslovakia in September 1939, Majà could not return home. In 1940, she introduced the Flower Festival to the First Unitarian Church in Cambridge, MA. When she finished the lecture tour, she worked as a minister for three years in New Bedford, MA.

Majà learned after the war that Norbert had been arrested by the Gestapo in 1941 and killed in 1942. Rather than returning to Czechoslovakia, she remained in the United States and worked for the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency, helping displaced persons settle in Yugoslavia, Egypt, and Palestine.

The Flower Festival became the Flower Communion and is observed yearly by many of our congregations. This moving ritual from Norbert and Majà, which is now 100 years old (2023), continues to bless Unitarian Universalism. As UU minister Richard Gilbert wrote, “The flowers have the gift of language. In the meadow, they speak of freedom....”

Note: The spelling of Majà with the accent mark is based on a 1926 photo of her signature. Source: Touchstones

Daily Ritual as Art

Keeping Sane in an Insane World

Courtney E. Martin

A ritual has formally been defined as “a sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place, and performed according to set sequence.” But ...we’re starting to play around with the boundaries and behaviors....

...Even washing the dishes can be a kind of ritual if you treat it as such. It’s about pace and intention, the senses and the symbols. It’s about the meaning you imbue into an object or an act.... It’s about noticing.

Here’s the first ritual I can remember: I climb up onto our tall kitchen chairs, feel my dad’s big, strong fingers separate my fine, curly hair into three equal pieces and begin folding one on top of the other. Each night, ...my dad transformed



my rat’s-nest-waiting-to-happen hair into one solid braid....

The profundity of this seemingly mundane nightly act kind of rocks me.... I may have been raised without religion, but I wasn’t raised without ritual....

... This kind of ritual is ...about daily practices: the ways of seeing and behaving and gathering that keep us sane in an insane world. They organize our emotional lives, prompt us to count our blessings along with our grievances, remind us to look up and out more often. They are about caring—for ourselves and those we love, even caring about those long dead....

It is so easy to feel overwhelmed. ... But these daily rituals—my dad’s hands ...laying one strand of hair on top of another ...reminds the ego that it’s ...only about the connections.... Everything else washes away with time.

Source: <https://onbeing.org/blog/the-art-of-daily-ritual-keeping-sane-in-an-insane-world/>

What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?

(Continued from page 4) **Faith & Theology**

unremarked, a fact frequently raised by Native Americans. On July 5, 1852, Frederick Douglass delivered his speech, *What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?* He answered, “The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought light and healing to you, has brought ...[lashes] and death to me. This Fourth of July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn.” In 1936, Black poet Langston Hughes wrote his poem, *Let America Be America Again*. (See <https://poets.org/poem/let-america-be-america-again>) Despite being excluded from the dream, his searing patriotic plea echoes across the years. A July 4, 1942 editorial in the *Manzanar Free Press* published inside an internment camp for Japanese-Americans explained, “For American citizens of Japanese ancestry herded into camps and guarded by the bayoneted sentries

(Continued on page 8)

Small Group Discussion Guide

Land of Love

Theme for Discussion Ritual

Preparation prior to Gathering: (Read this issue of the journal and *Living the Questions* in the next column.)

Business: Deal with any housekeeping items (e.g., scheduling the next gathering).

Opening Words: "One purpose of creative ritual was to experience the connection to 'the other' as well as a deeper connection to oneself. That's why ancient people would say: that ritual made me more aware of how I'm connected to life, to the earth, to the spirits, to the song of creation, and made me more aware of who I am inside, at the level of my own being. What we've lost is partly the sense that we are each connected to the whole thing, that each human soul is secretly connected to the living soul of the world." -Michael Meade

Chalice Lighting: (James Vila Blake) adapted (In unison) *Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law. This is our covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, to serve human need, and to help one another.*

Check-In: How is it with your spirit? What do you need to leave behind in order to be fully present here and now? (2-3 sentences)

Claim Time for Deeper Listening: This comes at the end of the gathering where you can be listened to uninterrupted for more time if needed. You are encouraged to claim time ranging between 3-5 minutes, and to honor the limit of the time that you claim.

Read the Wisdom Story: Take turns reading aloud the wisdom story on page 1.

Readings from the Common Bowl: Group members read selections from *Readings from the Common Bowl* (page 3). Leave a few moments of silence after each to invite reflection on the meaning of the words.

Sitting In Silence: Sit in silence together, allowing the *Readings from the Common Bowl* to resonate. Cultivate a sense of calm and attention to the readings and the discussion that follows (*Living the Questions*).

Reading: "When tea becomes ritual, it takes its place at the heart of our ability to see greatness in small things. Where is beauty to be found? In great things

that, like everything else, are doomed to die, or in small things that aspire to nothing, yet know how to set a jewel of infinity in a single moment?" *Muriel Barbery*

Living the Questions: Explore as many of these questions as time allows. Fully explore one question before moving on.

1. In general, what is your attitude toward ritual? Why?
2. In terms of society, why are rituals important?
3. In what ways did rituals impact or influence you when you were young?
4. What rituals have been handed down to you? How have/can you pass meaningful rituals onward?
5. Did you or do you have personal rituals that were/are meaningful? What is an example? What made/makes it important?
6. In terms of rites of passage in your own life, which has had the strongest impact on you? Why?
7. What rituals of civil religion do you find meaningful? Why? Are there any that bother you? Why?
8. Have you been subjected to bad rituals? What was the occasion? What made them bad?
9. What makes for good rituals?
10. Have you led a ritual for a group? What was it like? What did you enjoy? Was there anything you found challenging? Why?

Deeper Listening: If time was claimed by individuals, the group listens without interruption to each person who claimed time.

Checking-Out: One sentence about where you are now as a result of the time spent together exploring the theme.

Extinguishing Chalice: (Elizabeth Selle Jones) (In unison) *We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.*

Closing Words: (In unison) *May the quality of our lives be our benediction and a blessing to all we touch.*
Rev. Philip R. Giles



(Continued from page 7) **Faith & Theology** of their own country, it will be a doubly strange and bewildering day." Before the Stonewall Rebellion in 1969 in Greenwich Village, forty gay and lesbian activists held the first of five Annual Reminder demonstrations on July 4, 1965, in front of Independence Hall in Philadelphia to protest their lack of civil rights. On July 4, 2022, a panel of authors discussed the rise in censorship and book banning as an abuse of the rights and freedoms that are celebrated on America's Independence Day.

Given the above, what kind of July 4th ritual would serve the constitutional mandate "to form a more perfect Union?" A Unitarian Universalist theology of ritual seeks to touch and open hearts and minds by drawing on diverse voices and experiences. Emphasizing "the inherent worth and dignity of every person," the ritual would draw the circles of inclusion wide. Mindful of Lincoln's call to focus upon "the better angels of our nature," it would evoke compassion in service of justice and equity while recalling the "words and deeds of prophetic women and men." In the spirit of reconciliation, this ritual would speak the truth while exploring shared and novel meanings of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." It would be new wine, but a new wine-skin may also be necessary. Ultimately, it would seek to be a ritual of liberation since that worthy goal



is mindful of all those who loved America but were never loved back. As Langston Hughes wrote, "(America never was America to me.) / Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed — / Let it be that great strong land of love."

Source: Touchstones

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