

**Secular Rituals; Their Psychological Meaning
and use in Experiential Learning**

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Secular Rituals; Their Psychological Meaning and use in Experiential Learning

In this note I propose to state my understanding of the psychological meaning of rituals, the interpretation of rituals in the social sciences and the use of secular rituals in experiential learning/experiential psychology.

The paper begins with a brief statement as to what is a ritual, followed by a scanning of how rituals have been seen in social anthropology, by Swami Swahananda an eminent religious thinker and by Joseph Campbell. I then go on to state what are the functions of rituals from the point of view of the community that sponsors them and the individuals who perform them.

The paper then goes on to look at the application and use of rituals as a learning device in experiential learning with a focus on personal growth. Rituals are often thought of as steps taken in order to facilitate the journey across thresholds encountered in “life stages”. In experiential learning settings, this connection with stages can be dropped. From this secular point of view I posit that rituals can be used to great effect for personal growth irrespective of the consideration of life stages and free of any religious frames.

Introduction – Rituals in Societies and Religion

Rituals have been studied mainly in the context of religious practices and “primitive” tribes. Rituals are in the nature of ceremonies. Rituals are defined in social anthropology as “ formalized socially prescribed symbolic behaviour” (Robert H. Winthrop). They serve a function for the individual/s – the protagonists as well as the community they are members of. This function has been described as separation – transition – internalization, for the protagonist and, as a method of increasing solidarity in the community.

A ritual is a collective or individual routine of predetermined actions. It is a symbolic activity – located in one manifest reality while in fact relating/interacting with another, usually unmanifest reality. As an instance – a marriage ritual is located in a manifest reality (by the side of a fire for the Hindus, at a church for the Christians) while addressing a future reality that is to be influenced and shaped using the values of the community. A ritual almost invariably involves the presence, through symbols that stimulate imagination of a larger force, God, the cosmos or a future without end. This ‘larger force’ forms one of the anchors of the ritual in addition to the protagonist/s and the symbols.

Ritual studies as it is called, forms a recognizable area in the field of social anthropology. In its early stages of study, rituals were seen as a social or community event that in the main were intended to help cross thresholds. Writing in the context of primitive tribes Gennep (1960) writes that “rituals are connected in all cultures to the transitional stages of human life.” He goes on to state that these transitional stages are “life crises”

requiring the protagonist to move through a separation from the life stage till then, to a transition and incorporation of a new life stage with all its attendant new values, aims and goals. The title of Gennep's "Rites of Passage" has now entered common language, such as its pull. Victor Turner (1969) emphasizes "the transformative role that rituals play in society. Rituals sever values at their deepest level, man expresses in rituals what moves him most, and since, the form of expression is conventionalized and obligatory it is the values of the group that are revealed."

In a similar vein Swami Swahananda defines rituals as "a prescribed activity determined by consideration of tradition and symbolism." He goes on to say "rituals are the body of religions, they are concrete, spiritual ideas are abstract". Swami Vivekananda is quoted as "In every religion there are three parts; philosophy, mythology and ritual. Philosophy of course is the essence of every religion; mythology explains and illustrates it by means of the more or less legendary lives of great men, stories and fables of wonderful things and so on; ritual gives to that philosophy a still more concrete form, so that every one may grasp it—ritual is, in fact, concretized philosophy.

The greatest men I have seen in my life, the most wonderfully developed in spirituality, have all come through the discipline of these rituals."

Expanding the view Eliade (1958) writes about rituals in primitive societies "they understand puberty rites and various specialized initiation rites in terms of supernatural or transcendent models revealed to them by their mythical ancestors or by supernatural beings. The basic initiation symbolism is one of death and rebirth or resurrection, the necessity of dying to the old and be reborn to the new – recapturing their sacred history and being spiritually regenerated". Relating this to contemporary issues – "the 'modern' human being without traditional rites and symbols of initiation cannot deal with his/her existential crises.

A freemason article says "true rituals should provide the means by which an individual can grow and transcend his immediate environment. Ritual should be a positive experience which reflects the harmony and verifying principles of nature and the Great Architect" (Victor G. Popow – www.cornerstonesociety.com May 28, 1997) "Ritual is the roadway by which universal knowledge and philosophy revolutionizes man's spirit."

What is a ritual

A ritual is an event. It has a start, a performance and a conclusion. In this paper we are focusing attention on rituals that involve a whole community – being the people invited and assembled for the event within which there may be a sub group performing the ritual. We are not extending our discourse to include individually performed religious rituals.

Manifestly a ritual involves actors, witnesses and conductors. The floor layout is a predetermined geometry with allocated positions and spaces for movement. Chosen objects form the floor layout. These objects symbolize select elements of the macro cosmos and or the micro cosmos relevant to the ritual.

The conductor/s call the event to order, allocate the roles and functions, introduce the event giving its aims, requisite boundaries roles and the rules. In most rituals the central conductor sits or stands in a fixed location. He plays the role of the Sutradhar, the holder of linkages. He articulates the linkages between the Cosmos, the community, the cause for the ritual and the protagonist/s. Through his words he sustains the invitation to go through the various stages of the performance for all present. He plays the role of the Macro Ego. He creates the space for the protagonist/s to perform their part/s. He finally, on conclusion of all necessary prescribed actions and movements, winds down the proceedings, handing the space back to the community.

A ritual is a structured event with predetermined actions. The actions are symbolic in that they relate to a reality that is unmanifest. For instance you may have a ritual that addresses a whole universe of potential future action. This universe, being only a potential, is unmanifest at the time of performance of the ritual. The ritual is intended to create awareness of commitments that the actor (protagonist) will need to make in the present for a future which he will deploy in his world. As such a ritual is located in one reality but relates to another.

A working definition of rituals

Over the ages man in all societies across the globe, spontaneously and independently has designed and performed rituals. Rituals played the function of *preparing the participants for discontinuity and change*. They were designed to stimulate the imagination and provide succour and wisdom from the tradition. Clearly the aim has been to offer the psychological resilience and emotional stamina required for navigating through the discontinuity and live meaningfully with the new “changed” reality.

Rituals involve setting the stage, followed by the actual performance and finally a closure.

Setting the stage:

At the start the conductors of the event issue the call to order and then introduce the aim and purpose of the ritual that is to begin. The symbols which are related to the event are described. An invocation follows. The invocation is designed and intended to bring the attention of all present to the macro cosmos as well as the micro cosmos. The invocation contains statements describing the numinous* nature of the infinite unmanifest . As such its potency lies in evocation. Evocation of the intuition, of stepping into a zone of imagination, of wishes and yearnings, an experience of the infinite. This zone is not limited by words. The invocation aims to stimulate and bring fortitude to face and engage with the fundamental existential anxieties of death-life, isolation – communion, groundlessness – structure, freedom – responsibility. The ambience thus brings forth by

direct articulation some specific aspects of the existential conditions of human beings that are relevant to the ritual.

The performance

The second stage is the actual performance of the ritual. The invocation wends its way into a statement of the specific acts to be undertaken, the roles and the rules for all present.

The actual action may involve an individual or a group of individuals, several groups of individuals or even all individuals. The actors are invited to engage in prescribed ways, take the specific steps and do the acts. The ambience is usually one of solemnity. This is sustained by incantations from the conductors. The incantations articulate the

**huge potential, the 'wholly other'*

dynamics of the inner world as well as the possible phenomena of the macro cosmos. Spontaneous dialogue in most rituals is absent. Once the acts are completed the conductors move their spoken word towards appropriate closure winding down the event.

The function of rituals -Why use Rituals in Process work?

a) Connection of rituals with life stages and traditions:

The literature overwhelmingly points to the utilization of rituals as an aid to encounter and cross key thresholds in the journey of life. It is true that this function is enmeshed with the biological consideration of age and changes in the life span of the protagonist. It is also enmeshed with considerations of harmonizing, sustaining and giving continuity to some valued traditions. Historically rituals have invoked "higher powers," supernatural forces or God as an integral part of the prescribed procedure. To the popular eye therefore rituals are in the main associated with religious activity, tradition, orthodoxy and social doctrines.

The design structures of rituals are highly amenable to being stripped of all religious and 'life stage' concerns. In their secular form rituals can then be used as a learning process, as interventions in experiential learning groups or process works settings. Rituals powerfully open up the universe of the imagination, help elucidate the "one-ness" of human beings and articulate values, ethics, implicit norms - completely free of dogma. They become powerful platforms that evoke the existential world of all present paving the way for the birth of individual as well as collective insights.

b) Ritual as a learning device independent of the issue of "life stages"

Rituals then can be seen in their pristine form, shorn of any soteriology* and adherence to local customs, as a device for learning. These are lessons that cannot be "taught" but are

amenable only to being “learnt”. These learnings are in the nature of deep structures of thought and attitudes.

There are three steps in this learning process – a “dying” or “tearing away”, an initiation into a hitherto unfamiliar world and finally a return to this world with the new “learnings”. The tearing away is structurally set in motion by the use of symbolic activity free of any “pragmatic” conversation. The initiation is then set in motion through the incantations. The “return” is in the nature of a celebratory reception granted to the protagonist by all others present.

Rituals thus have a quality of departing from the rational and making a foray into the world of symbols, images, mythology and imagination. Participation engenders an encounter with the vastness of the imagined world, free of arguments based on “if then therefore”. It is an immediate journey into the world of associative thoughts with no “imposed” lines but lines evoked by the incantations. It creates an entry into the dream like world of myth and symbol. That is the zone of the first layer of the preconscious region of human experience and its meaning making activity – the storehouse of seeds of creativity.

This zone is a significant unifying element of human beings. For even a short time, participants dissolve their insulated worlds and partake of an experientially shared world – in other words communion.

c) The contemporary churn – Why Perform Rituals?

The dramatic, exponential growth of the sciences and their progeny, namely technology, has given rise to freedom from many orthodoxies and at the same time has undermined the individual’s relationship to the collective. Primitive society was strong in demanding that all meaning be given to the community while the emerging society is tending to swing to the other end of giving all meaning to the individual.

The core definition of man, society, collectivity and the cosmos have tended nearly been eclipsed by placing inordinate value on being “pragmatic”. Relationships, community structures, sense of belongingness and indeed human identity, individual and collective are all being churned by new challenges which are themselves under defined. This has led to new understanding and interpretation of tradition, resulting in the demise of several social customs and related practices. Rituals have evaporated, simplified truly into meaningless ritualistic acts rather than be distilled into “rituals for our times”.

Here is what Joseph Campbell has to say on the evaporation of rituals from contemporary society and its impact in the development of individuals: *“In fact, it may well be that the very high incidence of neuroticism among ourselves follows from the decline among us of such effective spiritual aid. We remain fixated to the unexorcised images of our infancy, and hence disinclined to the necessary passages of our adulthood. In the United States there is even a pathos of inverted emphasis: the goal is not to grow old, but to remain young; not to mature away from mother, but to cleave to her.”*

“The problem of mankind today, therefore, is precisely the opposite to that of men in the comparatively stable periods of those great co-ordinating mythologies which now are known as lies. Then all meaning was in the group, in the great anonymous forms, none in the self-expressive individual; today no meaning is in the group—none in the world: all is in the individual. But there the meaning is absolutely unconscious. One does not know toward what one moves. One does not know by what one is propelled. The lines of communication between the conscious and the unconscious zones of the human psyche have all been cut, and we have been split in two.

“The hero-deed to be wrought is not today what it was in the century of Galileo. Where then there was darkness, now there is light; but also, where light was, there now is darkness. The modern hero-deed must be that of questing to bring to light again the lost Atlantis of the co-ordinated soul.

“Obviously, this work cannot be wrought by turning back, or away, from what has been accomplished by the modern revolution; for the problem is nothing if not that of rendering the modern world spiritually significant—or rather (phrasing the same principle the other way round) nothing if not that of making it possible for men and women to come to full human maturity through the conditions of contemporary life. Indeed, these conditions themselves are what have rendered the ancient formulae ineffective, misleading, and even pernicious. The community today is the planet, not the bounded nation; hence the patterns of projected aggression which formerly served to co-ordinate the in-group now can only break it into factions. The national idea, with the flag as totem, is today an aggrandizer of the nursery ego, not the annihilator of an infantile situation. Its parody-rituals of the parade ground serve the ends of Holdfast, the tyrant dragon, not the God in whom self-interest is annihilate. And the numerous saints of this anticult—namely the patriots whose ubiquitous photographs, draped with flags, serve as official icons—are precisely the local threshold guardians (our demon Sticky-hair) whom it is the first problem of the hero to surpass.

“Nor can the great world religions, as at present understood, meet the requirement. For they have become associated with the causes of the factions, as instruments of propaganda and self congratulation. (Even Buddhism has lately suffered this degradation, in reaction to the lessons of the West.) The universal triumph of the secular state has thrown all religious organizations into such a definitely secondary, and finally ineffectual, position that religious pantomime is hardly more today than a sanctimonious exercise for Sunday morning, whereas business ethics and patriotism stand for the remainder of the week. Such a monkey-holiness is not what the functioning world requires; rather, a transmutation of the whole social order is necessary, so that through every detail and act of secular life the vitalizing image of the universal god-man who is actually immanent and effective in all of us may be somehow made known to consciousness.

“And this is not a work that consciousness itself can achieve. Consciousness can not more invent, or even predict, an effective symbol than foretell or control tonight’s dream. The whole thing is being worked out on another level, through what is bound to be a long and very frightening process, not only in the depths of every living psyche in the modern world, but also on those titanic battle-fields into which the whole planet has lately been converted. We are watching the terrible clash of the Symplegades, through which the soul must pass—identified with neither side.” (Joseph Cambell -The Hero with a Thousand Faces)

d) A case for the use of rituals in settings of secular learning

One of the key aims of process work is to foster discovery, of the wherewithal the learner needs in order to navigate though discontinuities that life inevitably confronts people with. Rituals as a learning device is an elegant platform to further this cause.

One of the requirements of learning in process work settings is the need to be able to “tear away” from deeply held structures of assumptions and perspectives in order to enable exploration of alternate perspectives. Rituals provide a simple infrastructure to assist in such a process.

A process definition of a ritual

A ritual is an event that is free of pragmatic conversation. It aims to make a foray into domains of thought that are not usually amenable to the usual format of I – Thou communication. A ritual is a structured setting that creates the space for a direct encounter and dialogue between the infiniteness embodied in individual participants and the infiniteness of the cosmos of existence itself. Rituals thus also provide a “safe” preview of the unconsciously held perspectives. A greater part of our perspectives are held unconsciously than our pride would permit us to admit. Participation in a ritual where some of these perspectives are articulated give a stimulus to the participant to recognize the elements that she has held so far. It further gives her a comparative idea to re examine her own existing perspectives (definitions of existence, purpose of life, am I the author or am I a mere object that destiny acts upon etc).

At a rational plane any given strategy a person has been using to meet her life situations will have a justifiable base. On a growth trajectory she may have come to a point that requires her to “tear away” from the extant strategy on account of its unintended consequences. While on the one hand the unintended consequences are creating pain and anguish the justification is based on very sound logic of consequences creating a life space that is safe although death like in its monotony and loneliness. Clearly a “tearing away” is called for in order to set the stage for realistic new exploration to begin.

A properly chosen or designed ritual becomes a non-discursive journey, a foray, into the existential world. Rational discourse is ordinarily constrained to the confines of the logic of consequences. In reality, living and being are governed dominantly by the play of deeper existential concerns of death, isolation, freedom and groundlessness accompanied

by the ever present aspiration to unfold and meet one's potentials. Rituals help gain an entry into the existential domain unraveling one's own responsibility and help place that in the context of the collective wisdom. Rationality limits access to one's own potentials, it is imagination that links the individual to her potentials.

My first ritual

My first experience of a ritual in a process work setting was in 1978. An aspiring neophyte, I had been given a role as an alter ego, with little to do, yet a critically important act was in my hands. I was anxious about my participation and I must confess that there was a lurking doubt "will I be subjected to preaching, proselytisation and the like?". As the ritual unfolded, (it was the Existential Threshold Ritual - "who am I?" etc), I found my mind expanding into a region best described as a zone of "wordless grandeur, awe that was real (infinity- real and experiential) and a sense of being ordinary that was inherently aesthetic and eminently worth soaking in (it is fine to be who and what I am), and, finally a sense of connection with the community present and mankind as a whole (hope is real, the *other* is not so distant)". It was as if the infinite and the finite had come alive in a loving embrace – forgetting and transcending the long lasting conflict that characterizes the relationship between them in all worldly spaces. I remember sitting in silence for long after it was all over accepting in peace, a sense that I am creating my own experience and that is the reality. It was being in a state of trance while being fully alert and alive to the objective environment.

Since then I have participated in and conducted, countless numbers of rituals, have designed a few new ones and listened to the experience of many who participated.

In summary: rituals in process work settings create a change of planes from the logico-transactional to the existential world. The key characteristic of this journey into the existential world is the sense of community and communion that accompanies it. Rituals foster the recognition that all human beings are subject to the same set of existential concerns. That it is each one's responsibility to apprehend his own role and contribution to his own world. As an outcome it thus reduces the intensity of the existential anxieties freeing the mind to receive and conceive anew the wisdom available with the community including oneself.

Yalom (pg 8 Existential Psychotherapy, Basic Books 1980) proposes that existential psychodynamics is the playing out of "... a conflict that flows from the individual's confrontation with the givens of existence". Is this not the same thing that rituals in their original, so called "primitive" settings were precisely designed to confront and resolve? A ritual at the time of the transition through the "existential crises" of the 'rites of passage' were nothing else but a community's way of offering that very support that the transiting members needed. I am here proposing that this pristine function of rituals shorn of any religious or tribalistic attachments is in fact a potent exercise that we can harness for promoting "right brain" learning.

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References taken from

1. von Gennep ; “Rites of Passage”
2. Turner

Both above internet references were taken from: Bibliography of Social Anthropological Theories of Ritual Meaning and Function-Sharon Morris.

3. Swami Swahanand : “Meditations and other Spiritual Disciplines” Ramakrishna Mission
4. Joseph Campbell : “The Hero with a Thousand Faces”
5. Irvin D. Yalom : “Existential Psychotherapy”