



# EXPLORATION

## Ritual

### Readings



#### 1. *The Rituals of Our Lives*

by Rev. Robert Fulghum

Rituals are timed by beats of the heart, not ticks of the clock. Most of our major holidays are connected to seasons. They are flexible feast days adapted to human needs. Heart time is not clock time—rituals should never be hurried.

Rituals are frames around the mirrors of the moment. Rituals are the coin by which attention is paid to the moment. Nobody lives without rituals. Rituals do not live without somebody.

The rituals change when the forms of celebration no longer fit our yearnings to celebrate the realities of present circumstances. The rituals change when we reach for a more authentic expression of our deepest human experiences. What does not change is the yearning.

...To spend time in the company of others who have our concerns, values, interests, beliefs, or occupation is to get confirmation of who we are—to feel connected to a larger image of ourselves.

...The rite of self-affirmation by association—being with people like us. The ritual of relevance—of belonging to a community of significance.

From beginning to end, the rituals of our lives shape each hour, day, and year. Everyone leads a ritualized life. Rituals are repeated patterns of meaningful acts. If you are mindful of your actions, you will see the ritual patterns. If you see the patterns, you may understand them. If you understand them, you may enrich

them. In this way, the habits of a lifetime become sacred.

Source: *From Beginning to End: The Rituals of Our Lives* by Robert Fulghum

#### 2. *Why we need rituals* by Terry Nguyen

In her seminal writing on rituals, religion scholar Catherine Bell advised against establishing a firm definition for what constitutes a ritual. While there might be differences between what's perceived as an "authentic ritual" and a "ritual-like activity," Bell encouraged people to focus on the specifics of the process, instead of unnecessarily limiting themselves to a defined ideal. In other words, many activities can become rituals. It depends on how a person approaches them.

Rituals shouldn't be reduced to just mechanistic habits. The scholar Dale Wright, in his research on Zen Buddhist rituals, believed the process can facilitate the "disciplined transformation of the practitioner" in a way that mindless routine can't. ...

Rituals can be an artistic process, a meditation, a communal celebration, or a simple act of observation, according to Kate Southworth, a London-based artist whose works are rooted in ritual. "Rituals often have an intention,"

Southworth said. "I think the framing of that intention to be as important as its enactment." It's a form of resistance, she added, "to let go of the rational mind of habit and routine."

...[In] *The Disappearance of Rituals* ... German philosopher Byung Chul Han [argued] rituals stabilize life. They are "temporal technologies for housing oneself," and provide a mental refuge from the ceaselessness of social media and our fast-paced world.

...Han writes extensively about the decline of collective ritual in secular societies, but he doesn't propose a return to the old ways of ritualizing. Instead, he

encourages readers to form new rites that are resistant to becoming commodified.

Source: <https://www.vox.com/even-better/23144784/why-rituals-not-routine>

#### 3. *The Ambiguous Liminal Space* by Heather Platt

In anthropology, a liminal space is a threshold, an interim space of ambiguity or disorientation that occurs in the middle stage of rituals, when participants no longer hold their pre-ritual status but have not yet transitioned to the status they will hold when the ritual is complete. In liminal space we are between identities, between who we once were and who we are becoming, like the chrysalis stage between caterpillar and butterfly.

Grief, transition, loss, birth, divorce, trauma, job loss, bankruptcy, marriage, betrayal, relocation, graduation, conflict – nearly every human experience has within it some element of liminal space. The liminal space is a space of open-heartedness, when we are raw, vulnerable, and exposed. In order to survive without further wounding, we need a container that will hold us with gentleness and strength, without short-circuiting the process or forcing us into the wrong outcome.

Holding space isn't easy and it can make us feel powerless. We want to fix things, give good advice, control the outcome, or avoid the conversation all together.

In order to hold space for others in our lives, we have to learn to hold space for ourselves first. When we neglect our own needs, we risk burnout, addiction, and other unhealthy coping mechanisms.

Holding space is what we do in the liminal space when we walk alongside another person (or ourselves) on a journey without judging, fixing, belittling, or shaping the outcome. While supporting



their boundaries and protecting our own, we offer unconditional support, compassion, and gentle guidance.

Source: <https://www.awakin.org/v2/read/view.php?tid=2346>

#### 4. *Routine and Ritual* by Anne Lamott

Here's the true secret of life: We mostly do everything over and over. In the morning, we let the dogs out, make coffee, read the paper, help whoever is around get ready for the day. We do our work. In the afternoon, ...we come home, put down our keys..., let the dogs out, ...put water on for tea.... I love ritual and repetition. Without them, I would be a balloon with a slow leak.

...Daily rituals, especially walks, even forced marches around the neighborhood, and schedules, whether work or meals with non-awful people, can be the knots you hold on to when you've run out of rope.

...You have to keep taking the next necessary stitch, and the next one, and the next. without stitches, you just have rags.

And we are not rags.

...The search is the meaning, the search for beauty, love, kindness and restoration in this difficult, wired and often alien modern world. The miracle is that we are here, that no matter how undone we've been the night before, we wake up every morning and are still here. ...I have found that the wonder of life is often most easily recognizable through habits and routines.  
[...]

...Discipline, I have learned, leads to freedom... If you don't do ritual things in order ...you'll be thrown off the whole day. But when you can sit for a while at your table, reach for your coffee, look out the window at the sky or some branches, ...everything feels right for the moment, which is maybe all we have.

Source: *Stitches: A Handbook on Meaning, Hope and Repair* by Anne Lamott

#### 5. *Ritual Is Poetry in Action*

by Dennis Ross

Rabbi Chaim Stern [said,] "Ritual is poetry in action."

He identified the opportunity to recognize ...spirituality in the routine, and recapture lost enthusiasm and hope.

... "Ritual is poetry in action," ... presented an image to describe the spiritual potential of ritual.

... "Ritual is poetry in action" means that ritual does for behavior what poetry does for words; religious deeds grace ordinary activities the way poetic language elevates commonplace communication.

Thus, a ritual contributes spiritual elevation to an ordinary deed as a poem ennobles casual language. Ritual allows for a broadened perspective on life.

... "Ritual is poetry in action" at worship when liturgy, community and learning punctuate a week of labor. The spiritual pause at the close of a work week offers an opportunity for stock-taking and renewal. Worship services provide time for considering the rote behaviors—picking at the office computer keyboard or pushing the cart down the supermarket aisle—in a different and elevated context. Worship is an occasion to consider what the daily grind adds up to. Ritual identifies and establishes meaning that already abides—unnoticed until then—in a person's routine behavior.

...Of three religious dimensions, holy, profane and the ordinary, it is in the ordinary that the spiritual danger abides. ...Religious community, worship and celebration, these acts of faith restructure the ordinary as sacred.

...When life gets eaten up by recurring obligations, when the spirit withers in the hours between punching-in and punching-out, when dreams of financial security melt into economic challenge, life cries out for uplift — for the ritual that makes poetry of action.

Source: <https://onbeing.org/blog/ritual-is-poetry-in-action/>

#### 6. *Why Rituals Work* by Francesca Gino and Michael Norton

...Rituals—the symbolic behaviors we perform before, during, and after meaningful events—are surprisingly

ubiquitous, across culture and time. Rituals take an extraordinary array of shapes and forms. At times performed in communal or religious settings, at times performed in solitude; at times involving fixed, repeated sequences of actions, at other times not. People engage in rituals with the intention of achieving a wide set of desired outcomes, from reducing their anxiety to boosting their confidence, alleviating their grief to performing well in a competition – or even making it rain.

Recent research suggests that rituals may be more rational than they appear. Why? Because even simple rituals can be extremely effective. Rituals performed after experiencing losses—from loved ones to lotteries—do alleviate grief, and rituals performed before high-pressure tasks—like singing in public—do in fact reduce anxiety and increase people's confidence. What's more, rituals appear to benefit even people who claim not to believe that rituals work. While anthropologists have documented rituals across cultures, this earlier research has been primarily observational. Recently, a series of investigations by psychologists have revealed intriguing new results demonstrating that rituals can have a causal impact on people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

Source: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/why-rituals-work/>

#### 7. *A Ritual of Reconciliation* by Christina Baldwin

When we live in a family, a community, a country where we know each other's true stories, we remember our capacity to lean in and love each other into wholeness.

I have read the story of a tribe in southern Africa called the Babemba in which a person doing something wrong, something that destroys this delicate social net, brings all work in the village to a halt. The people gather around the "offender," and one by one they begin to recite everything he has done right in his life: every good deed, thoughtful behavior, act of social responsibility. These things have to be true about the person, and spoken honestly, but the time-honored consequence of misbehavior is to appreciate that person back

into the better part of himself. The person is given the chance to remember who he is and why he is important to the life of the village.

I want to live under such a practice of compassion. When I forget my place, when I lash out with some private wounding in a public way, I want to be remembered back into alignment with my self and my purpose. I want to live with the opportunity for reconciliation. When someone around me is thoughtless or cruel, I want to be given the chance to respond with a ritual that creates the possibility of reconnection. I want to live in a neighborhood where people don't shoot first, don't sue first, where people are Storycatchers willing to discover in strangers the mirror of themselves."

Source: Storycatcher: Making Sense of Our Lives through the Power and Practice of Story by Christina Baldwin

## Wisdom Story

***This Must be Sufficient*** by Elie Wiesel

When the great Rabbi Israel Ba'al Shem-Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews, it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light the fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished and the misfortune averted.

Years later when a disciple of the Ba'al Shem-Tov, the celebrated Magid of Mezritch, had occasion for the same reason, to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say: "Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer," and again the miracle would be accomplished.

Still later, another rabbi, Rabbi Moshe-leib of Sasov, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say, "I do not know how to light the fire. I do not know the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient." It was sufficient and the miracle was accomplished.

The years passed. And it fell to Rabbi Israel of Ryzhyn to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God:

"I am unable to light the fire, and I do not know the prayer, and I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is tell the story, and this must be sufficient." And it was sufficient.

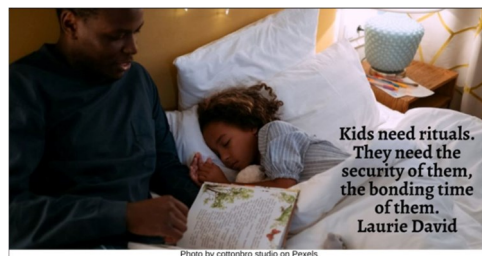
Source: <https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/adults/life/workshop2/159144.shtml>, from *The Gates of the Forest* by Elie Wiesel

## Snippets

"Ritual is not simply an attitude or intention, just as love is not simply a feeling. At its most basic, ritual is something that you do. A man can't plow a field just by thinking about it, he must go out to the field and get to work. Yet if he is fully present to the work and acts with mindfulness and loving attention—that is, if he brings his whole self along—then even as he turns over the rich soil beneath his plow, he turns it over in his mind and heart as well. The act of tilling the soil becomes an act of tilling the soul." *Allison Leigh Lilly*

"The tea ritual: such a precise repetition of the same gestures and the same tastes; accession to simple, authentic and refined sensations, a license given to all, at little cost, to become aristocrats of taste, because tea is the beverage of the wealthy and the poor; the tea ritual, therefore, has the extraordinary virtue of introducing into the absurdity of our lives an aperture of serene harmony. Yes, the world may aspire to vacuousness, lost souls mourn beauty, insignificance surrounds us. Then let us drink a cup of tea. Silence descends, one hears the wind outside, autumn leaves rustle and take flight, the cat sleeps in a warm pool of light. And, with each swallow, time is sublimed." *Muriel Barbery*

"This is what rituals are for. We do spiritual ceremonies as human beings in order to create a safe resting place for our most complicated feelings of joy or trauma, so that we don't have to haul those feelings around with us forever, weighing us down. We all need such places of ritual safekeeping. And I do believe that if your culture or tradition doesn't have the specific ritual you are craving, then you are absolutely permit-



ted to make up a ceremony of your own devising, fixing your own broken-down emotional systems with all the do-it-yourself resourcefulness of a generous plumber/poet." *Elizabeth Gilbert*

"Every historic religion has faced the problem of how to knead the vision of the sacred into the dough of everyday life.... Ritual invests ordinary acts and objects with symbolic meaning.... To play with ritual and to invent disciplines of awareness is to recognize that we have dual citizenship. We live simultaneously in two dimensions, the profane and the sacred, time and eternity. We remain most animated, most inspired, most fully alive, when we learn how to cross back and forth between the here and now and the Beyond." *Sam Keen*

"Any action that speaks to the soul and to the deep imagination, whether or not it also has practical effects, is a ritual. Some rituals may have more spiritual import than others and therefore assume greater dimensions, but even the smallest rites of everyday existence are important to the soul. We can give an action a ritual quality by repeating it regularly as remembrance, memorial, celebration, or personal piety and by giving it ceremony, special language, meaningful timing, and placing. If any of our actions lack care and thoughtfulness, they remain largely unconscious and raw. Staying in close touch with religious, cultural, and family traditions may also give our actions an impersonal, eternal quality that is essential to ritual." *Thomas Moore*

"Our lives are so often devoid of nourishing ritual. It's easy to lose our focus, to not pay attention. Listening to jarring music, talking on the telephone, watching television, thinking of tomorrow while we chop and stir in the kitchen are all habits that can get in the way of the practice of cooking. Bringing ritual into



Forgiveness has to do with the past.  
Reconciliation ...the future. Henry Cloud



the kitchen is actually a way of coming back to the center of yourself. A Turkish Sufi teacher while describing how to cook an egg, said to me, 'All the qualities of a spiritual teacher can be found in a person who can cook an egg perfectly.'" *Anne Scott*

"Ritual creates its own feedback. We hold hands with a child as the sun rises, and we sense, in a way we never did before, that the world is being reborn before our eyes. Suddenly we are in the presence of the unutterable. Believing now in the world's rebirth, we choose to make that hand-holding part of our daily lives, perhaps adding some word of prayer, perhaps creating a mini-ritual. Along with our child, we find a language to express what cannot be spoken. Using that language over and over, we are confirmed in our initial hunch. The world is as pregnant with meaning as the sunrise with the day." *Nancy Fuchs*

"Bowing will be part of your daily ritual. The gesture of bowing is an exterior sign of an awesome presence you are encountering. Begin your day by bowing to the dawn. A deep bow gives witness to the truth that you are awake and ready to receive the new day. All too often we take the day rather than receive it." *Macrina Wiederkehr*  
Take the day means take for granted receive the

"'We are all related' is a prayer of faith and communion that could well be repeated over and over in the midst of a crowd, a traffic jam or checkout line. The ritual of Holy Communion is intended to awaken us to this deeply buried and unspoken truth. The Native American Plains Indians, at the conclusion of their pipe ceremony, would all murmur: 'We are all related.'" *Edward Hayes*

"When I offer the early morning Mass..., the people are generally sprinkled throughout the cavernous space, separated from one another by more than a pole's length. I know that some of them live alone in apartments, and I am always glad to see them get up from their places and move toward each other with hands and arms extended at the sign of peace. Especially for those who live alone, the ritual of 'passing the peace' may represent a high point in the service because it provides a safe space within which they can touch and be touched by others, even people whom they do not know. Exchanging signs of peace with our bodies reminds us that we must touch others only in peace and love." *Thomas Ryan*

## Questions

1. In reading #1, Rev. Robert Fulghum writes, "Rituals are the coin by which attention is paid to the moment." How does a ritual focus attention? If a ritual fails to focus attention, might it mean, as Fulghum writes, it "no longer fit[s] our yearnings to celebrate the realities of present circumstances." Why or why not? Are there rituals that no longer speak to you? Can you give an example? Why has it lost relevance for you? Are there rituals that are particularly important to you? Which ones? Why?
2. In reading #2, Terry Nguyen writes, "many activities can become rituals. It depends on how a person approaches them." In this sense, how can the same action/activity be a ritual for one person and not another? Nguyen notes that a ritual could be an artistic process? Does this make sense? Why or why not? Are the decorations surrounding a wedding a part of the ritual? How do they influence our experience of this rite of passage? Nguyen also writes, per Byung Chul Han that "rituals stabilize life." How might this happen?
3. In reading #3, Heather Platt focuses on liminal space when "we are between identities, between who we once were and who we are becoming, like the chrysalis stage between caterpillar and butterfly." When have you experienced liminal space? In these experiences people can be "raw, vulnerable, and exposed." Platt writes about the importance of holding space for others "without judging, fixing, belittling, or shaping the outcome." Have you done this for someone? How did it help? Have others done this for you? How did it feel? Help?
4. In reading #4, Anne Lamott writes, "I love ritual and repetition. Without them, I would be a balloon with a slow leak." What role does ritual and repetition play in your life? Lamott observes that "Daily rituals ...can be the knots you hold on to when you've run out of rope." Have the repetition of daily rituals helped you when you've run out of rope? She calls it "taking the next necessary stitch, and the next one, and the next. Without stitches, you just have rags. And we are not rags." How do personal rituals help structure your day, your life?
5. In reading #5, Dennis Ross returns again and again to the quote by Rabbi Chaim Stern that "Ritual is poetry in action." He explains that this, "means that ritual does for behavior what poetry does for words; religious deeds grace ordinary activities the way poetic language elevates commonplace communication." How is the chalice being lit in our congregations more than just a flame? What are some of the meanings that it holds for you? Ross writes, "Worship is an occasion to consider what the daily grind adds up to." How does the Sunday service touch your life? What makes it special? Does it help you deal with the daily grind? If yes, how?
6. In reading #6, Francesca Gino and Michael Norton write about the ability of rituals to alleviate grief or reduce anxiety or increase confidence. Do you have personal rituals that are especially meaningful to you? Can you give an example? What does that ritual do for you?
7. In reading #7, Christina Baldwin



recounts a communal ritual performed by the Babemba, a tribe in Africa. When someone does something that harms the tribe, the people circle around the offender and begin calling out every good deed that the person has ever done to call him or her back into right relationship. What impact might that ritual have on an offender? Why? What might it mean to the members of the tribe. As Baldwin writes, "I want to live with the opportunity for reconciliation." This can happen more easily, she writes, "When we live in a family, a community, a country where we know each other's true stories, we remember our capacity to lean in and love each other into wholeness." How can knowing each other's story soften our heart and ease our gaze?

***The following questions are related to the Snippets***

8. For Allison Leigh Lilly, "Ritual is not simply an attitude or intention, ...its ... something that you do." Using a farmer as an example, she concludes, "The act of tilling the soil becomes an act of tilling the soul." In thinking about your own personal actions how would you distinguish between routines and rituals?
9. For Muriel Barbery, the tea ritual can rescue us from emptiness or insignificance or the absence of beauty. What can a ritual like drinking tea or savoring wine add to a moment in life? For her tea brings with it serene harmony. What rituals or experiences lead to harmony for you?
10. Elizabeth Gilbert suggests that personal rituals can "create a safe resting place for our most complicated feelings of joy or trauma...." Why is this important? She states that if your culture or tradition doesn't have the specific ritual you need, then you should create one. Have you created your own rituals? What were the circumstances? How did doing so help? Gilbert recom-

mends rituals for "fixing your own broken-down emotional systems with all the do-it-yourself resourcefulness of a generous plumber/poet." What does the image of a plumber/poet conjure up mean for you?

11. For Sam Keen, the purpose of ritual is "to knead the vision of the sacred into the dough of everyday life...." He continues, "Ritual invests ordinary acts and objects with symbolic meaning...." How does this happen with the Water Communion and the Flower Communion? Keen writes, "We live simultaneously in two dimensions, the profane and the sacred, time and eternity." How might this be true?
12. Thomas Moore writes, "Some rituals may have more spiritual import than others and therefore assume greater dimensions, but even the smallest rites of everyday existence are important to the soul." What are some examples of small, everyday rituals that add meaning to life? By contrast he writes, "If any of our actions lack care and thoughtfulness, they remain largely unconscious and raw." What is the problem when this happens? Why?
13. Anne Scott laments all of the distractions and "habits that can get in the way of the practice of cooking." What is your relationship to cooking? Why? Scott writes that, "Bringing ritual into the kitchen is actually a way of coming back to the center of yourself." How could cooking a meal become a meaningful ritual? Quoting a Turkish Sufi teacher, she writes, "All the qualities of a spiritual teacher can be found in a person who can cook an egg perfectly." Can cooking become a spiritual practice? How?
14. Nancy Fuchs writes, "Ritual creates its own feedback." By way of explanation she continues, "We hold hands with a child as the sun rises, and we sense, in a way we never did before, that the world is being reborn before our eyes. Suddenly we are in the presence of the unutterable." What rituals can you imagine sharing with a child? Why? What rituals do you think will benefit children? How? What rituals were important to you when you were young? Why?
15. Macrina Wiederkehr suggests that you, "Begin your day by bowing to the dawn." This ritual symbolizes "that you are awake and ready to receive the new day." How might doing this with intention help you live more mindfully? She distinguishes between "take the day"

and "receive the day," that is taking the day for granted rather than receiving it as a gift. Which approach is consistent with a bow? Why?

16. For Edward Hays, the prayer, "We are all related," is at the core of Holy Communion as well as the pipe ceremony of the Plains Indians. Does his assertion shift your understanding of communion? Why or why not? Does this prayer apply to our Flower Communion, to our seventh principle? Why or why not?
17. Thomas Ryan writes about leading morning Mass with people separated at some distance from each other, except when they participate in the ritual of "passing the peace" when they get up and move toward each other. Have you ever participated in the ritual of "passing the peace?" What was the experience like? What meanings might be associated with this ritual? He concludes, "we must touch others only in peace and love." What if the spirit of this ritual was more widespread?



**Reconciliation for  
the powerful and  
privileged means  
trusting those who  
have lived under  
oppression and  
even following  
their lead....  
Curtiss P. DeYoung**

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