

## 5. Using Ritual

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Let's define a ritual as any activity that we perform at least as much for its *symbolic and emotional value* as for its practical value. We perform a ritual because the act in itself has meaning, or because doing it make us feel better about ourselves, or both.

Our American culture provides us with a whole repertoire of standard rituals: standing for the national anthem before a sports event; singing "Happy Birthday" and blowing out birthday candles; sharing a meal at Thanksgiving; wearing caps and gowns at graduations; the complex ceremonies of weddings and funerals.

Our consumer economy exploits (some would say, parasitizes) our culture to direct us toward rituals of consumption: buying lots of gifts at Christmas; overeating on all holidays; distributing gobs of candy to children at Halloween; remembering that "a diamond is forever." The advertising industry works hard to load every purchase with symbolic and emotional value, for good reason: we are culturally (perhaps, biologically) programmed to enjoy doing things that have symbolic and emotional value, and to not count their cost too carefully.

A religious practice supplies a believer with a wide vocabulary of rituals: daily, weekly, and seasonal rituals to structure the year, and powerful ceremonies to mark the major life transitions of birth, adulthood, marriage and death.

Besides these standard rituals, every family and every individual develops private rituals: things that we do in a certain way because

the doing expresses how we feel about ourselves, and reassures us that we are still in control of our lives.

Since *any* action is a ritual if we do it at least in part for its symbolic and emotional value, the whole field of human activity can be exploited as ritual. The aim of this chapter is to get you to inventory your personal selection of rituals, possibly discard some old ones, and perhaps adopt or invent some new ones.

### *Awareness and assent*

There's a hazy boundary between the words "ritual," "habit," and "custom." I think the difference between a ritual act and a habitual one lies in *awareness* and *assent*. An act becomes a ritual for you when you perform it with conscious awareness of its symbolic and emotional meaning, and with willing assent to those meanings. Unless you act with both awareness and assent, your act is merely a habit (if it is unique to you) or a custom (if you share it with others).

Religious practice is full of activities that are meant to have symbolic and emotional value, but which can slip into mere custom owing to our very natural tendency to let awareness and assent fade with time:

I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.

– Revelations 3:15-16

...in the course of the future there will be monks who won't listen when discourses that are words of the Tathagata [Buddha] are being recited. They won't lend ear, won't set their hearts on knowing them, won't regard these teachings as worth grasping or mastering. ...In this way the disappearance of the discourses that are words of the Tathagata...will come about.

– Samyutta Nikaya XX.7

Awareness and intention are personal qualities that can exist only in your own mind. They cannot be coerced. Nobody can force you to pay attention to the symbolic meaning of an act. And in particular, nobody can force your assent to the meaning of a ritual. As I well know, because I can remember myself as an adolescent, being required to attend my parents' church in which I no longer believed.

My body was present at the rituals; my willing assent was most definitely and defiantly not.

### *Private ritual*

The positive side of ritual is that you can invest *any* act with whatever symbolic and emotional value you want; and this, too, is a personal act that takes place in your head. Just as nobody can coerce your assent to a rite, nobody can prevent you from pouring meaning into any act you choose.

That means that any act you want can become a personal ritual. Take that regular Tuesday noon jogging date with your friend Alex. If it's just a run and a pleasant chat, it's a habit and no more. However, occasions like these can *become* rituals if you make the conscious decision to be mindful of their implications: what they stand for, what they imply, how they represent your status and condition of life. Suppose that while you are lacing your running shoes, you think: "At this time I am going to connect with the outdoor air, with the weather and the season. I'm going to be aware of my body, its strength and limits, how it feels to get tired and to recover. And I'm going to attend to Alex, who is a friend." And you would consciously try to bring awareness of these points into the front of your mind several times during the run.

Would this kind of mental activity make your jogging date any better? Well, at the very least, it can't *lessen* the experience. The external, practical activity of meeting Alex, running, talking, and parting would be no different. The only difference would be the purely internal activity of attending to, and assenting to, symbolic values.

Many of us have habit/rituals that center around the Sunday newspaper. My wife and I have a habit of going out for coffee on Sunday morning, instead of eating breakfast and reading the paper in our kitchen at home as we do the other six days of the week. We sip lattes and read the paper at a neighborhood bookstore. For us, this routine just barely crosses the line from habit into ritual. We do it, not so much because we like lattes and pastry, but because we want to mark the turning of the week. Going out makes Sunday into a delimiter that divides the previous week from the next one. The symbolic and emotional content of our outing is this: a week has turned; we are still alive and healthy; we are preparing ourselves to

plunge into the next week. We don't give special attention to this content, although if we did, the coffee would undoubtedly taste better.

Should you make the effort to invest habitual activities with ritual value? Possibly yes, because rituals have uses that rise above the details of their practice.

### *Uses of ritual*

It seems to me that ritual acts have four main uses.

- They give time-structure to our lives on the daily, weekly, and annual levels.
- They assist and encourage the formation of trust and community between people.
- They give shape to public expressions of powerful emotions: expressions of grief, as at funerals; and of joy, as at weddings, graduations, birthdays and anniversaries.
- They help to reorient and stabilize our own feelings when we need to comprehend and cope with crucial life passages.

Let's consider each of these uses and the conventional rituals for them. Keep in mind that although I separate the four uses here, a ritual often serves more than one purpose.

### *Structuring life*

Any repeated activity — your jog with Alex, our Sunday coffee outing — acts to stabilize the tempo of life, just as the beat of a metronome stabilizes music. We gain immense reassurance from this chronic stability. The time has rolled around and here we are, still able to meet the time with the right behavior: thus do we show that we are masters of our lives. We are *efficacious*; that is, we are able to control the circumstances of our lives. We prove our efficacy to ourselves over and over by doing expected things at appointed intervals. The feeling that we are efficacious is one of the most important feelings we can have; it's one of the foundations of a happy life, as we will see in Chapter 10.

There's a wealth of sources for ritual time-structures. Think how many people build their week around the television schedule; or who build their year around the school term, the baseball season, or

the hunting season. Religions provide a rich seasonal cycle of rituals, from Easter to Passover to Ramadan. For those without a religious practice, our consumer society is eager to step in with seasonal occasions for consumption. Anyone can benefit by examining this aspect of life, and making a thoughtful choice of season rituals.

### *Helping people bond*

A primary use of rituals is to give people, especially families, occasions to bond with each other. The ritual occasion creates a kind of emotional neutral ground where, by common consent, we permit ourselves to express emotions that we wouldn't be comfortable expressing at other times. You might not go around showing affection for your father (mother, sibling, aunt, cousin...); but you do join in caroling "Happy Birthday," or give hugs when you meet at Thanksgiving. If we didn't have these occasions, we'd be much more isolated.

In fact, plenty of us do *not* have these occasions, and *are* emotionally isolated as a result. Sometimes it's because we have moved out of reach of family. Equally often, the conventional family rituals like Christmas have lost their meaning for us; or worse, we have withdrawn our assent from them because the rituals have been poisoned by disappointment and bad memories.

A lack of occasions for bonding allows family ties to weaken and friendships to thin. But it's possible to create new rituals for this purpose.

### *Expressing and confirming emotion*

Intense emotions beg to be shared. It is comforting to take part in a formal, public demonstration of a grief, a loss, or a triumph. If you have to deal with either tragedy or triumph silently, unshared, the emotional burden can be choking. Public rituals give us a way to externalize emotion, express it, and so finish with it. When you share its expression with others and see it expressed in other peoples' faces and voices, you can begin to release the emotion in yourself.

It seems to me that one purpose of a public ritual is to make an event psychologically real (make it, literally, undeniable) to the

participants. Yes, this person has actually died and is gone; I know this because I stood with these other people and actually witnessed the coffin going into the ground, or into the crematorium. From this come two emotional conclusions. First, the grief I feel is legitimate because it is shared by others. Second, the loss is real, there is no point looking for ways around it, the only direction now is forward.

### *Internalizing transitions*

In other cases, like weddings and graduations, the public ritual makes a life transition socially undeniable, and so irrevocable. Yes, I am now an adult; or yes, they are really married; it must be true because so many other people witnessed it along with me.

Religious practice is especially good at providing rituals for two common transitions: weddings and funerals. If you, a non-churchgoer, want to celebrate a marriage, where can you turn for ideas? Perhaps an awkward visit to the local Unitarian minister, who will be very gracious about helping you. If we don't practice a religion, going to a religious institution to get a ritual done has a certain hint of hypocrisy about it. In any case, religious custom does not cover every occasion of strong emotion in modern life. We need to be able to find, or invent, new rituals. This is not too difficult, if you have some imagination and you know the elements.

### *Elements of ritual*

On the whole, we shouldn't be too self-aware, too calculating, in creating new rituals. For rituals that structure life and help to bond family and friends, it's enough to find any excuse to meet other people on a regular basis in comfortable surroundings. And we have time to plan these occasions. However, the need for a ritual to express emotion or transition can come up unexpectedly; and these occasions seem to ask for more formality. Thinking about the elements of ritual in a more analytic way can help us to be ready. Let's begin with ritual objects and spaces.

### *Ritual objects*

If a ritual act is one that we perform for its symbolic and emotional value, we can apply the same qualifier to spaces and objects. A ritual *object* is something we keep because of its symbolic and

emotional value, not because it is useful. You own many ritual objects, although you probably call them souvenirs, mementos, keepsakes, snapshots, and old-stuff-I-can't-bear-to-throw-away.

Just like ritual acts, ritual objects have value only to the extent that you bestow that value with your mind. Only you know why you would run back into a burning house to rescue a photo album. Nobody else would endanger themselves to save your mementos.

Ritual objects get their benign power over us in three ways. As mementos, they are tidy portable reminders of the good things we have known. Second, they often *signify*, as clearly as a neon sign. A ritual object can capture a whole complex of meanings and present that meaning to other people in a way that is clear and yet, because nonverbal, subtle. The picture of husband and child on the desk of that attractive woman at work is no doubt a fond reminder to her of her loved ones. However, it also quietly advertises her marital status to anyone who comes into her workspace.

Finally, no matter how rational we try to be, we all have a trace of the shaman in our hearts, especially an instinctive belief in the second law of sympathetic magic:

Sympathetic magic has two "laws." ... The second law is the "law of contagion," which states that two things that have once been in contact retain some occult connection one with the other. Hence, if the magician obtains a fingernail paring or a hair cutting, he can affect the former owner thereof by working magic on that small part of him. On this principle, the "hair of the dog that bit you" was a serious dog-bite remedy.<sup>1</sup>

We almost can't avoid believing in some form of the second law of sympathetic magic. A picture of your child at age 1 reminds you of that time, but it is almost impossible to avoid the unstated assumption that there is some connection between the picture and the actual child<sup>2</sup>.

### *Ritual spaces*

A ritual *space* is one we reserve for ritual acts. In religion, the mosque, temple or church is the ritual space. The nature of a religious ritual space is always acknowledged by a ritual act on entry and exit: removing the shoes, or putting on a veil, shawl, or special cap<sup>3</sup>. Catholics use a whole set of little ritual acts to mark the

church as a ritual space: crossing themselves on entry, genuflecting when crossing before the altar, etc.

You probably have another kind of ritual space, a much smaller one, devoted to displaying ritual objects. Such a space is properly called a shrine.

Sometimes these items are put in a special place in an organized fashion — usually on a dresser top at home or a desktop or shelf at work. Little framed photographs, a rock or two, something a kid made in school, a key, a bronzed baby shoe, a little jar of dried flower petals and — well, you know. Shrines, altars. These are not accidental assemblages of sentimental detritus. They are the physical evidence of the ritual of remembrance.<sup>4</sup>

Walk around your workplace and look over your workmates' desks and computer monitors. How many shrines can you spot? The plastic toys on top of the computer monitor; the framed photos of spouses or lovers, of kids, of shiny vehicles; the collection of coffee mugs from trade shows of the past; the carefully-curated gallery of *Dilbert* or *Farside* cartoons — count them all, and don't skip the one(s) in your own cubicle or office. These are ritual spaces by our definition: they are devoted to storing and displaying ritual objects. The spaces aren't being used for anything practical; they haven't any functional value. They are reserved, prepared, and kept because of the symbolic and emotional value of the objects in them.

### *Conventional ritual elements*

Just as any act is a ritual if you decide to invest it with meaning, any object becomes a ritual object and any space becomes a ritual space when you decide to make them so. However, we've all absorbed a vocabulary of familiar symbols from our culture. When we create new ritual, we might as well take advantage of the symbolic weight of these familiar elements. A table set for a meal is just a table. A table set *with candles* is a ritual space: we don't need candles for light any more, they have only symbolic and emotional value.

Here are some familiar ritual objects. As you read this list, think of the times you've seen these items used in ritual: Candles and lamps; banners; clean, crisp cloths; fire, and ashes; seasonal flowers, fruits, and foliage; bread, salt, alcoholic drink; water, soap, aromatic herbs; rings, necklaces, shawls; bowls, goblets, boxes.



## *Unmaking rituals*

Now that you are a little more aware of the prevalence of rituals, you can take an inventory of your own rituals. Ask yourself if there are rituals in your life that are unhealthy. (For example, I heard one person complain they were stuck with a family Christmas ritual of getting drunk and having a fight.) Or perhaps the meaning has drained out of a ritual, leaving only a husk of custom or habit. That can happen when other participants grow older or move away, or it can happen when you grow away from the origin of the practice.

If you identify a ritual that is diseased or dead, you could simply drop out of it. But it might be worth asking: what value did it once have, or should it have had? Maybe you can replace the old ritual with a better one.

## *Making rituals*

A ritual is anything you want it to be. And it turns out that Americans are amazingly creative at devising new rituals to adapt to the pressures on their changing lives. In the following paragraphs I sketch just a few of the possibilities, in order to encourage you to apply your own creativity.

### *Personal rituals*

You surely have developed a personal set of daily, weekly, and seasonal habits that give structure to the progression of time. Make a list of these. Do you always start your workdays the same way? Your weekend days? Do you end every day the same way? Do you treat Super Bowl Sunday as a holy day of obligation (to use a Catholic term)? Or the weekend of the NCAA Basketball Final Four?

Having made the list, consider whether you would enjoy adding symbolic depth to one or more of these habits so as to make a ritual of it. Robert Fulghum writes eloquently about the benefits of making rituals out of your getting-up and going-to-bed times<sup>4</sup>. He says we reconnect to our own faces and bodies each morning in the mirror. A couple can make a ritual based on the old saying "never go to bed on your anger," agreeing to make at least a truce, if not a complete resolution, of any quarrel before turning out the light. People of either gender can profitably make a ritual of a weekly self-

exam for cancer (your doctor can surely give you a pamphlet showing how).

Perhaps you take a shower every morning before dressing. What if your shower could wash away not only odor and dandruff, but stupidity, or clumsiness, or some other personal quality you'd like to have less of? It can't really do that, but there's a part of our subconscious that reacts to *intention* as if it was *action*. So, as you wash yourself, you could think: "May it be that my stupidity (or whatever weakness) washes away with these soapsuds, and that clarity (or whatever good quality) soaks in with this water." And see if you don't feel better about yourself and the upcoming day after a ritual shower<sup>5</sup>.

Any regular occasion to get outdoors can become a ritual of connecting to the round of the seasons: the smell and feel of the air and the look of the sky and the trees or streets. Such occasions include daily dog-walks, runs, or bike rides.

And be sure to look over those seasonal occasions that advertisers are so eager to have you participate in. Do these holidays have little meaning for you? Get together with your family and friends and design a holiday that does have meaning, a holiday that has a genuine claim on your assent. There are plenty of resources in print and on the internet to give you ideas on how to create a simpler, more frugal, and perhaps more meaningful Christmas<sup>6</sup>. The tiny minority of people who are into pagan and Wiccan revivals have begun to create celebrations around the winter solstice; and this is too good an idea to leave only to them.

The four corners of the Solar year — the longest night on December 21st, the longest day on June 21st<sup>7</sup>, and the equinoxes on March 20 and September 21 — can be the anchors for new family celebrations that substitute for worn-out, commercialized occasions. You could create a Yule celebration for December 21st, one that need not include the exchange of gifts. You could inaugurate an annual Long Twilight Picnic for midsummer. And the equinoxes are the times to celebrate winter's end and summer's end.

One good use for such new, equinoctial celebrations would be to replace and revitalize the worn-out custom of making new-year's resolutions. Instead of making resolutions once a year, you could make more limited resolutions specifically for the summer ahead (at Wintersend, March 20th) or for the winter ahead (at Summersend,

September 21). It is much more likely that a resolution you make for the six months of a season will actually be carried out, don't you think? You could make it a part of each of these celebrations that you recall the resolution you made at the last one, and celebrate whatever success you had with it. These times are nicely coordinated to the school year, so they might work well for families.

### *Rituals of family and friends*

Rituals lubricate the awkwardness of coming together with friends, family, and community. First of all, the mere fact that a ritual repeats — whether it's Family Sit-Down Sunday Dinner or Monday Night Football At The Sports Bar — eliminates a host of logistic problems. Everyone involved knows the meeting time and place, and knows that they are expected. There is no need for telephone messages and comparing datebooks and saying "no, that isn't good for me, can we do it Wednesday?" It isn't easy to get a regular event established, but once it is established, the event owns its slot on every participant's day planner or electronic organizer. (The major holidays already own their calendar spots.)

Second, the ritual gives everyone a role to play and something to do. This removes a lot of stress. Nothing is emotionally tougher than walking into an ill-defined group where you have to invent your role on the fly. Take the hypothetical Family Sit-Down Dinner (which needn't be held on Sunday; you can designate any meal of the week as a special time at which everyone must show up and sit down to eat). Whatever else it may be, it is a meal, and there is the shared activity of serving and eating. Even if you are in a total adolescent snit, there is at least something to do (eat) and something to look at besides the other people (your plate)<sup>8</sup>. In the standard Christmas ritual, the giving and opening of presents serve much the same function: giving everyone involved defined roles to play.

All that said, the standard rituals fail some of us. Maybe you are geographically isolated from, or estranged from, or grown beyond, the people you used to meet with. Maybe your family has been disrupted by death or divorce. Or maybe the ritual occasions have simply lost meaning for you.

Very well: Invent some new ones. I can do no better for you than to recommend Susan Lieberman's *New Traditions* (Lieberman 1991), a delightful collection of things that real people have done to invent

new rituals of bonding between themselves and their families and friends. Here are a few of the creative ideas Lieberman recorded from real people:

- The great neighborhood flag football game: neighbors of all ages meet at the school playground Thanksgiving morning (it could as well be New Year's day or Super Bowl Sunday) to play a magnificently disorganized game of football. Everyone gets to play, even toddlers; those not playing, cheer. The organizing families bring doughnuts and cider; then everyone goes home red-cheeked and panting to their own celebrations.
- Single Mothers' Day Picnic: a group of single mothers (could equally be single fathers on Fathers' Day) feel they, too, deserve a celebration (damn it), so they organize and host their own Mothers' Day picnic (could as well be a brunch or any other sort of get-together), featuring games, food, shared kid-minding.
- Singles eating together: like the wonderfully-named ROMEO (Retired Old Men Eating Out) club, or the group of thirty-somethings who meet for breakfast in a diner before work one day a week, any collection of single friends can stay in touch by scheduling a regular meal together.
- Breakfast Out With Daddy: in a family with several kids competing for attention, father sets up the custom of taking each child in turn out to a restaurant for breakfast on Sunday morning. Child gets father's undivided attention for a couple of hours; father stays in touch with each child as a person.
- Family Circular Letter: reviving a very old custom, a family keeps an envelope moving around a circle of geographically-separated members. Rules: must not hold the letter more than ten days; must add a sheet of your current news. (Don't even *think* there could be an email equivalent!)

In these and other examples, a person who feels a need for companionship or community establishes a simple, enjoyable, repeated occasion. The emotional atmosphere of such a ritual need not be solemn. For all but rituals of grief, it's perfectly fine to be light-hearted, even giddy. And there's no reason to be ashamed of any particular social status; in fact, if you are divorced, or unmarried, or retired, you can make that a theme of the occasion.

### *Rituals of grief and loss*

Conventional funerals deal fairly well with the occasion of the death of an adult, and mortuaries and funeral homes are ready and willing to help you organize one, for a price. But there are other occasions of loss that demand to be recognized in some way.

For example, there is no conventional funeral ceremony for a pregnancy that ends early, although this is a common tragedy<sup>9</sup>. A newspaper article<sup>10</sup> describes the way several families formalized their grief on these occasions. One couple ceremoniously planted trees to represent the children that weren't born. One couple began lighting a candle each day, at first "to light the darkness" they felt; but as they continued the daily ritual they began to see it as something "lighting their way forward."

Again, there is no conventional ritual to help us externalize our grief at the termination of a marriage or love affair — or indeed the end of any other process that fails, after having involved us deeply for a long time. I can remember the dismal, inconclusive ending of a software project that had consumed me and my coworkers for more than a year: it was wound up and unceremoniously shelved without being shipped, and we all moved on to other jobs.

Barbara Biziou spells out recipes for some rituals of termination and loss<sup>11</sup>. There are several common features to these rituals:

- Assemble ritual objects that strongly represent the failed relationship. (Be sensible, use pictures of valuables and copies of legal documents, not the originals.)
- With ceremony and formality, bring to mind the best features of the relationship and express them; for example, by writing a letter to the lost love, or by standing in front of a picture and reciting aloud the good things that you want to remember.
- Bring the ritual objects together and ceremonially destroy them: burn them (in a suitably fire-safe container), bury them (in a nice box, it's dreary to just drop things in a hole), or cast them into the sea (again, in a box, weighted to sink quickly).
- Ceremonially separate yourself from grief: wash your hands, as Jews do when leaving a cemetery; or shed a garment, or extinguish a candle, or move to another part of the ritual space.

- If others are taking part, share food and drink to celebrate the start of a new chapter.

From this meta-recipe you can compile a private or group ritual to formalize grief over almost any loss. For example, here's how my old programming group might have mourned our cancelled project.

The group would have been instructed to meet at a local picnic area, each bringing a sheet or two of paper that symbolized their best work on the project: the prologue of a module of code, cover of a test plan, a beta-test announcement. The project manager would have preceded them and built a good fire in a fireplace (defining the ritual space). After welcoming the group and having them assemble on one side of the fire, the manager would have invited each person in turn to step forward and say a few words about what he or she had learned from the project. Then each person would consign their symbolic paper to the flames and step to the other side of the space. The manager would go last, saying gracious words about what a wonderful group they'd been, and burning a copy of the organization chart. Then all would retire to a restaurant for lunch to talk about employment opportunities.

A special form of grief is personal regret over evils done — grief at having cruelly, or selfishly, or stupidly, harmed someone else. You could use this same meta-recipe to construct a private ritual of expiation — a ceremony in which you privately, but aloud, confess the damage you did and commit to whatever you plan to do to atone or amend.

### *Rituals of transition*

Life transitions are happy/sad moments: an old life dies, and deserves to be mourned; simultaneously a new life starts, and its possibilities need to be brought to mind and celebrated. There are conventional rituals of transition; the most common are graduation ceremonies and weddings. There's not much to be done about graduation ceremonies, except to apply the imagination of family and friends to find ways to supplement them with a meaningful celebration. (At Stanford, taking part in the Wacky Walk means more to a lot of graduates than all the speeches.) Fulghum's chapter on weddings<sup>4</sup> makes very clear the pitfalls and rewards of designing your own wedding ceremony.

There are many other transitions that deserve celebration. Barbara Kato details some of the homemade rituals mothers and daughters have designed to honor a girl's first menstruation<sup>12</sup>. Beck and Metrick describe a simple and affecting family ritual that would serve to honor puberty in an adolescent of either gender<sup>13</sup>. The teen spends time alone, sorting possessions into three boxes: old things no longer needed; old things that are keepsakes; and things that represent his or her future self. Meanwhile, other family members select gifts for the third box. When ready, the teen invites the family into his or her room, and shows and describes the things in each box. The family offer their own additions to the third box and verbal good wishes. All retire to the kitchen for celebratory ice cream (or whatever).

Susan Lieberman makes the point that when someone leaves home — to go to school, to move into an apartment, to join the military, even to go to summer camp — the occasion needs to be marked with more ceremony than the usual awkward handshakes and sniffly hugs.

Robert Fulghum describes a nice ceremony for a transition that is rarely marked in our culture: bringing a new baby home to the neighborhood. After all, the neighbors will have more direct influence on this child's formation than will its blood relatives that live far away, so the neighbors might as well be formally introduced. However, new parents are usually not up to the task of planning and hosting any kind of party, so this is something that needs to be set up by the neighbors. Fulghum's ritual centers on a "treasure box," a box of symbolic gifts to be sealed and put away until the new child is 18, or 21, or old enough to leave home. The neighbors bring pictures, notes, or whatever they like to be sealed up in the box. The baby and mother are formally welcomed by all, and food is shared.

## *Summary*

Ritual acts permeate our private and our public lives. We use ritual to assuage our grief, to help us bond as families and friends, to lend stability and shape to the cycles of life, and to come to terms with life transitions. Believers receive a useful (but not a complete) set of rituals for grief and transitions. American consumer culture presses

many more on us in order to make us better consumers. But ritual is easy to create. Once we are aware of the role that ritual plays in our lives, we can inventory the rituals we have adopted without thinking, and can add new rituals that meet our needs.