

Creating and Altering Rituals

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During this COVID-19 pandemic many people have had to give up important shared rituals—graduation ceremonies, long-awaited concerts, religious services, opening day baseball, and even funerals. The loss, while necessary, is profound.

No one knows exactly how forgoing shared rituals will affect us individually or as a society. However, science does give us some clues. By understanding the purpose of shared rituals, we can try to preserve their intent and create a sense of shared emotion, connection, and transcendence.

Why We Have Shared Rituals

Shared rituals play an important role in our psyches, according to social psychologist Shira Gabriel. Her research suggests that rituals—choreographed events that produce an emotionally laden experience—create a feeling of unity and sacredness that bonds us together with others.

“Rituals give us a feeling of going beyond the ordinary—of having a moment that transcends that, turning events into something special and meaningful,” says Gabriel. This is because when we participate in a ritual, we experience a sort of emotional contagion that Émile Durkheim called “collective effervescence.” The energy in these rituals increase our sense of commonality (even with strangers) and make us feel we are part of a larger community. She also says that we often create shared rituals when we go through important life transitions, too, because they mark the passage of time as sacred. Weddings, funerals, and graduations, for example, all give us a sense of meaning, which makes forgoing them so hard.

“There’s no doubt that people are going to grieve and are going to feel sad about the loss of what they had planned,” she says. Losing out on shared rituals may also be difficult for society at large, Randall research has suggested that when people stop gathering together to share emotional experiences, their sense of oneness tends to dissipate. But Gabriel research findings suggest that collective effervescence and social solidarity don’t happen only during big events; they can occur in everyday interactions, too, like watching TV together or attending an interesting lecture. “Everyday moments of collective effervescence can make us feel more connected to others and make us feel as if our life has meaning,”

says Gabriel. "Our research suggests that people who experience these things a lot are likely to be happier and feel less anxious and depressed."

This means we can create that uplift more easily than we might think. So does that mean the coronavirus outbreak, especially given the need for "social distancing", a big event involving the whole world will make "everybody focus on the same thing and feel the same emotions," which creates a sense of solidarity? But, at the same time, however, we lose face-to-face interaction with other people. The other question then is can phone conversations, and Zoom meetings make up for that loss?

I would say the answer is sort of a yes, but to a weaker degree, because there is something special about in-person ritual.

How Ancient Chinese Philosophers View Rituals

The term ritual has taken on connotations of mindless repetition. We tend to think of ritual as something that tells us what to do, not as something transformative. Which is unfortunate given the importance of rituals in everyday life. Rituals can be a healthy routine of activity that symbolize and facilitate important dimensions of experience.

Confucius led us to a radically new vision of exactly what ritual can do. For Confucius everything began with the question, "How are you living in your life on a daily basis?" The reason these daily moments are important is because, as we will see, they are the means which we can become a different and better person.

Chinese philosophers saw the world as consisting of an endless series of fragmented messy encounters. This worldview emerged for the notion that all aspects of human life are governed by emotions including the endless human interactions that take place. All living things have tendencies to respond to things in a certain way, like flower tends to lean toward the sun, butterflies seek out flowers. Human beings have dispositions too, we respond emotionally to other people. Constantly our emotions are being drawn out from us, our feelings sway back and forth depending on what we encounter. When we encounter something pleasurable, we feel pleasure, toxic relationship makes us feel despair, rivalry with a neighbor arouses our jealousy. We are pulled to and fro emotionally. And we find ourselves experiencing certain emotions more often than we do others. And our responses become patterned habits. Every one of us live in a fragmented world, are buffeted about endlessly by disparate events and reacting passively.

However, we can refine the way we react to create pockets of order. It simply means cultivating our emotions so that we internalize better ways of responding to others, to move from a state where we just randomly respond to things emotionally, immediate emotional reaction (Chinese terminology “qing”) to a state where we are able to respond with propriety, in ways that we have cultivated (“yi”). We do this through ritual.

Most of us have certain “rituals”. Morning cup of coffee, weekly family dinner with parents, or piggyback ride for the kids at bedtime, we consider these moments important as they give our lives meaning and bond us to our loved one. In Confucius teachings these are potential rituals. Confucius defines rituals in a new and provocative way. Rituals in Confucius sense are transformative, they allow us to become a different person for a moment. They create a short-lived alternate reality that returns us to our regular life slightly altered. For a brief moment, we are living in an “as-if” world.

Take an example of greeting someone we’ve a conflict with, we share a more civil side of ourselves and break the pattern of disagreement. For this brief moment we experience different relationships with those around us. Or when we are feeling a bit down, taking a moment to say hi to another person can interrupt a cycle of negative emotion. But if we go through life performing most social conventions by routine - we use different greetings, ask different sorts of questions and use different tones when talking to different people - they lose their power to become rituals that can profoundly change us. In order for us to change we must become aware that breaking from our normal ways of being is what makes it possible to develop a different side of ourselves.

In the *Analects*, Confucius is asked about ancestor worship. He says that the ritual is absolutely necessary but that it makes no difference whether the spirits are participating or not. We sacrifice to them “as-if” they are there. And we must participate in the ritual fully. If we do not, it is “as-if” we did not sacrifice.

In real life, relationships are imperfect and fraught, ritual moves us from this troubled world of relationships and creates a space, a ritual space, in which ideal relationships can be forged. For Confucius, ritual was essential because of what it can do for the people performing it. Family members needed to make the sacrifice because acting “as-if” the ancestors were there brought about change to themselves. It also changes the feelings of the living towards one another. Within the ritual household unrest, sibling rivalry, everyone plays their new familial roles “as-if” there were no discord. Of course, ritual always ends. The moment family members walk out of the ritual space, they are in the messy

world again, and the pieces fall apart once more. But gradually by repeating the rituals again and again and re-creating healthier connections, the improved relationship among members would begin to manifest more in daily life.

Let's look at a therapist office, where people come to us to talk about their troubles during a set period of time. Although many of us assume this is helpful as we are slowly uncovering who we really are, from a Confucius standpoint, the greater benefit comes from the fact that we have set up a ritual space in which we take on "as-if" roles that we cannot play outside. Therapy helps break the patterns that dominate our lives, and through the interactions between us, the therapist and the patient, it allows us to construct a different way of relating to others. But inevitably we fall back to old patterns outside the therapist's office. So, patient goes to therapy weekly and keep on practicing breaking those old patterns and through repetition slowly develop new ways of interacting and eventually construct a different and better self.

How Confucius Vision of "As-If" Ritual Can Be A Valuable Complement to Psychotherapy

When I am working with patients who feel that they have lost their balance, I often asked them to describe their daily and weekly routines in great detail. Their responses give me a better idea of the degree of structure or order in their lives. Many individuals are unaware of having developed mundane routines. Although I am asking for details, my primary interest is in their overall pattern of changing and unchanging activities.

An awareness of that pattern may be important in later phase of my work with them. If they seem unaware of what they do regularly, I ask them to pay attention to their activities and write them down. For some patients I may also recommend a temporary increase in the regularity with which they do things. I may also suggest that they introduce new rituals into their routine. For example, if they are leading a supercharged lifestyle, the ritual may be to pause breathe or release breathe once an hour. Or if the patients are feeling overwhelmed by sudden changes, I may recommend that they clean or organise something familiar. The sense of agency and order that comes from this is often calming.

I employ role playing with my patients quite frequently. Sometimes it involves just a brief enactment of a scene from their life. An example would be an unsatisfactory interaction with their spouse. Sometimes I surprise them with challenges they don't expect. If they are thrown off balance it provides them with

the opportunity to practice their responses and centering skills. Sometimes I switch roles with my patients, with them assuming my therapist chairs and I theirs. My goal is to provide them with the opportunities of stepping out of their patient role and for me to enter into their frame of experiencing. Role plays can be helpful in rehearsing life challenges. They can also add resolution to situations that are physically difficult. Our patient may be able to express strong feelings to a parent or spouse who is no longer alive or available for dialogue.

There is much more to say about role playing “as-if”. I believe that role playing is an extremely valuable technique for helping the movement from realm of just words, talking about life problems, to the realm of feeling and action, although in a hypothetical situation. Courage, action in the presence of fear, creativity and imagination are at the heart of role playing. One particularly powerful role play technique I like, is George Kelly’s fixed-role therapy. In this “fixed-role” the patient is first asked to write a third person character sketch of himself. It is a sketch that might have been written by an intimate friend who knows the patient extremely well. The sketch is written as if the patient were going to be portrayed as the principal character in a play. “The object is to see how he structure himself.” After the patient submits this sketch, the therapist studies it and prepares what is an enactment sketch.

This is a character sketch of a fictional person who shares many characteristics with the patient—but is different in at least one important dimension. The fictional character is not the patient’s psychological opposite, but he is importantly different. The difference may be intentionally drawn from the patient’s self- portrait—but is more often within a dimension that the patient has not even mentioned in his self-characterization.

The patient is asked to read the enactment sketch in session and his reaction is closely monitored. The patient is asked two questions: 1) whether he feels this other character seems genuine, and 2) whether this person is someone he would like to know. If his response is yes to both questions, he is asked to make an important time limited commitment in the form of a secret personal experiment. It is important that this experiment begin immediately in session. Importantly, the patient does not inform anyone including his spouse about the experiment. The enactment would simply become an exercise in acting if others were aware of it. When the patient receives feedback that he seems to be acting differently or strangely, it means that he is successful in his enactment.

The patient is asked to pretend that his own identity has gone on a brief holiday and in its place this alternate character has materialized. The patient is asked to enact as best as he can twenty four hours a

day, all that the alternate character might do, say or think. During this time, at least three therapy sessions per week are scheduled so that the patient and therapist can rehearse the enactment of the alternate character and evaluate the impact it is having. The therapist is careful to protect and respect the integrity of the patient "real self" which is on an imaginary holiday. This avoids the resistance that might be evoked by a direct challenge to the patient identity. Nor is the alternate character presented as how the patient should be. The enacted character is an experiment of being different.

In this temporary "fixed role", the patients rehearse for and enacts five successive levels of social activities. (1) interactions with a teacher or supervisor (2) interactions with peers (3) interactions with spouse or intimate others (4) interactions with parents or their equivalents and (5) interactions in situations involving religion or religious experience. This sequence is intended to be progressively more challenging and therapy sessions every other day are designed to offer support and rehearsal for these increasing demands.

Eventually the patient's "former self" must return and an integrative process begins. Honoring the processes that create "self-hood," the therapist emphasizes that it is the old self that should evaluate what has happened and choose which direction to go. Perhaps the patient sees new possibilities and some of the patterns and practiced in the form of the alternate character is worthy of continued exploration. The goal of this experiment, with a likable genuine but slightly different person, is to realize his innermost personality is something he creates as he goes along, rather than something he discovers lurking in his insides or has been imposed upon him.

What the Western world defines as true self is actually patterns of continuous responses to people and the world. Patterns that have built over time. For example, you might think that you are the kind of person who get angry easily. However, it is more likely you have become the kind of person who get angry over minor things because of how you interacted with people for years. Not because you are in fact such a person.

Remember the world is fragmented, and we are too. Instead of thinking of ourselves as one single unified self, we are trying to discover through self-reflection, we could think of ourselves as complex assortments of emotions, desires and traits that often pull us in different and contradictory ways. Suppose you have been having a conflict with your spouse. The problem between two of you may not be that your personalities are incompatible. It may be that your communication has fallen into a pattern. You are stuck in your roles and so is your spouse. Neither of you feels good about this but you

can't see any way out. Remember your spouse is not static or unchanging. Your spouse is a complex, multifaceted person. Think through what you can say to elicit other sides of your spouse and then behave "as-if" you are speaking to those sides of your spouse. How could you alter the things you say or the tone of your voice to appeal to your spouse other side?

Like the above "as-if" roles play, a Confucian approach would be to note the patterns and work actively to shift them. Over time, you internalize a more constructive way of acting instead of being led by undisciplined emotional reactions. Little by little you develop parts of yourself you never knew existed and become a better person.

Our patterned behaviours and rote habits, not rituals, are what really dictate our lives and get in the way of caring for other people. But through doing "as-if" rituals that break these patterns, we gain the ability to be good to those around us. This is "ren", or a sensibility of goodness.

Creating Rituals

Creating rituals just for ourselves can help alleviate grief and make us feel less out of control, which could help now when the world seems so uncertain. If you can design a ritual that is meaningful, that it touches your heart or brings someone to mind or gives you a sense of your own purpose, all the better. Look beyond formalized rituals to everyday opportunities to share positive emotions and a sense of solidarity from a distance.

"I love you", one of the most common phrase people in intimate relationships construct new realities with. Couples who are in the habit of saying this probably do not feel loving every second of the day. They certainly have a variety of complicated feelings towards their partner from time to time. But there is a greater good in nurturing the relationship through such rituals that let them break from reality and enter a space where it is "as if" they do love each other at every moment. At the moment when they express their love in an "as-if" way, they are really doing it. Saying "I love you" these "as-if" moments create moments of connection throughout the day that build up slowly but no less dramatically over time.

Rather than start with great philosophical questions, Confucius start with the fundamental question of "How are you living your life on a daily basis?" Book 10 of the *Analects* is filled with Confucius's everyday habits. He understood that minor actions such as arranging the place where people would sit with him would create a different environment that could affect them profoundly. Dinner table ritual could also create a break that allows everyone to enter a different mode. Dinner time routines when we set the

table, perhaps laying out placemats, napkins, lighting candles, we step out of our regular lives and create an alternate reality for ourselves and those with us. Even if it has been a stressful day or if there's been conflict, nobody needs to declare "Okay, it's time to stop fighting and relax now." The dinner table ritual simply creates that break. But we seldom allow ourselves to engage in rituals in a Confucian way, to act "as-if". We follow so many social norms and conventions and when we are blind to the value of the possible rituals that pervade our lives, we end up performing them by rote. This may be a surprising way to think about ritual or change in general.

Let's look at playing a simple game of hide-and-seek with a child. When you hide in a place so that the child can easily find you, she laughs with glee upon finding you and you enthusiastically repeat the game again and again. You are not just engaging in playing a lighthearted game. The game is an "as-if" ritual. The two of you are participating in a ritual by taking on a shift in roles that diverge from the usual ones. The child normally vulnerable, gets to play a powerful person who outwitted an adult by finding him. The adult gets to play at being a bumbling person so inept that he can't even find a good hiding place. Of course, the child knows that the adult knows that the child can see him, but the ritual is that they are playing "as-if" the child was able to outsmart him. A ritual that allows you to construct a new reality.

The role reversal breaks their pattern. The child gets to experience and remember a feeling of competence. The adult has now played at being fallible and vulnerable. The role helps to develop the more complex and the nuanced sides of himself that he can take with him to other situations. The key is to be conscious that they are pretending and together they have entered an alternate reality. If they can do this the game can cultivate a mutually joyful and respectful relationship. These repeated rituals will develop aspects of each of them that eventually enhance other relationships in both their lives.

The ordinary "as-if" rituals are the means by which we imagine new realities and over time construct new worlds.

How to Make New Rituals with Others During Social Distancing

Sheltering in place could also inspire people to create alternative events to mark special occasions, such as a Zoom dance party to celebrate a graduation, which may even end up being more memorable than what was originally planned. Or special event such as online Coffeehouse for Turbulence Times, where people can "stop by" and meet others for an hour of music, laughter, and camaraderie. You can just bring yourself or bring something to share (a poem, song, humor, story, recipe, or whatever you'd like to share).

Jan Stanley, who works as a celebrant—someone who designs rituals for weddings and funerals—says that it’s not too hard to create rituals online if you keep certain things in mind. She suggests that you:

- Ask people to bring to their online gathering something symbolic to share, like a candle to light, a memory or story, a picture, or a poem. Getting people to contribute in that way can help create a sense of oneness.
- Mark the moment by having someone provide an opening statement that designates the beginning of any ritual and explains the purpose of being there. That sets the tone and makes people realize that this is a special moment in time and not just another online meeting.
- Create emotional highs, perhaps using music, dancing, poetry, moments of silence, or something else with high emotional resonance to augment the experience.
- Always have a distinct ending that includes an emotional peak, because people tend to remember an event better that way.

Though an online ritual may lack some of the power of an in-person ritual, says Stanley, it still has value. Even doing rituals alone can be useful, she adds, if it’s meaningful.

But beyond the cleverness required by coming up with novel rituals it is often useful to establish a daily routine or ritual that is associated with something that does not change. Example include practicing meditation or prayer first thing in the morning, using sunset or bedtime as a signal for comforting contemplation.

A final thought on ritual. Because of limited resources, it is impossible for everyone to satisfy their desires for material goods. What people can do is decide whether to act on a desire or not. Ritual also teaches people to channel, moderate, and in some cases transform their desires so they can satisfy them in appropriate ways. When it is right to do so one satisfies them, and when that is not possible one moderates them. This allows both the partial satisfaction of desires and the maintenance of social harmony. All of this is made possible by the ritual principles of the “Way”, when the alternative is the chaos of the state of nature.

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