

February 20, 2005 QUUF 9:15 and 11:15  
 Sacred Patterns, The everyday rituals that shape our lives  
 Peggy Albers

### Call to Worship

Look to this day!  
 For it is life, the very life of life.  
 In its brief course lie all the verities and realities of your existence:  
 The bliss of growth,  
 The glory of action,  
 The splendor of beauty;  
 For yesterday is but a dream,  
 And tomorrow is only a vision;  
 But today, well lived, makes every yesterday  
 A dream of happiness  
 And every tomorrow a vision of hope.  
 Look well, therefore, to this day.

### Responsive Reading

To Live Deliberately by Henry David Thoreau

MINISTER: Why should we live in such a hurry and waste of life?

CONGREGATION: We are determined to be starved before we are hungry.

MINISTER: I wish to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life.

CONGREGATION: I wish to learn what life has to teach, and not, when I come to die, discover that I have not lived.

MINISTER: I do not wish to live what is not life, living is so dear,

CONGREGATION: Nor do I wish to practice resignation, unless it is quite necessary.

MINISTER: I wish to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life,

CONGREGATION: I want to cut a broad swath, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms.

MINISTER: If it proves to be mean, then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world;

CONGREGATION: Or if it is sublime, to know it by experience, and to be able to give a true account of it.

### A Time for All Ages (Children come forward)

Do any of you have birthdays?

How many people do something special for your birthday?

How many people have a cake?

Birthdays are special times to celebrate, and everyone alive has one, every year!

Today we are going to talk about big celebrations like birthdays, which we celebrate because someone has changed, and also things we do every day. We call them rituals, or habits, and they remind us to celebrate, and to be thankful.

Birthdays happen once a year, but how about something we do more often?

Who here goes to bed every night?

What do you do every night to get ready? Brush teeth

Do you do this in a special place? At the sink. Would it be silly to brush your teeth in the closet or living room? The bathroom is a special place to brush teeth because it has special stuff in it for teeth brushing (sink)

Do you look in the mirror? What do you see?

Do you look the same or different?

What's different – new or missing teeth, Can you tell that you are taller?

Wrinkles (maybe you are too young to have them)

When you get into bed, what usually happens? Story? Someone says goodnight and tucks you in? How do you feel when this happens?

I think about the day

The things and places and people I am thankful for –

The things that didn't go well – what can I do tomorrow to make it better – Tell someone I'm sorry if I hurt their feelings.

Look forward to a good night's sleep and hope for a great new day tomorrow, and think about what I can do to make it happen.

Be glad that I am alive!

One ritual we do here a church every week is to have you come up here, then we make an arch and sing you out with "Go Now in Peace". This is a way that the grownups here at QUUF can show that you are loved and that we care for you. We really do want to have "the spirit of love surround you", and when we make the arch, and you go under it, you are really surrounded by this love!

Reading from From Beginning to End: The Rituals of Our Lives by Robert Fulghum

Several of our members, including our minister Bruce Bode, are in Portland, Oregon this weekend, attending the Annual General Meeting of the UUA's Pacific Northwest District. Robert Fulghum, is the keynote speaker for this assembly, and his book From Beginning to End, the Rituals of Our Lives is the major inspiration my talk today. This morning you can experience some of Fulghum's wit and humor, filtered through some of my experiences with ritual. In this way we can join our fellow Unitarian Universalists in Portland in spirit, if not in the flesh.

I told Bruce that before Robert Fulghum's "All I Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten" was published, Lucille Watson, a founding mother of this congregation, arranged for the author, to speak to this Fellowship at the Tri-Area Community Center. Fulghum was the former minister of the Edmonds UU Church,. He came, on the ferry, with his guitar, and his sermon included music. So perhaps this weekend in Portland, Bruce can arrange his return visit, and we will all get the chance to hear him first-hand.

The following is from his book on rituals.

*To be human is to be religious.*

Every human being asks the elemental religious questions: Who am I? What am I doing here? Where did I come from before birth and what happens after I die? What's right and wrong and how do I know? What is the meaning of life, and how do I give meaning to my life? How do I account for the awesome, mysterious majesty of the universe, and what's my place in the scheme of things?

These questions are not provided by society or the church – they first rise out of the deep inner space of each person. And it has been so since the beginning of human consciousness.

*To be religious is to be mindful.*

When careful attention is given to these human questions, we find answers and hold to those answers with faith and devotion, thereby making them sacred to us. The asking and answering process itself sanctifies existence, and we repeat the process lifelong. Ritual is one name we give this repetition.

*Our lives are endless ritual.*

Patterns of repetition govern each day, week, year, and lifetime. “Personal habits” is one term we use to describe the most common of these repeated patterns. But I say these habits are sacred because they give deliberate structure to our lives. Structure gives us a sense of security. And that sense of security is the ground of meaning.

Rituals flow *from* the life of the individual *into* the church.

The rituals of the church are the organized, communal form of the needs and patterns of the life of the individual. Communal activity is one more way of supporting meaningful structure in the life of an individual.

The ritual moments of life mark changes from moment to moment, day to day, year to year, and from one stage of being to another. The conscious acknowledgements of these changes are called rites of passage. Sometimes we celebrate in public, sometimes in private, and, most often, in secret. Sometimes we are aware of the importance of the moment and at other times its importance is established later, through the ritual of remembering.

The rituals are cairns marking the path behind us and the path ahead of us. Without them we lose our way.

Rituals refer to two kinds of acts: those things we do for the first time that, in fact, have been done by the human race again and again forever – and those patterns that we ourselves repeat again and again because they bring structure and meaning to our individual and collective lives.

A consideration of human and personal history will remind us that rituals are not set in concrete – that public forms, private celebrations and even secret acts get modified over time to more nearly satisfy changing needs. This re-formation comes when we choose or are forced to consider the patterns of our lives.

### Sermon: Sacred Patterns: The everyday rituals that shape our lives

It may seem strange to be hearing about ritual in a Unitarian Universalist Fellowship. Many people have joined UU churches because of our de-emphasis on ritual. Often, they have come here from other churches whose rituals have become meaningless to them. The secular humanist movement in Unitarian Universalism, and our principles of acceptance of individuals and a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, make it more difficult to incorporate formal rituals into our church services. But I see this as a good thing – for it helps us examine and distill our rituals, so that they do have meaning.

When the children leave the sanctuary every week, to our united voices, and under our arched arms, they truly do go in peace, and are surrounded by the spirit of our love.

Rituals are used by people to mark significant events, raising these moments up above the mundane of everyday life, and bringing meaning into their lives. A ritual is a tangible happening that reconnects people to each other, to their past or heritage, and at their most profound level, to the wider human family and world.

I found a list of ten good things rituals do for children, and, in looking them over, it seemed to me that if they were good for children, they were good for adults, too.

Rituals:

- Impart a sense of identity
- Provide comfort and security
- Help to navigate change
- Teach values
- Teach practical skills
- Solve problems
- Keep alive a sense of departed family members
- Pass on ethnic or religious heritage
- Help heal from loss or trauma
- Generate wonderful memories

When we think of rituals, grandiose, transforming events come to mind – Birthdays, Weddings, Memorials, Graduations. These are the rites of passages that mark major life changes. The participants cross a threshold, and emerge changed. This transformation happens publicly and internally. A path is created, well worn by humans for thousands of years, on which the participants travel, with the blessing of the community. On this familiar yet unique journey, the travelers are transformed on the inside, also.

This is one of the reasons I love to go to high school graduations, where one can witness the awesome moment when dozens, hundreds, or, I suppose thousands of children turn into adults, shedding their past selves, and shouldering the mantle of adulthood, with its burdens of independence, responsibility, and potential and unlimited possibilities. I try to soak as much of that hopeful energy as I can! Many high schools seniors are surprised at what a powerful experience this turns out to be for them.

In 1990, several members of this congregation, including Wendell Stout, recognized a need for QUUF, as a religious community, to be able to legally conduct weddings and memorial services – to marry and bury. The congregation voted to authorize Karen Frank, Everett Whealdon and myself to do this. Since then, I have officiated at about 80 weddings, child dedications, building dedications, and memorial services – mostly weddings. Over the years, the elements of a successful ritual ceremony have been revealed to me. I've identified the following 5 essential ingredients. All of these elements are bound by intention, or, as the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh says, mindfulness.

1. The first element is a sacred space. We can easily recognize a space that has been infused by a sense of the holy. Repeated past connections with a presence greater than ourselves seems to hang in the air, to emanate from the walls. Sometimes, as in a church, religious symbols hold this sense of sacredness. In others, sacredness can be evoked by a few simple objects. And, in a natural setting, holiness is ever present. As we enter into these spaces, we add to, and absorb this feeling, by our intent, or mindfulness.

2. The second element I call Special Powers. As the convener and celebrant at a wedding, I take on the role of representative of this fellowship, acknowledging the covenant and trust that has been bestowed upon me by the congregation, and by the state. This gives me Special Powers. I used to downplay this, especially when people used to thank me for the beautiful weather at an outdoor wedding (as if!!!!), but now I acknowledge and assimilate this power. By facilitating the participants' connections with the mystery, and helping to set the moment apart from other activities, I can contribute to the success of the ritual. Once, after a wedding, the groom asked me how I managed to sprinkle magic dust over everyone! Again, intention is the true Special Power.
3. The third factor is - Symbolic elements. These elements are often very simple. We recognize them as rings, flowers, candles, water, gifts. They almost always symbolize the elements of water, fire, earth and air. These items are invested with greater meaning within the context of the ritual. For instance, in one wedding, the bride gave the groom a small wooden box filled with compost from their garden. She spoke of how their garden, like their relationship, grew from love tended with patient persistence, was endowed with basic elements, and was a place of transformation, sharing and renewal for both of them. This box of compost thus became infused with these attributes.
4. The fourth part is Physical Movement. In a transforming ritual, there is a beginning, a middle and an end. The participants move into the sacred space, do something in it, and then move out of it, changed. The movement in and out of the space helps set the moment apart from an ordinary moment. Ceremonial processions are a major part of rituals, and whether we are in the procession or witnessing it, we can experience the transformation. At the university my son attended, there are gates that open twice a year – in the fall for incoming freshmen, and in the spring for graduation. Not only do the graduating seniors and postgraduates exit through the gates, but the procession includes the entire faculty, in their academic robes and hats, and the alumni (it's also alumni weekend). For ritual procession, nothing beats a university!
5. The fifth element is participation by all. Nobody is a spectator, everyone participates, by standing, sitting, repeating words, singing, affirming, witnessing. At some weddings, the rings are passed around so that each person can hold and bless them. The witnesses also represent the connections with the larger community, and often those that are not present are invoked, thus bringing their spirits into the midst. By intentionally inviting those present to witness rather than just observe the ritual, it becomes meaningful to all.

In all 5 elements, nothing works without intention. Everyone present creates the ritual by focusing their presence and intention on the reason they happen to be at this particular place, at this particular time.

Fulghum quote:

“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.”

I have discovered that rituals can be glorious moments when hearts are open and amazing things happen. When, no matter how carefully things are planned, the unexpected arises and everything goes exactly as it is supposed to.

I could regale you with more stories of joyous and solemn ceremonies (some of you would recognize them!) but I wanted to address the other kind of ritual - not the ones that mark passages and transform but the ones that hold our lives together. In Fulghum's words: "These behaviors are regularly repeated because they serve a profound purpose – to affirm a deep sense of connection through action with the unnameable wonder and mystery of life."

Many rituals, from earliest human history, revolve around the seasons – planting and rebirth, harvest, rest and hibernation. There are seasonal celebrations in every culture. Each of us can quickly recall our own seasonal. Even in moments of personal darkness and despair, these repeated events remind us that the world is always turning toward the morning, moving us through the cycles of the seasons, and evoking memories of seasons past.

We can, and do, endow daily activities with a sense of sacredness.

My epiphany on this subject came several decades ago while standing at the sink doing dishes, undoubtedly a moment when enlightenment has hit many people. This dishwashing experience had all the elements of a sacred ritual.

A sacred place – a cabin in the woods, with a window looking into the forest, framed by a windowsill of treasures – beach rocks and shells, fir cones. (hold up basket of stuff)  
The sink is the vessel in which the ritual transformation takes place. I didn't bring my kitchen sink!

Symbolic items – handmade bowls and cups, my great-grandmother's china plates (hold up cup and blue plate. These represent perhaps our most basic ritual – eating). The 4 elements are also present – water; fire, which heats and transforms the water; earth (We wash the dishes when they are dirty, right?); and air, represented by our breath.

Everybody knows that the dish soap used expressly for this purpose contains Special Powers – it even says so on the container! ( hold up dish soap) And I had the special skills and garment needed to perform the ritual. (apron)

Physical Movement – The items to be transformed move from one place – the table – to another – the shelf, and are transformed – dirty to clean – in the sacred vessel, by the magic dish soap! (dish towel)

Participation by all – Well, everyone does the dishes over and over again. This is a ritual that I repeated myself, but it also connected me with the millions of other people who clean up after preparing and eating food.

At this moment, I saw that I was not scaling a mighty mountain, or painting a masterpiece, or saving the world single-handedly. I was washing the dishes. Again. This was my life. Dishes. Laundry. Getting firewood. Keeping the fire going. Being home. Going to work. I could discontentedly wish I was doing something else, perhaps more dramatic and exciting, or I could enjoy what I was doing at the moment. Since all these moments - this one, and the last

one – and the next one – equaled my life, it made a lot of sense to choose acceptance and enjoyment. After all, my life was full of things to celebrate and be thankful for. Why not celebrate and be grateful as much as possible?

The Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, in his book on meditation, The Miracle of Mindfulness, writes, “While washing the dishes, you might be thinking about the tea afterwards, and so try to get them out of the way as quickly as possible in order to sit and drink tea. But that means you are incapable of living during the time you are washing the dishes. When you are washing the dishes, washing the dishes must be the most important thing in your life. Just as when you’re drinking tea, drinking tea must be the most important thing in your life. Each act must be carried out in mindfulness. Each act is a rite, a ceremony.”

Linda Hogan writes, in Waking the Rake “There are human lessons to be learned here, in the work. Fritjof Capra wrote, ‘Doing work that has to be done over and over again helps us recognize the natural cycles of growth and decay, of birth and death, and thus become aware of the dynamic order of the universe.’ And it is true, in whatever we do, the brushing of hair, the cleaning of dishes, we begin to see the larger order of things. In this place, there is a constant coming to terms with the sacred place life occupies... What a marvel it is, the fine shape life takes in all of us.”

According to my son, who studied anthropology and ritual theater in college, ritual action actually reorganizes the social world (represented by the stacked, clean dishes) restoring psychic and social harmony. Of course, there are degrees to which one derives meaning from this particular ritual – dishwashing. Some of us are perfectly content to let the dishes stack up, while others need to restore order right away. One may say that there is a close link between one’s inner landscape and that of the kitchen counter.

My increased awareness of ritual patterns came about in that transformative phase of life – parenthood. When I was a mother of small children, my life seemed like an endless string of repetitive tasks - reading the same favorite stories, playing the same games, noticing and commenting on the same trees on our walks.

As many parents will agree, car games fit into this category. On trips out of town, our family of 4 played “Guess the Animal” – a version of 20 Questions. My daughter first started participating, at about age 3, and when it was her turn to choose the animal to be guessed, it would be her rabbit Fluffy – every time. So now, on the rare occasions that all 4 of us are in the car together, someone will announce, “Let’s play ‘Guess the Animal!’”, and the rest of us will shout, “It’s Fluffy!”, and we will all crack up. It’s not that it’s so funny, but at that moment we vividly recall her, in her car seat, so pleased with herself that she could participate. The original moment, a milestone in her development, has become ritualized by repetition and memory. And it is memory, which is perhaps our most powerful and personal ritual.

Again, Fulghum says; “Merging the needs of the child with your own needs leads to routine. Routine that enables essential human functions is the rootstock of ritual – lifelong especially if you look at what you’re doing from the child’s point of view. Sacred habits are being established.

Sleeping and waking, eating and bathing, getting dressed and undressed, talking and singing, holding and juggling, and, of course, eliminating body waste. From the child’s point of view,

this rhythmic existence is all there is to life. It's more than taking care of business; it is ritual. This is how the world goes round.

I know of few more fundamental secrets of child-rearing than this – that the parent understand that what may be routine chores for him or her are in fact all there is to the early life of the child. Respect for the ritual needs of the child leads to respect for the ritual patterns of the adult.”

Paul Jordan-Smith wrote about Repetition and Renewal in Parabola Magazine: “The discipline of the body, in standing or kneeling and more particularly through repetition, is critical to an understanding of how ritual repetition acts on the being of the participant. In our everyday state, our bodies, like our minds, exist just ‘anyhow’, seldom with any consistent direction, and with no natural sacred intention. We are not quiet – the chattering “monkey of the mind” sees to that – and we are not still, so the Silence from which all sound emanates, and the Stillness from which all movements flows finds no place in our ordinary being. The form of the ritual provides a kind of stability to which we can refer all relation, with God as well as among ourselves. One might say that it is the particular function of sacred ritual to establish a relation between our higher and lower natures, that they might properly serve one another.”

Earlier, I spoke of the 5 elements of transformative rituals. These elements can also be a part of daily activities, if we bring to them intention, or the mindfulness of Thich Nhat Hanh. In this way these moments can be the kind of ritual that serves the profound purpose of giving structure, continuity and meaning to daily life.

We can do this by:

1. Creating a sacred space

In the bathroom, we take care of our basic bodily functions, and get clean.

The bathroom mirror is where we see ourselves in the morning, and before we go to bed – where we get to know ourselves, and notice how we stay the same, and how we change.

The kitchen – full of potential rituals here!

Think for a moment about the sacred purposes of each part of your house.....

2. We can recognize Special Powers – we all have them! Intention and mindfulness can bring them forth, creating gratefulness for the miracle of life.

3. We can give meaning to Symbolic elements and words

When I put my glasses – on in morning, I prepare to look outward, and when they come off at night, I look inward.

We may say prayers or blessings, or expressions of gratitude

Certain items may remind us of a connection with a time or place.

4. There is physical movement

We do things daily that have a beginning, a middle and an end. We leave, and return.

5. Participation by all (even if it is just you!)

We can be present, with intention, it's why we are here!

In the words of Isa al-Kharraz:

“Do not occupy your precious time except with the most precious things, and the most precious of human things is the state of being occupied between the past and the future.”

What can we do to be more aware of the moment? To live each moment fully? To experience gratitude?

We can be mindful of what makes our lives go well and respect that knowledge.

Think about your personal seasonal rhythms –

When is the beginning of the year for you? The fall when the school and church year starts? Spring when the earth warms up and new growth begins? After the winter equinox and holiday season, when the calendar tells us it is a New Year?

What kind of weekly routines do you have? Are they centered around school or work schedules? Do you have a weekly meeting or class? Do you read the Leader on Wednesday? If you live in town, can you remember whether it is a trash or recycle week?

How does your day go? Are you a morning person, or do you come alive after 10 PM? When is your most productive time of day? When do you need a break? Food? Do you have morning and evening routines for the transitions between waking and sleeping?

And of course breath is our most fundamental ritual of inner rhythms. – Numerous religious disciplines have focused awareness on breath as a path to enlightenment and wholeness. Thich Nhat Hanh says “ Our breath is the bridge from our body to our mind, the element which reconciles our body and mind and which makes possible one-ness of body and mind.”

To close, I'd like to quote Fulghum again:

“..For every one of us there is an annual cycle of personal seasons.

A productive time and a fallow time.

A time to generate new ideas and a time to make them work.

A time to get organized and a time to let go.

A time to get in shape and a time to be lazy.

Whatever and whenever the public celebrations may be, I live my life in tune with private and secret rhythms as personal as my pulse. The same is true for everyone I know. Our lives are endless ritual. The patterns that give meaningful shape to the day, the year, and the life are sacred to me, and to us all.”

May your lives be filled with a deep sense of gratitude for each sacred moment.

Benediction

May the love that gives to life its beauty,  
the reverence that gives to life its sacredness,  
and the purposes that give to life its deep significance  
be strong within each of us  
and lead us into ever deepening relationships with all of life.

Extinguish the Chalice

We extinguish this chalice, but hold its flame in our hearts.