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THE RITUAL EFFECT

From Habit to Ritual,
Harness the Surprising Power
of Everyday Actions

MICHAEL NORTON

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For Mel

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THE RITUAL EFFECT

Part I

What Rituals Do

Preface

Reenchanted

Before the sun rises, Flannery O'Connor begins her day with morning prayers and a thermos of coffee she shares with her mother. At 7:00 a.m., O'Connor attends daily Catholic mass. At the same time, Maya Angelou arrives not far from her house at a motel room, where she has asked to have all the art removed from the walls. Sometime midmorning, Victor Hugo strips naked and instructs his valet to hide Hugo's clothes until he has met his daily writing goals. At exactly 3:30 p.m. (*so* exactly the whole town can set its clock by him), Immanuel Kant steps outside his door with his Spanish walking stick in hand for his afternoon walk. In the evening, Agatha Christie slips into a bathtub and eats an apple. And at the long day's end, Charles Dickens pulls out the compass he always keeps with him to confirm that his bed is facing north, blows out the candle, and falls asleep.

The paragraph you just read—a composite day in the life of six world-famous writers—may look like a portrait of creative madness or, at the very least, eccentricity. But these famous authors are performing deeply meaningful actions, which they repeat over and over. Even though these actions might seem totally random to you, they felt deeply right to—and *worked* for—these writers. All of them were engaged in some form of ritualistic behavior.

You might be thinking that eccentric behavior is part of the job for creative people such as poets, novelists, and philosophers. But I could

just as easily have picked any other category of high performers. Keith Richards has to have a piece of shepherd's pie—always the first slice—right before he steps onstage with the Rolling Stones. Chris Martin wouldn't leave his dressing room to go out with his band, Coldplay, until he had methodically picked up his toothbrush and toothpaste and given his teeth a quick but precise shine. Marie Curie—tragically—could only fall asleep if she had her tiny bottle of radium next to her bed. Barack Obama could only get through polling day by playing a carefully arranged game of basketball with certain friends.

Now, guess who the sources of these two preperformance rituals are:

I crack my knuckles and tap my fingers against certain areas of my body. Once these are completed, I take an inventory of my body from head to toe.

I close my eyes and imagine being with my dog. I list four things I see, list three things I smell, list two things I hear, and list one thing I feel.

Serena Williams? Tom Brady? Excellent guesses—and we'll get to know some of Serena's and Tom's rituals later. But these are simply the preperformance rituals reported by two regular folks who completed surveys my colleagues and I conducted in our more than ten years of investigating the science of rituals.

My colleagues and I at Harvard and around the world—psychologists, economists, neuroscientists, and anthropologists—have had the privilege of investigating a genuinely astonishing array of individual and collective rituals with the goal of better understanding what rituals

are; how they work; and how they help us rise to the challenges and realize the opportunities of everyday life. For more than a decade, we've surveyed tens of thousands of people all over the world, conducted experiments in our labs, and even used brain scans to explore the neural underpinnings of rituals.

This is a book about what we discovered. In realms personal and professional, private and public, and in encounters that cut across cultures and identities, rituals are emotional catalysts that energize, inspire, and elevate us. Our research will lay bare this logic of ritual by successively stripping away different elements of specific rituals to isolate and explore their impact. Among the questions we'll take up are: What exactly are the differences between a ritual, a habit, and a compulsion? How do rituals emerge? And how do we ensure that our rituals work for us rather than against?

We will also explore why placing your socks in your drawer sideways, *just so*, like so many toppled snails, can spark joy; how families can turn dinners from drudgery to delightful; why brands such as Starbucks can benefit from encouraging their customers, "Take Comfort in Your Rituals"; the real reason open-plan offices don't work; why traditional rain dances and those annoying and seemingly pointless team-building exercises managers make their employees perform really *can* work; and why rituals' ability to generate a greater variety of emotions—a phenomenon I describe as *emodiversity*—is important for our psychological well-being in measurable ways.

For those of you who insist you don't have rituals, you'll come to see how they play key roles in the way you conduct business, relate to other people, mark milestones, and experience your daily life—down to what you eat and drink, and even how you brush your teeth.

Rituals often operate below our radar and enable us to savor the experiences of everyday life. We'll see how rituals help us start the day off right and bring it to a peaceful close; how they foster strong rela-

tionships, in life and work; how they operate in war and peace; and how they offer us a transformation from automated to more animated ways of living.

I want to take you on a scientific journey to discover the rituals that make up the fabric of daily life. By the end of this book, I hope that you will feel empowered and equipped to create and adopt your own rituals as you try to get over, get through, and get better at the many challenges all of us encounter, and also to do more of the things that make life worth living.

The many ways in which ritual enhances and enchants our lives—what I have come to call the *ritual effect*—is the story of this book.

Chapter 1

What *Are* Rituals?

Maeby: *Do you guys know where I can get one of those gold necklaces with a "T" on it?*
Michael: *That's a cross.*
Maeby: *Across from where?*

—Arrested Development

On Sundays when I was growing up, my Irish Catholic parents and I engaged in a full-throated battle as I valiantly tried—and failed—to explain why I shouldn't have to go to St. Theresa's for mass. It wasn't what was said during the service that bothered me so much ("do unto others" always seemed like solid advice). It was the script: walk in, sit, stand, sign of the cross, sit, stand, walk, candles, eat, drink, kneel, sit, stand, shake hands, sit, stand, sing, walk out. The people in the pews around me, including some of the people I love and respect most in the world, found deep meaning in this sequence. But I felt like an automaton, literally going through the motions.

Those particular religious rituals didn't work for me, but other rituals absolutely did. My preferred rituals, like most people's, were selective. I didn't love holy days but I loved holidays, especially the end-of-year run from Halloween to Thanksgiving to Christmas capped by New Year's Eve. I'm sure you're thinking shrewdly: candles, candy,

doting relatives, relaxed bedtimes, presents. Of course eight-year-old you liked those rituals more. And there's no discounting that candy and toys cast a certain spell.

But I also know that what I loved most—and what has stayed with me—is the particular way my family enacted the holidays. This included the scratchy sounds of Johnny Mathis's *Merry Christmas* album emanating from my father's record player (used just once a year for this purpose) and that we had three kinds of stuffing at Thanksgiving (even though I disliked all three). There were plenty of nonholiday rituals, too. For example, we sat at the same places at the dinner table for decades (I sat across from my mom, between my dad and one of my sisters). All hell broke loose if anyone ever dared to switch places. When my mother had had enough of any of us five kids, she would give us to the count of three to knock it off; but when she starting counting—"Once, twice . . ."—one of us would jump in to sing, "Three times a lady." At the time, this made her even angrier. But decades later, she danced with my brother to this same song at his wedding. Now that she is gone, hearing that song brings her briefly back to me. These idiosyncratic behaviors somehow came to matter. As they were ritualized over time, they were among the things that made my family *my family*. They were us.

Welcome to a More Secular Age

Years later, it's easy to see that my resistance to traditional religious rituals and church attendance yet my enthusiastic embrace of many secular rituals—in particular, my family's idiosyncratic versions of them—tracks the broader cultural trends that define what the philosopher Charles Taylor has called our "secular age."

In the United States, in 2022, for example, roughly three in ten adults now identify as having "no religion"—whereas in the 1990s close to 90 percent identified as Christian—and some estimates project that the number of Americans who identify as "religiously unaffiliated" will approach those who identify as Christian by the year 2070. A 2022 Gallup poll showed Americans' trust in institutions such as the Supreme Court and organized religion to be at an all-time low. These numbers bear witness to a simple truth: the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have seen a widespread loss of faith in both the traditional authorities who once told us how to pattern our lives and the institutions that once held us to those patterns.

More than a century ago, the German lawyer and economist Max Weber developed a bold narrative that anticipated these trends. In 1897, after immersing himself in less than scintillating scholarship on topics such as the agrarian patterns of ancient Rome, Weber suffered a nervous breakdown and took to his bed. There, under the care of his wife, Marianne (who also was his second cousin), he started documenting what he described as the "disenchantment" of the modern world. He argued that technological systems and bureaucracy were the new organizing principles of society. Whereas once customs, religious obligations, and rituals dictated how we ordered our days and lives, society was now, Weber argued, under the reign of rationalized procedures and processes. Science and technology—and the institutions governed by them—would replace doctrines of faith, superstitions, and other forms of magical thinking. In what many consider to be his (unfinished) magnum opus, *Economy and Society*, Weber warned that a "polar night of icy darkness" was descending. Humankind, in his estimation, was entering a world stripped of light and warmth, meaning and magic. The result? A disenchanted world bereft of ritual.

The Great Reenchantment

In some ways, Weber was prophetic. The established, traditional rituals that he had in mind have declined in the past century. Yet our world is far from coldly rational or disenchanted. Belief in God remains pervasive among people around the world, including Americans—some 81 percent in 2022. Although one in six people worldwide report being religiously unaffiliated, many still engage in religious rituals. In China, for example, 44 percent of unaffiliated adults say they have worshipped at a graveside or tomb in the past year. Even belief in other supernatural beings, such as aliens, is on the rise.

When you start to consider ritual outside the realm of organized religion, it soon becomes clear that the late twentieth and early twenty-first century has produced countless secular or loosely spiritual rituals. Among the proliferation of new group affiliations that have quickly become ritualized are a wide variety of pilgrimages to the deserts of America—starting with Burning Man and now including the Coachella music festival and the Bombay Beach Biennale, an art commune held in the environmental wasteland of California's Salton Sea. Yoga and fitness groups have created initiation rites such as Orangetheory's "Hell Week"—replete with signature high fives for ensuring social cohesion—and SoulCycle's candlelit rooms with sermon-like coaching and "soulful moments" throughout class. During the years of the COVID lockdown, Peloton became a leader in the world of fitness for answering the collective need to gather and move in synchrony with other humans. The at-home workout provided a virtual space for people of all shapes and sizes to gather and breathe within a simulacrum of a sweaty studio. All over the United States, one commonly sees people wearing internet-famous T-shirts that read GYM IS MY CHURCH.

Rituals are also providing more meaningful ways for people to step away from technology's drive toward optimization and captured attention. Rituals delineate a sacred space to keep people connected to the present moment, while the practice of "I Am Here" days invites participants to meet up for time together without any digital devices. Journalist Anand Giridharadas, an originator of I Am Here days along with his wife, author Priya Parker, described these gatherings as a special time for "reveling in friendship and conversation of a kind that Facebook doesn't do; being thickly in one place, not thinly everywhere." This same desire for connection can also be seen in the group of teenagers gathering every Sunday at the same spot in Brooklyn's Prospect Park. They place logs in a circle and set aside their flip phones to discuss analog books and share sketch pads. These are the members of the Luddite Club, and they have designed rituals to support and enhance one another's efforts to move away from all social media platforms and live a pre-iPhone existence, if only for a few hours.

Consider, too, the rise of the Seattle Atheist Church, where atheists gather on Sundays to experience everything good about church—community, reflection, singing—just minus the God part. When the service is over, members of the church sit in a circle and pass around a "talking rabbit." Anyone who has feelings and thoughts to share holds this totem while speaking to the group. Using such rituals, the church's official mission is to offer the benefits of a religious community without the "cognitive dissonance" that belief in supernatural beings entails.

In all these examples rituals are alive, well, and flourishing. It's just that they've assumed forms that fly in the face of traditional ideas about what rituals are—and for that reason, they are often dismissed as New Agey or millennial or indulgent or just plain odd. Also, clearly the word *ritual* retains an aura, an air of the sacred or magical, that

the wellness industry has monetized to great effect. One can now hire "ritual mavens"—corporate ritual consultants—and engage with a myriad of online apps and platforms offering daily meditations, gratitude practices, affirmations, and bullet journaling—just to name a few. What do these new developments tell us about the place of rituals in the twenty-first century?

The Story of a Ritual Skeptic

I am often as dubious of these new secular rituals as I had been about the many traditional ones I had growing up. At first, I wasn't especially curious about them, either. Despite these examples of secular rituals emerging in the culture, the idea of studying rituals was the furthest thing from my mind in the early days of my career as a behavioral scientist. I liked designing tightly controlled laboratory experiments, where I could strip down phenomena to their bare essentials, isolate key variables, and assess the effects of those variables on some outcome measure. My focus was on topics such as quantifying the precise effect of spending our money in different ways (for example, on ourselves versus others) on our happiness, varying the type of information conveyed by political "spin doctors" to assess the impact on our perceptions of politicians, and demonstrating which specific brain regions undergird the ubiquitous tendency for our minds to wander.

The challenges of measuring ritual's effects in a laboratory struck me (and many of my fellow colleagues in the behavioral sciences) as daunting, at best. The kinds of practices that came to mind when I thought of "rituals" were richly detailed, highly elaborate, tailored to specific cultures, often with centuries of embedded meaning, and therefore felt impossible to reduce to the same scientific method. How

do you strip away culture and history from practices such as these? Would anything be left to study?

Even in my earliest explorations of how rituals work and why, I still identified as a ritual skeptic. What does it mean to be a ritual skeptic? Perhaps you already know. Many of us have friends or family members who scaffold their days—their whole lives maybe—with rituals. Like Flannery O'Connor, they might start their day at a precise time, in a specific way, and carry on like this all day until, like Charles Dickens, they end their day in another precise, specific way. But not me. I woke up at different times, ate at different times, took breaks at different times, went to bed at different times—there was nothing at all ritualistic in how I went about my life. Or so I thought.

Until the day something happened. I shouldn't say something—someone. My daughter. After she arrived, I instantly and unthinkingly transformed into a shamanic madman. Going to bed—a goal that had once involved a handful of dull but functional actions such as flossing and plugging my phone in—became over time a roughly seventeen-step ritual enacted with one goal: to get my child to go to sleep. There were key players: me, my wife, piggy, brown bunny, and (especially) gray bunny. There were key songs: a song my wife used to sing at Camp Wewa, the Buddy Holly song "Everyday" (known to my daughter as the "roller-coaster song"), the James Taylor song "Sweet Baby James" (the "cowboy song"). There were sacred texts: *Goodnight Moon; The Very Hungry Caterpillar; Oh, the Thinks You Can Think!* There were key actions: carrying her up to bed slowly so she could say good night to the stairs and ask them if they needed anything before bed, then repeating a quiet *shhh* until she fell asleep. (I was so convinced that my way of saying *shhh* was the most soothing in the world that I recorded it and looped it so that we always had ten minutes of me ready to go.)

I believed that I was performing these steps month after month, each and every night, because my daughter needed them. As with any

ritual, I rigidly adhered to the precise order of actions and repeated them. Anything less and I was convinced she would be up all night. And, as with most rituals, my actions had some randomness—why two bunnies but only one pig? Why not *Oh, the Places You'll Go!*? Why the stairs and not the kitchen appliances? We didn't know but still we rarely strayed from each of the steps. The stakes were too high. The overriding feeling was that if we tried to vary it or—in desperation to get to sleep—to streamline it, the entire endeavor might fall flat. An abbreviation or variation might not conjure up the necessary drowsy comfort—and then we would have to start again.

Over time, I began to look at this nightly performance with a more analytical eye. What was I doing? The ritual was not just for my daughter; it was for me, too. I had been enacting this series of rigidly precise steps with the belief that they could and would *do* something. After night upon night of enacting the ritual, we had come to believe in its power to transition us from evening into night and to summon sleep. Somehow, without ever consciously deciding to do so, I had shifted from a solid ritual skeptic to a true ritual believer.

The moment I recognized this shift I started to wonder: Were all of the people I passed by on the street on an average day also relying on made-up rituals? And were they working? If so, why and how? Beyond ritualized group identities to fitness groups such as Peloton and Orangetheory, far from people seeking out collective effervescence at Burning Man, were other self-professed skeptics like me actually living everyday lives rich with the unacknowledged power of ritual?

My daughter's bedtime requirements confronted me with the startling possibility that almost everything I had believed about rituals was at best misinformed and at worst dead wrong. Yes—rituals are certainly religious traditions and ceremonies that get passed down from one generation to the next. But they are also idiosyncratic behaviors that can emerge spontaneously. I was living proof that seemingly any

set of behaviors can become a ritual. The catalyst of all rituals is the need; tradition and ancestry are not required.

The new parent in me had reached for ritual instinctively to soothe to sleep the youngest human in my life—but to soothe my own anxiety, too. I'd started a few investigations into rituals, but now the scientist in me needed better answers about what was happening underneath the hood. If people can come up with their own rituals, on the spot, and yet still have their experiences and emotions shaped by them, what exactly are rituals and how do they work? These questions cracked a curiosity in me wide open; I was now determined to find out.

Where Rituals Come From

Aside from my childhood experience of religious ritual, much of what I knew about rituals came from research in anthropology and other descriptive fields in the social sciences. The idea behind anthropology's ethnographic methods has been to set forth and observe what the humans are doing, then try to figure out why they are doing it. Much of this now canonical body of scholarship was produced by Western scholars studying non-Western cultures, and most of it focused on one vein of rituals—time-tested rites received as tradition. These are the rigid, communal practices that most readily spring to mind upon hearing the word *ritual*. They are what I refer to as *legacy rituals*.

None of this body of research, although certainly fascinating, brought me any closer to understanding my experience with my daughter's bedtime. No ancestors passed knowledge of stuffies down to me; Buddy Holly is not mentioned in any ancient texts. Ritual, I was coming to understand, could be an individually designed experience.

Once I shifted my tacit assumptions about rituals—to include not only inviolable traditional rites but practices constructed spon-

taneously by individuals—I started recognizing them all around me. Just as I had done in trying to create calm at my daughter's bedtime, individuals and groups often grab for the props, pageantry, and stagecraft available to them in the moment. Sometimes they adapt aspects of a legacy ritual they inherited, other times they come up with a new ritual, and often they do both at the same time.

In the conventional understanding of rituals, such things don't just happen out of the blue. The ritual is the ritual: you sit up, stand, and kneel when you are told to sit up, stand, and kneel. You eat the food you are told to eat because that is what your people have always done and that is what they will do ad infinitum. In my experience with my daughter, I saw glimmers of a completely different way to think about rituals. People across time have been innovating their rituals to meet the moment with whatever resources and materials they have on hand. Maybe the legacy ritual passed down from generation to generation didn't work for everyone, like the rituals I practiced as a child in church. Or, in some cases, maybe what was needed just didn't exist yet, sometimes because the world had presented the humans with an entirely new problem—such as a twenty-first-century pandemic.

This approach to the science of rituals—the idea that an individual might at some point say, "I'm doing this differently"—put me squarely in the domain of behavioral economics, or the science of how individuals go about making decisions. My PhD was in social psychology, and I did my postdoctoral work in behavioral economics at the Sloan School of Management at MIT. When I first arrived there, fresh from defending my dissertation, I discovered an intellectual Shangri-la, a world filled with curious and generous people who were asking all sorts of unexpected, quirky questions about how people make decisions. From within this spirit of intellectual freedom I was first exposed to a possible way forward for measuring the effects of rituals.