

Ritual: some thoughts from the literature and elsewhere

Ritual does appear in all sorts of places. I am reading a lovely book at the moment – “The Tiger’s Wife” by Téa Obrecht¹. And guess what – the very beginning of the book is a passage explaining the “forty days of the soul”, which begin on the morning after death, and involve the soul visiting all the places of its past. In the meantime, the living worry that the soul could get so involved in this journey that it will forget to come back:

“For this reason, the living bring their own rituals to a standstill: to welcome the newly loosed spirit, the living will not clean, will not wash or tidy, will not remove the soul’s belongings for forty days, hoping that sentiment and longing will bring it home again, encourage it to return with a message, with a sign, or with forgiveness.”

One of the interesting things about this section is not only the reference to a bereavement ritual, and the attendant belief system on which it is based. But also the reference to the everyday rituals of the living which are brought “to a standstill”. The presence of ritual in our ordinary regular environment is of particular interest to me, and I am also curious to explore the kind of relationship that might exist between everyday rituals and the non-everyday “special” (and more obvious) rituals.

Everyday rituals come up a few pages later in *The Tiger’s Wife*:

“Breakfast over a newspaper, followed by Turkish coffee brewed by my grandma; personal correspondence, always in alphabetical order, as dictated by his address book. A walk to the market for fresh fruit...Some light exercise; a snack at the kitchen table, almost always sunflower seeds. Then a few hours in the living room with my mother and grandma, sometimes talking, sometimes just sitting together. Dinner, and then an hour of reading. Bed.”

Michael Dawson shared the following quote, which rather beautifully articulates the need for ritual:

“People have traditionally turned to ritual to help them frame and acknowledge and ultimately even find joy in just such a paradox of being human - in the fact that so much of what we desire for our happiness and need for our survival comes at a heavy cost. We kill to eat, we cut down trees to build our homes, we exploit other people and the earth. Sacrifice - of nature, of the interests of others, even of our earlier selves - appears to be an inescapable part of our condition, the unavoidable price of all our achievements. A successful ritual is one that addresses both aspects of our predicament, recalling us to the shamefulness of our deeds at the same time it celebrates what the poet Frederick Turner calls "the beauty we have paid for with our shame." Without the double awareness pricked by such rituals, people are liable to find themselves either plundering the earth without restraint or descending into self-loathing and misanthropy. Perhaps it's not surprising that most of us today bring one of those attitudes or the other to our conduct in nature.”²

But maybe before going any further, it's useful to look at some of the origins of thinking about ritual. And the best place to start is with van Gennep.

"The Rites of Passage" by Arnold van Gennep

First published in 1960, this is a classic in the literature on ritual. Van Gennep was a contemporary of Durkheim, and like him found inspiration in the writings of Auguste Comte, and Positivism. He strongly believed that social theory should be derived directly from observation and research, and he used his own ethnographic studies as well as referring to a huge range of published contemporary research. The book is fascinating, surprisingly readable, but very rooted in the attitudes of mid-twentieth-century France (particularly with regard to the classification of "civilised", "semi-civilised" and "uncivilised" societies). However, he offers a very powerful framework for understanding life-transitions, and stresses there is a particular sequence to these "rites of passage" – from "separation", through "transition", and on to "incorporation". These phases are found to varying extents according to circumstance.

Van Gennep: "Rites of separation are prominent in funeral ceremonies, rites of incorporation at marriages. Transition rites may play an important part, for instance, in pregnancy, betrothal, and initiation; or they may be reduced to a minimum in adoption, in the delivery of a second child, in remarriage, or in the passage from the second to the third age group."³

Reflecting on van Gennep's work, I find myself considering in particular the transition undergone by an individual training to be a doctor, and the rites performed by individuals who have to accommodate a life-changing diagnosis, either for themselves, or for someone close to them. What can we learn from using the filter of ritual to re-examine these familiar themes?

"Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice" by Catherine Bell

Catherine Bell has written a book on ritual which is really too technical for me to properly understand (!). But calling the book "Ritual theory, ritual practice" is a bit of a pointer to the central thesis, which is to critically explore the distinction made between thought and action, and the use made of this distinction by key writers on ritual. To quote her: "I am suggesting that descriptions of how rituals work have been constructed according to a logic rooted in the dynamics of theoretical speculation and the unconscious manipulation of the thought-action dichotomy is intrinsic to this construction."⁴ See what I mean?

Here's some more from the book:

"The notion of ritual first emerged as a formal term of analysis in the nineteenth century to identify what was believed to be a universal category of human experience. The term expressed, therefore, the beginnings of a major shift in the way European culture compared itself to other cultures and

religions. Since then many other definitions of ritual have been developed linked to a wide variety of scholarly endeavours. Many myth-and-ritual theorists, for example, looked to ritual in order to describe “religion”. Later social functionalists, in contrast, explored ritual actions and values in order to analyze “society” and the nature of social phenomena. More recently symbolic anthropologists have found ritual to be fundamental to the dynamics of “culture”. From W. Robertson-Smith to Clifford Geertz, the notion of ritual has been meaningful precisely because it functioned as much more than a simple analytical tool. Rather, it has been integral to the mutual construction of both an

object for and method of analysis.”⁴



NB some definitions here:

synchronic

1. occurring at a specific point in time.
2. (linguistics) relating to the study of a language at only one point in its history.

diachronic

1. occurring or changing along with time

communitas

1. An unstructured community in which people are equal.
2. The very spirit of community; an intense community spirit, the feeling of great social equality, solidarity, and togetherness.



“Theoretical descriptions of ritual generally regard it as action and thus automatically distinguish it from the conceptual aspects of religion, such as beliefs, symbols, and myths. In some cases added qualifications may soften the distinction, but rarely do such descriptions question this immediate differentiation or the usefulness of distinguishing what is **thought** from what is **done**. Likewise, beliefs, creeds, symbols, and myths emerge as forms of mental content or conceptual blueprints: they direct, inspire, or promote activity, but they themselves are not activities. Ritual, like action, will act out, express, or perform these conceptual orientations. Sometimes the push for typological clarity will drive such differentiations to the extreme. Ritual is then described as particularly thoughtless action – routinized, habitual, obsessive, or mimetic – and therefore the purely formal, secondary,

and mere physical expression of logically prior ideas. Just as the differentiation of ritual and belief in terms of thought and action is usually taken for granted, so too is the priority this differentiation accords to thought. ... Claude Levi-Strauss takes this logic much further when an initial distinction between ritual and myth eventuates in a distinction between living and thinking.”⁴

Durkheim argued that religion is composed of beliefs and rites: beliefs consist of representations of the sacred; rites are determined modes of action that can be characterized only in terms of the representations of the sacred that are their object. “Between these two classes of facts,” he wrote, “there is all the difference which separates thought from action.” “Ritual (is) the means by which collective beliefs and ideals are simultaneously **generated, experienced, and affirmed as real** by the community.”⁴ (My emphasis)

“Ritual is provisionally distinguished (by Tambiah) as the synchronic, continuous, traditional, or ontological in opposition to the diachronic, changing, historical, or social. However, ritual is also subsequently portrayed as the arena in which such pairs of forces interact. It is the mediating process by which the synchronic comes to be re-expressed in terms of the diachronic and vice versa.

*Turner initially described ritual as the affirmation of communal unity in contrast to the frictions, constraints, and competitiveness of social life and organisation. Rite affords a creative 'antistructure' that is distinguished from the rigid maintenance of social orders, hierarchies, and traditional forms. However, when subsequently portrayed as embodying aspects of both structure and antistructure, he describes rituals as those special, paradigmatic activities that mediate or orchestrate the necessary and opposing demands of both communitas and the formalised social order."*⁴

Catherine Bell (whilst being technically demanding...) does offer a route in to some of the interesting theoretical approaches to ritual. She gives quite a bit of space to a discussion of Geertz:

"... it is in some sort of ceremonial form – even if that form be hardly more than the recitation of a myth, the consultation of an oracle, or the decoration of a grave – that the moods and motivations which sacred symbols induce in men and the general conceptions of the order of existence which they formulate for men meet and reinforce one another."⁵

Bell suggests that in ritual, the world as lived and the world as imagined are revealed as the same world, through the agency of a single set of symbolic forms.

The history of the use of the term ritual in anthropological thinking is reviewed and a critique offered by Bell. She describes a more recent set of theories on ritual which tend to see ritual as an aspect of all activity, rather displacing the older perspective of ritual as a behaviour with specific (usually sacred and symbolic) meaning. Mary Douglas states that "ritual is pre-eminently a form of communication"⁶ composed of culturally normal acts that have become distinctive by being diverted to special functions where they are given magical efficacy. Leach argues that "we engage in rituals in order to transmit collective messages to ourselves."⁷

"Rite out of Place" by Ronald L. Grimes

A very readable book by Ronald Grimes explores the "emplacement" of ritual, and looks for evidence that ritual is alive and well and functioning in lots of unexpected places – like tv, film, in the classroom, and concludes with an exploration of the place of ritual in re-learning a sustainable way of living⁸.

Here's an excerpt from the preface:

"Ask anyone and you'll be assured, 'Sure, ritual has its place.' Like a dutiful servant, it should know that place and stay there. It ought not be springing up underfoot, as if its place were everywhere. But you can't just stash it anywhere either.

Ask people, 'What's ritual's place?'

They'll tell you, 'Someplace special.' Their reply casts ritual in a role that is sequestered, if not sacred. Ritual, in this view, is not ordinary or public. On account of its curvaceous tendencies and circumambulatory ways, ritual would be out of place at work, rendering inefficient the great cultural machines that drive the workplace.

Jonathan Z. Smith, an eminent religious studies scholar, thinks ritual is about emplacement. Fair enough, but placement where? In a world of fast-paced globalisation and market-driven economies, ritual seems awkwardly out of place, a clumsy, tradition-laden cultural activity. Nevertheless, it springs up underfoot, making troublesome appearances in unlikely places. Like a weed or a pest, it resists being stamped out. Ritual can be surprisingly invasive.”⁸

Grimes devotes a chapter to an exploration of the place of ritual in teaching, and addresses this in a wonderfully sideways manner. He describes two courses on which he was assigned to teach at his university in 1999: one on “Zen Meditation: Zen Art”, and another on “Writing Religion”. The first of these courses was designed to evoke a sense of Zen Buddhism, and to look critically at the acculturation of Zen practice and ideas in North America. The second was a required course for religious studies honours undergraduates in their final year, and aimed to improve the quality of their writing.

He describes his efforts to instil a sense of Zen in the class on the first course, and his feeling of failure in this endeavour. At the end of the course two of the students asked if they could supplement their paper on tea ceremonies with one performed for, and with the class. He describes initially feeling delighted with this suggestion, then feeling appalled at how it was done, with clutter, noise, a lack of simplicity and precision, plastic beer mugs, and “the ethos of a grade four Shakespeare play”. However, when evaluating the session with the class, he was amazed to hear an outpouring of warmth and praise from the students, who cited it as a highlight of the course. He thought it was hopeless, but despite that, it had worked. He comments:

“I reminded myself that the rite was not of my doing and that it transpired despite my resistance and self-consciousness. It succeeded despite me, despite the course, despite the two students, even despite itself. Ritualising, it seems, can work even when it fails.”

The course on writing was run concurrently with the Zen art course. He describes how, without planning it to be that way:

“the writing course became more of a Zen course than the Zen course was. We sat. We drank tea. We wrote. We shared what we wrote. We trashed what we wrote. We treasured what we wrote. We offered Buddha the fruits of our writing. When celebrating, we blew bubbles over his dozing head. When disappointed, we burned or shredded writing trash.”

He reflects on these two courses:

“When the writing course was over, I felt it a success. When the Zen course ended the same week, I felt it a failure. Where I had intended to teach Zen I had not. Where I had not intended to teach Zen I had.”

And concludes:

“I do not claim that everyone should teach every course on Buddhism or on writing in this way, only that an embodied, “participatory” pedagogy is a valid form of teaching and learning and that it is not a propagandistic move aimed at making converts.

The quotation marks around “experiencing” and “participatory” are necessary. They signal the crucial subjunctive. An “as-if” marker does not render experience and participation unreal, but it does flag them, suggesting that the reality of the Zen and the writing that I teach is peculiar, even fictive. but fiction, like ritual, has real consequences.”

For me, this is touching closely on the Scaling the Heights approach to teaching and learning, and resonates deeply with Heron’s analysis of holistic learning. Reflecting on the activities we use on courses, I can see how much ritual is a part of this: in the introductory exercises, in the embodied learning that comes from engaging in activities, in the routine evaluatory discussions we facilitate at the end of each session, and in the group closing sessions. I just never thought about these activities as rituals before...

“Culture, Health and Illness” by Cecil Helman⁹

This fantastic, and huge, book by the wonderful Cecil Helman is itself a classic of medical anthropology. Needless to say it contains much on ritual. To begin with, he offers a distinction between repetitive behaviour and ritual:

“A key characteristic of any ritual is that it is a form of repetitive behaviour that does not have a direct overt technical effect. For example, brushing the teeth at the same time each night is a repetitive form of behaviour, but it is not a ritual: it is designed to have a specific physical effect – the removal of food and bacteria from the teeth. If, however, this action is accompanied by others that do not directly contribute towards the effect, such as always using a toothbrush of a particular colour or saying certain words or prayers before, during, or after brushing the teeth, then these extraneous actions can be thought of as having a private ritual significance for the person.”

In the literature a distinction is frequently made between private and public ritual. It is the latter which is generally of more interest to anthropologists, as these behaviours “say something about the state of affairs, particularly about the social conditions of those taking part in the ritual.”¹⁰

Fairy Tales – and ritual?

There are three essential elements to a fairy tale:

- the call to adventure,
- the fantastical experience,
- the return to daily life.

It is clear that these closely match the three stages of transition and ritual described by van Gennep: “separation”, through “transition”, and on to “incorporation”.

Bruno Bettelheim’s noted work¹¹ on the place of fairy tales in the psychological development of children gives another perspective on transition, and perhaps there is something of ritual in this too. He describes “how fairy stories represent in imaginative form what the process of healthy human development consists of, and how the tales make such

development attractive for the child to engage in.” Is it reasonable to imagine that in the routine of bedtime stories, and the predictable elements of fairy tales (children without parents, evil relatives, magical spirits etc), there is a kind of ritual? And that this ritual serves a vital function in the child’s development? The child is an active participant in this ritual (if we may so imagine it) as the listener, and (often) the chooser of the favourite tale, to be repeated again.

“It is the characteristic of fairy tales to state an existential dilemma briefly and pointedly. This permits the child to come to grips with the problem in its most essential form, where a more complex plot would confuse matters for him. The fairy tale simplifies all situations. Its figures are clearly drawn; and details, unless very important, are eliminated. All characters are typical rather than unique.” [from the introduction]

Although he spends much of the book examining the psychological themes encountered in fairy tales, he also makes clear the danger of explicating these themes to a child:

“Explaining to a child why a fairy tale is so captivating to him destroys, moreover, the story’s enchantment, which depends to a considerable degree on the child’s not quite knowing why he is delighted by it. And with the forfeiture of this power to enchant goes also a loss of the story’s potential for helping the child struggle on his own, and master all by himself the problem which has made the story meaningful to him in the first place.”

Bettelheim also refers to the use made in traditional Hindu medicine of fairy tales in the treatment of the “psychically disoriented”, for meditational purposes. I find this a very interesting insight, which I think has a potential place for me in both clinical and educational work: the use of stories and metaphor to aid personal growth.

“The fairy tale is therapeutic because the patient finds his *own* solutions, through contemplating what the story seems to imply about him and his inner conflicts at this moment in his life. The content of the chosen tale usually has nothing to do with the patient’s external life, but much to do with his inner problems, which seem incomprehensible and hence unsolvable. The fairy tale clearly does not refer to the outer world, although it may begin realistically enough and have everyday features woven into it. The unrealistic nature of these tales is an important device, because it makes obvious that the fairy tale’s concern is not useful information about the external world, but the inner processes taking place in an individual.”

He also makes the case for fairy tales having ongoing relevance for adults, who might find it especially difficult to admit to the conflicts and difficulties which children encounter, yet persist into adulthood:

“As a matter of fact, the older person might find it considerably more difficult to admit consciously his fear of being deserted by his parents, or to face his oral greed; and this is even more reason to let the fairy tale speak to his unconsciousness, give body to his unconscious anxieties, and relieve them, without this ever coming to conscious awareness.”

Marshall Marinker is always a wonderful resource whenever I am thinking about medical practice, communication, and looking for some kind of tangential approach to the commonplace. He also draws a parallel between some kind of encounters between doctors and patients, and fairy tales (and rituals)¹². He describes this very clearly using Cinderella as his reference point. What he concludes resonates very well with Bettelheim. I have included an excerpt from this essay as a separate link on this web page.

References

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