

Most men, when they meet or are introduced, extend their hand, with the expectation that the other man will extend his hand. Each hand is then expected to grasp the other and together, move up and down. It's expected the grasp will not be too tight or too loose and that their joint movement will be up and down, not side to side.

I've just described the typical ritual most men are expected to engage in upon meeting each other, especially for the first time and especially in a work environment. Life becomes a bit more complicated when women enter the scene. But maybe that's just a male perspective.

Perhaps, what I've just described is not a ritual, but a custom or a habit, or merely what we do to be polite. But whatever we call it, it serves a purpose. Whatever we call it, for it not to occur, would cause most of us to feel some amount of discomfort. Do we take it personally? Do we conclude the other person is impolite, or worse?

Today, I want to talk about the importance of ritual in our lives. I want to debunk the notion that ritual is exclusively about religion and requires a belief in a supreme being. I want us, as Unitarian Universalists, to not shy away from ritual, not recoil at the use of the word. Because I believe rituals serve a very real and often important role in our lives, as individuals and as a community.

In secular culture, what masquerades as habit, often can reasonably be termed a ritual. Look at the picture on the cover of the order of service. It's a child looking in the mirror as he brushes his teeth. Since this fellow is relatively young and looking in a mirror, I would assume he has not yet established a habit of brushing his teeth. He still needs the mirror to guide him or help teach him how to do it. But once he gets the process down, my bet is he's established a lifetime habit of HOW he brushes his teeth.

My bet is that, you as do I brush your teeth exactly the same way every time you brush. If not, then I'd guess the change is intentional and by conscious choice. Brushing our teeth, is a ritualistic exercise. We don't have to think about how we will brush. We just brush. And we probably brush the same *time* every day. Maybe it's first thing in the morning and last thing before we go to bed. Maybe it's after every meal. And if we floss, we probably floss the same way each time as well; before we brush or after. My guess is its an either-or-proposition, either we floss before or we floss after but not as the mood suits us.

I'd argue that how and when we brush becomes an important part of our daily practice and we'd feel a bit out of sorts if we failed to include it. I believe brushing our teeth is more than just a habit we've developed. It is a practice that we place meaning in. We do it for a reason, even if we don't think about why we're doing it. We do it because it has meaning. It has a purpose and it plays a role in our lives and affects how we see ourselves.

Perhaps that's the difference between a habit and a ritual. A habit may be simply something we do, like women twirling their hair while they think or talk. I think of a habit as a particular behavioral trait or pattern of behaving that may or may not be based on conscious thought or have a particular purpose.

Ritual on the other hand, is almost always tied to a purpose or a reason. It's done after conscious thought or is taught to us with the intent that it serve a purpose. To my mind, a ritual does not need to be an end unto itself. It may serve the purpose of connecting us to something else. It may be a stand-in for something or implicate something other.

Most of us learned about ritual in church. Most of us associate ritual with religion and God. I suspect that's because that is the way we have been taught to think about ritual. I think it's because the culture, our churches and families have wanted to separate what a particular ritual stands for, its purpose and meaning, from the everyday, from the mundane.

I suspect that every culture has understood there are some things, some behaviors, some practices that are more important than others. Some practices should hold a higher place in our existence; have greater value than other things. Ritual is a way we can separate the mundane from what's important.

I think we've come far enough as a society to understand that not all things of importance are found exclusively in the church. I think we, in this community, place a high value on coming to our own conclusions, arriving at our own truth. We believe it important that *we* determine what is important in our lives.

I want us not to have blinders on. I want us not to shackle ourselves in the exploration and pursuit of what's meaningful, what has value in our lives. I want us not to miss what is important to us, simply because we mislabel it.

Let us learn to recognize the rituals in our lives that help give our lives meaning. That helps connect us to something bigger than our own egos; that may connect us to a community, to each other, to something that feeds us. Let us learn to value the things we may do automatically, yet are significant and hold meaning.

Let us learn to recognize the role that ritual plays in our lives, so we can be better served by them. If we can recognize the purpose, function or importance of our rituals, we benefit in two ways. We benefit by increasing our awareness of something that is inherently of value. And we benefit by noticing the absence of a ritual that once serves us.

I remember learning about myself by paying attention to my fish tanks. Fish and fish tanks must serve a similar purpose in my life as dogs or cats do for others. It connects me to something of value, to a universe of beauty and learning, to life outside myself.

Many years ago, my tanks taught me something that I've never forgotten. They provided me a discovery. I was depressed, I was in a marriage that didn't serve me well and I wasn't happy in my work. One day, when I could no longer stand seeing my fish tanks in such horrible shape, I forced myself to do something about it.

After the tank was cleaned, I felt better. My mood was lighter, my disposition had noticeably changed. As I thought about it over time, it dawned on me that my tanks were in some way a reflection of me. They served as a mirror to my life.

When my psyche was in reasonably good shape, my tank reflected it; they were clean and vibrant. When my tanks were dirty or unkempt, I was psychologically not in a good place. Ever since that learning, more than twenty years ago, I've learned to take note of when my tanks do not look good. It's become an alarm, a messenger, telling me I need to pay attention to what's going on in my life.

But more than that, the ritual associated with keeping fish has a larger meaning for me. It connects me to my childhood. It seems we always had fish. Fish tanks are associated with fond memories. I remember inheriting the fish tanks when my brother moved away. I've kept fish almost all my life. In a way, it connects me to my brother Lou and my childhood.

I believe we all have rituals in our lives that often go unnoticed. When they are hidden, much of their life enhancing power is stripped away. I encourage us all to take time to pay attention to those things that we do regularly. Pay attention to those things we miss doing. Do they serve us? Do they hold greater meaning than we've allowed ourselves to acknowledge? Would we be better off if we brought them back into our lives?

Which of your habits are actually rituals, and not merely something you do? Anyone with young children understands the power of rituals. Before you can go any where, you have to make sure you have the particular cuddly toy that soothes. Or that special blanky.

And a bedtime ritual is indispensable for a smooth running household. The text books suggest giving the kids notice that bedtime is coming. You encourage them to calm down, to pick up and clean up whatever they've been doing. They then are taken in to brush their teeth. Maybe they get a bath before they get into their PJs. Then you find that special toy or blanket and they climb into bed for a story. Then its lights out. Day in and day out, it becomes a night-time ritual.

Whether we are little or big, repetition can be a very good thing to have in our lives. Sometimes, repetitive behavior is only a habit. Sometimes it's more important than that.

Going to church on a regular basis can be an important part of one's spiritual practice. It can be a ritual that has inherent value, whether or not the sermon is good or the choir is singing. Just the act of making the decision to be in community can feed us.

And there are rituals contained within the service that remind us that we are in a sacred place. We are in a place that is separate from the world outside our doors. We operate based on a different set of values inside this house than the ones that tend to drive our everyday behavior. We hope that this is a place where you can come to be refreshed.

Often, when we have meetings in this place, we light a chalice as we come together. Lighting the chalice is a ritual that separates us from where we have been and where we are. It allows us to enter into a new place. Lighting a chalice is a visual reminder of what we have in common. It signifies the values we share. It lets us know, we are not just with other people, but we are in a shared community.

Many of us have a chalice at home and light it to remind us that we are not alone. It encourages us to settle in to our selves, to calm our selves, to separate from the world of hustle and bustle. It reminds us of our values, principles and beliefs. It's a visual symbol of our connectedness to like minded people, to community and the web of life.

Everyone should have a ritual they can count on to help them in times of need. We all need a ritual that encourages us to separate from the mundane. A ritual that connects us to a different realm of existence where we can find peace in ourselves, regardless of what winds may be blowing in our world.

For some, that ritual is prayer. For others it may be meditation. For still others it may be walking or listening to a favorite piece of music. The Buddhist would say that washing dishes could serve such a purpose. Or simply paying attention to one's breathing.

Let us not shy away from ritual. It plays too important a role in our lives for us to go without. Notice what you do regularly, and ask yourself if it feeds you? If the answer is yes, let it be important, hold it in esteem. Allow yourself to be conscious of its life enhancing power. If the answer is no, go looking for something that will feed you.

Our souls need to be fed. And ritual is one way we feed ourselves.

May it be so. Amen