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**A Sprinkling of Oats**  
**Meaningful Rituals for a Modern World**  
by  
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***Summary:** Ritual has been a part of human self-care and growth since the dawn of time, but with the coming of the scientific age and secularism we have lost touch with ritual to our great loss. This article looks at the possibilities inherent in ritual, its capacities to repair wounds, create a sense of equanimity, and re-connect us to the more than human world.*

There's a storm coming. In the oppressive heat of an African afternoon, a powerful alpha chimp scowls over his shoulder and looks up at the sky. There's a distant rumble of thunder and the females of the troop, move off with the young ones to watch from the trees, that overlook a broad and sloping space, where the other males are spreading out, taking possession. As the storm begins to crash around them the alpha male tears a branch off a tree and, pant-hooting wildly, charges up and down the clearing beating the ground with his weapon. Enraged and pumped-up, with bristles erect and eyes ablaze, he finally hurls the bough at the sky before climbing into the trees, where he sits glowering at the other males. Over the next twenty minutes, he is followed by the next chimp in the male hierarchy, and the next, and the next; each pant-hooting violently, each hurling their torn-off branch at the sky<sup>i</sup>.

Since the dawn of time – and the chimps above were actually witnessed by Dr Jane Goodall at Gombe in the 1970s – rituals have been a part of primate, hominid and human development. Throughout recorded history we have instinctively created rituals around the greater and lesser occasions of our lives – childbirth and death, hunting and harvest – and yet over the last century or so many of us have come to distrust, disparage, or turn our backs on ritual. Since the Reformation and the Enlightenment, since the apotheosis of science and the growth of secularism, we have come to see ritual as something tied to our 'primitive' past – as empty flim-flam or benighted superstition. Sadly, as a consequence, we now find ourselves in the same fix as our ancestors, but minus the magical thinking that enabled them to cope with the 'terrible beauty' of a cruel, arbitrary, and often stormy, universe. How do we achieve better psycho-spiritual health and an underlying wellbeing in a secular world where we may be unable to access the various states of grace that might better our condition?

I've heard it said that we are so over-awed, or over-stimulated, by the science-based world we are creating that we are becoming numb. I'm not so sure. While there's a serious case for there being more numbness due to increased addictive processes and a kind of media-induced adrenal overload; and while there's a genuine problem developing around our inability to describe and label the feelings we are having, I believe we have yet to become the unfeeling robots of dystopian night-mare. After a century of mechanised warfare and a technological

revolution we remain stubbornly human. As the poet Robert Bly once said, “Just because you can’t express your feelings, doesn’t mean you’re not having them.”

The difficulty now is one of accessing and processing our feelings when we are generally encouraged not to express them. In business they are ‘messy’, in polite society they are shunned, and in dysfunctional families they are beyond explanation or even naming. I believe an answer lies in the revival of community and individual ritual, and the creation of safe places where feelings – especially the shadowy, ‘unacceptable’ feelings we are told to avoid or suppress – can be explored, witnessed and expressed.

My story around ritual follows a lifetime’s exploration as an artist and ritualist; a thirty-year journey through personal and organisational development, leading initiatory retreats, teaching in rehab and business, acting as a celebrant and crafting individual rituals for worried souls. In that time I’ve come to see that a return to properly shaped and held rituals can help us in two simple yet immensely important ways. Firstly ritual can help us to express our ‘difficult’ feelings and feel better in our skins, to shake off our accumulated rag-bag of repressed emotions and simply be at ease. Secondly – as a result of developing a kind of practice over time – we can come to re-experience the deep and satisfying interconnectedness of life.

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I am kneeling by a stream in Snowdonia, weeping quietly as I light a candle for the un-named, un-grieved foetus that an ex-girlfriend of mine once insisted upon aborting. Next to me a man is demanding to know, in the ripest language imaginable, exactly what his long-dead brother did with his fifty quid, while next to him, another man – vehemently anti-religious and exiled from his home in Ireland – is silently, intently lighting candle after candle, placing dozens of little lights on the opposite bank of the stream, representing the unreachable tribe of his looming dead.

This is one of a dozen or more grief rituals that I have participated in, or led, in which people have been able to lay down the oppressive weight of their pent-up – and I would say toxic – anger, grief and shame. They don’t need medical supervision, just a friendly companion to keep an eye out for them, and they don’t need weeks of therapy. They merely need an appropriate setting, and permission to let their feelings out.

Later, around a welcoming fire, these men will speak of a profound contentment – a state of grace if you will – which came upon them in the wake of what first appeared to be an outlandish, even self-indulgent activity. They’ll describe how this activity took on an intensity, even an urgency as they poured their creativity into making a shrine, and thinking through their individual relationships with their dead. And how they gathered into a group and addressed the shrine, chanting and waiting as they felt their feelings rising up till they each ‘went to the water’ and laid down their particular burden, saying – whispering, shouting or wailing – what needed to be said. Coming away from the ritual, each would

say they felt freer, lighter - and every one would acknowledge that they had been changed by the experience.

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**For the purposes of my work, I define a ritual is a symbolic action which allows the psyche, or the soul, to grasp a change of condition or status. It is the wedding ring we remember, not the certificate.**

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Once it is properly defined, and any fear of superstitious hocus-pocus or religiosity is dispelled, people instinctively step into ritual, in the way that they might step into song, or dance, or storytelling or any other art. The step-change comes when we make the distinction between ritual and ceremonial – ceremonial confirms the status-quo. The Queen ceremonially troops the colour every year, for instance, but she remains Queen and her troops remain her troops – nothing is actually changed by the event. Ritual is a symbolic act, which allows the psyche or soul to grasp a profound internal change. At this point we can begin to think in terms of re-alignment, renewal and even healing.

It is ritual's ability to marry symbol and emotion that gives it such profound and potentially life-changing power. Very often in a ritual, there comes a moment when an intensity of feeling and an understanding come together in a person to create a sudden, felt realization. I have come to think of this moment as the ritual shift. It is usually a clear and unforgettable point in a person's experience – a kind of watershed or divide between a clearly defined before and after. This has long been recognised by indigenous shamans and medicine teachers who, at the crucial point in a youngster's initiation, jab the young person with a sharp stick to physically embed the emotional fullness and intellectual insight in a whole, embodied experience.

The ritual shift need not be the climax to days of preparation or overwhelming feeling, but it does need to marry feeling and understanding in some kind of physical experience. In my own case, on one occasion, I was working as an assistant to a Mayan shaman, when a member of the 'instant community' we had convened started to speak about someone in the most glowing and generous terms. I was thinking of my next three tasks at the time and failed to notice that this man was actually talking about me, and my stumbling efforts to serve. As I stood open-mouthed, embarrassed and deeply moved by the rowdy, yet clearly loving appreciation of what was now a laughing, cheering, applauding mob, the shaman grabbed my hand. With extraordinary urgency he poured a little stream of dried corn into my palm, folding my fist around it. "Remember this moment!" he hissed and vanished into the joyous crowd. As I stood there, suddenly alive to the moment, I realized that Don Martín, the shaman had turned this into an initiation, a step up into a new state of self-acceptance and leadership. He had seen the moment unfolding and anchored it in my body. I still have the dried corn in a little bottle on my desk.

Despite the increasing numbers of these little victories for individuals and groups, on a broader cultural level we remain trapped in a state of ritual poverty. We live in a rich and sophisticated secular society but, generally speaking, we have no reparative rituals for those who have been subjected to humiliation or violence. We have neither healing rituals for parents who have miscarried, or lost a child, nor proper rites of passage to initiate our troubled youth. We have nothing to give the elderly a sense of value and purpose, and nothing whatsoever to greet the returning warrior, changed beyond help, and hurt beyond all kindness. We have no ritual to close out a job, nor end a project that has changed the lives of everyone involved in it. And most bizarrely of all we have nothing to mark or cauterize the end of a decade-long relationship that began in a flurry of white lace and confetti and ended in petty cruelties and recrimination.

Over the last twenty years I have been asked time and again to create what I have come to call rituals of lack – rituals that serve the areas of modern life where the old writs of religion fail to run, or more often remain censoriously aloof, choosing not to engage.

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Becky (identity changed) was in her mid-thirties, slim vivacious and determined to be chirpy, though it quickly became apparent that she was in pain. Some decade or more before she'd had an abortion, without her boyfriend's knowledge. She felt she couldn't tell her volatile man about what had happened back then and was increasingly prey to 'flashbacks' of her abortion experience and fantasies about her aborted child.

I prescribed her a long list of things to collect (I learned by watching the medicine teachers I worked with that long and complicated lists of things to do and acquire, help westerners to enter into the ritual experience; absorbing and gripping them with tasks and challenges so that, by the time the ritual actually starts, the individual has settled into the liminal, or threshold space in which a ritual change can happen).

Meeting again, Becky and I sat together while I 'formally' opened the ritual she had already been in for a couple of weeks. I talked her through the process, explaining everything as we went along. Having asked her to lay out all her objects, I asked her to create two foot-long stick-figures, which she imbued with her soul by breathing on them. Gradually the two figures took shape with their own distinct little faces and characteristics. I then talked her through the complex but beautiful process for 'creating a soul', of making an object out of oat-flour, cloth and little offerings that represented the essence and potential of her unborn child. Next I gently asked her to wrap the figures she had made in pink and blue cloth, and to tie the soul to the two figures, who now clearly represented the male and female potentials of her baby's undeveloped personality. Finally she bound all three together, making them one, swaddling the whole in white cloth.

Becky, who had been getting quieter and quieter as the process unfolded, stopped before wrapping the finished object together. "It's my baby, isn't it?" she said and quietly began to weep.

From then on she knew exactly what she needed to do. When I left her for a while to spend time with her 'daughter', she smiled softly, and without any self-consciousness, was able to say the things she needed to say to her representation of the baby that she had lost all those years before. A while later, at a spot that we had agreed, amidst yew trees and 'churchy' shrubbery, we gave her lost baby the rite of burial that it, and she had lacked. As I cast a last sprinkling of oats (for nurture not death) on the grave, I was struck by Becky's extraordinary dignity. Although she had cried from the moment of the ritual shift, and held her baby as if she would never give it up, she instinctively grasped the significance of the ritual and was able to lovingly place her sad little bundle in its grave, and say her goodbyes with quiet grace. She now knew she had a place to go to, should she ever need to commune with her lost child.

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This is merely one of the many rituals we lack in our culture. Such absences can leave us both entangled *and* bereft. The more of these rituals we create, or re-instate, the better our psycho-spiritual and emotional well-being. Be they for people made redundant, or for expatriates in the limbo of exile, we can once again find ways to create healthy, acceptance and closures where it may be lacking.

In the unstructured, non-hierarchical, gatherings of a group ritual such experiences can also be shared with surprising candour and equanimity. We are all human, after all, and in a world that alternates between frantic acquisition and emptiness, we tend to relish the depth and comfort of people's open-hearted responses in ritual space. Anthropologists call this ritual phenomenon *communitas* and it can be a healing in itself. The sense of communal belonging, of true connectedness, is often palpable in the group.

Thus well shaped and meaningful ritual can bring us back – secular or not - to three kinds of connectedness: internal re-connection with occluded, cut off, or shadowy parts of ourselves; *communitas*, in which we re-connect with other people in the liminal space of live ritual; and lastly re-connection with the Other, be that spirit, a godhead, or with creation, the environment, what David Abram calls the *more than human* world<sup>ii</sup>.

My personal journey led me down the third path, through native American style vision quests, and what the Nordic tradition would call out-sittings; ritual time spent alone but 'watched out for' in nature, usually without benefit of food or shelter. What tends to happen on these occasions is that one's conscious mind (ego) tends to loose its fierce grip after the first couple of days and eventually lets go enough for one to sit in relative silence. This allows us to relax our singular focus and take more in – hearing the messages of nature, which Native Americans say are there to be had if you see or hear a creature more than four

times. And of course that's what we are normally too busy to see, too 'edgy' or active to allow: the deer that normally shies away but allows you to cross her path because you hum a gentle riff to let her know you are no threat; or the pair of bald eagles that greet you on a 'pond' in New England, day after day as you drift, silently, under their dead pine tree; or the twenty badgers, seen over four days in Dorset, feeding, fighting, chattering and snuffling badgers, that seemed to accept you as another creature and a part of their world. Time, as in all true ritual, starts to bend in such moments and genuine visions can come, leaving you touched, inspired or simply aware of the deep interconnectedness of everything – as I wrote when reflecting on my experience with the badgers in Dorset...

On my last night in Dorset I *think* I had a dream... It was night time and a harvest moon was cresting the ash trees. There was a badger in front of me, an old boar, close to death, alone in a field of stubble. He was perfectly still and quite unworried – I knew he was unworried. Slowly, like a wolf raising his head to howl, he lifted his snout to the cool night air. But there was no sound. He just hung there, relaxed, his whole body curved and pointing to the sky. As I watched him, I smelled the scents that he was smelling, and my dim eyes saw the glow of the moon. I heard a rustling in the trees as a pheasant settled, felt the invisible movement of deer on the Hill. Like the badger, for a moment, I raised my head – and I was a part of everything<sup>iii</sup>...

Ritual then can bring us to connectedness on many different levels. In fact, in terms of general health and well-being, a re-connection with nature can heal us to a remarkable degree. However, if we don't have the leisure to spend four days out on the land, we can still connect with the wild by holding rituals in our garden, or a local park. It doesn't take much, just a lighted candle or a sprinkling of oats - as in all ritual, it's the intention that counts. For there is a part of us that will always yearn for ritual, a deep attentive part that listens and hopes. It's an ancient part that knows the stars and the weather, and the mood of the trees. It has stories in its heart and songs that it took from the birds. It doesn't do email and its not on Facebook but it is sure of itself out there in the forest. We need to nurture it.

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<sup>i</sup> *In the Shadow of Man*, by Jane Goodall. Dell Books. 1971.

<sup>ii</sup> *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More Than Human World*, by David Abram. Vintage, New York. 1997.

<sup>iii</sup> *Re-Enchanting the Soul: Meaningful Ritual in a Secular Age*, by William Ayot. Vala. Bristol. October 2015.