

The Surprising Power of Ritual

Three days later, on September 14, my daughter was at a hair salon in Atlanta getting a haircut. All of a sudden, and without any apparent planning, workers and customers alike began to rise to their feet and join hands. Before she knew what was happening, my daughter found herself standing in a circle singing “God Bless America” with a group of weepy strangers. A week earlier this would have been an unlikely way for a haircut to end. But in the wake of the recent Terror, this kind of spontaneous ritual has become a familiar scene around the country.

In response to horrifying events both known and imagined, our world has seemed of late to spin out of control. As the days pass, we have felt increasingly out of focus, unable to plug back into the lives we had before the towers came crumbling down before our eyes. We naturally look to our leaders and to the military to restore a sense of global safety and predictability to the world at large. We turn to the media to help us understand what is happening and why. But in our churches, our parks and, yes, our hair salons, many of us also find ourselves turning to the comfort and protection of ritual.

The terrorist attacks have produced a remarkable flowering of ritual acts that have served to get us through the darkest hours. Some of our most comforting and important responses to terror involve planned public rituals like religious services, candlelight vigils and the Presidential address to Congress. Other rites catch us by surprise, such as baseball games, which most of us never thought of as ritual. Suddenly we discover as we did back in ‘89, after the San Francisco earthquake, that it is less important who wins the game than that the baseball season be resumed, as if simply playing the game itself exerted some kind of magical healing effect on our damaged souls.

In times of collective crisis, our need for ritual communion can outpace our many conventional resources. And so we invent new rituals on the spot. These improvised rites often use traditional sacred forms like hand-holding, candle-lighting, singing, the formation of circles, and the making of shrines, but combine and embroider on them in novel ways. Our need to connect with others and assure ourselves that we live in an ordered world produces an outpouring of do-it-yourself rites, makeshift moments of communion that pop up in some of the oddest places.

But for me, though I didn’t know it until last week, some of the most powerful rituals in my life turn out to be those seemingly trivial everyday acts that have always been there right under my nose. These are the deep but perfectly ordinary rituals that were uprooted on September 11, the well-worn patterns of my everyday goings and comings that I have found myself struggling to recover. It’s a funny thing about the small routines of our lives. It is only we lose them that we realize that these petty rites of everyday life make up the baseline of our mundane music. Our smallest ritual moments, it turns out, actually underwrite of our sense of being in a meaningful universe: a morning cup of coffee with the newspaper, a casual lunch with friends, a weekly call to my mother, dinnertime with our families, jokes shared around the water cooler, watching weekly reruns of Seinfeld uninterrupted by breaking news, a date with my wife at the movies.

When the ritual pattern of ordinary life is uprooted by terrorism, we experience not just fear and uncertainty, but the inability to recover the ordinariness of our days. This is the secret terror in terrorism that besieged peoples the world over have always known, a secret that many of us in the United States, for whom terrorism was always a headline about someone else's backyard, are just beginning to understand.

Our great conventional rituals, civic and spiritual, the ones we usually think of as "Rituals" turn our attention away from this ordinary life and help us to place the everyday things of our lives in the context of ultimate acts and meanings. Such rituals have flourished in recent weeks, and have served us well. But a life lived only in the vortex of momentous events can become exhausting and vacant without the counterpoint of the ordinary.

And so I have made up my mind to fight back. Even as I walk in the shadow of uncertain coming events and contemplate the vast and inchoate landscape that has opened up before me, I have determined to attend to matters small as well as great. After two weeks glued to the TV, awaiting breaking news, after a succession of candlelight vigils, high-minded discussions, proclamations and stirring speeches, I will do what I can to reconnect with everyday life. Of course I am more vigilant and anxious. And I have no intention of sticking my head in the ground, ignoring the lessons of the moment. But I am determined to reclaim some corner of the unexceptional shape of my days and my ways, and not give in to the truly corrosive claims that our everyday lives are history.

For the ultimate target of the terrorists is not the World Trade Center or the Pentagon, but the rhythms and routines of an ordinary life. And so, even as we must re-tune our lives to play in a somewhat darker key, it is essential to keep touch with normal things, marshaling the forces of ordinary life against the powers of death. Confronted with relentlessly momentous happenings, the simple resumption of a baseball game, a business meeting, a trip to visit friends or a morning coffee ritual all become acts of courage, rituals of resistance, at once petty and profound.

Bradd Shore is Professor of Anthropology at Emory University and Director of the Emory Center for Myth and Ritual in American Life, an Alfred P. Sloan Center on Working Families