

On Defining Ritual

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Fall 2007

Ritual is many things, easy to define is not one of them. I see ritual as celebration and transformation; a creation of the human heart and our need to make connections. It is a dialogue with spirit and with self that enables us to make deep and lasting change in ourselves and the world we share, and through that process learn about and explore elements of who we are and what we think. Ritual is that which transforms us with our active participation and intention. That transformation may be minute – the shifting of a mood, from a very bad day or a bad headache into a calmer space with a decrease in pain, or it may be enormous- the movement from uninitiated, blind practitioner of a religious system into an initiated, knowing member of a religious community. While there are a number of things that go into creating and performing ritual, without the shift of consciousness and reality that happens through some form of transformation, ritual is merely play and story telling. And it is this power to transform and make lasting change, that gives ritual its power and its magnetism. And yet, what is ritual in truth? How do we define it ways that are usable and less than a page long?

In “Deeply into the bone; reinventing rites of passage” Richard Grimes, a Ritual Studies scholar who has written several books on ritual and ritual studies, digs into the difficulty of how to define ritual. In discussing the thoughts of Robbie E. Davis-Floyd, he quotes Davis-Floyd as saying: “a ritual is a patterned, repetitive, and symbolic enactment of a cultural belief or value; its primary purpose is transformation.”¹ In his discussion Grimes

focuses on the quality of generalization in this definition. Davis-Floyd is choosing to name the actions of doctors in hospitals as ‘ritual’ in contrast to the usual approach which is to see them as technology or science. Grimes points out that this generalization is rather broad, making it possible to define many more common activities such as going to work or school as ritual. “Even taking out the garbage is *repetitive* (Tuesday mornings before 8:00 am), *patterned* (from countertop to under the sink, to bins, behind the garage, to street curb – always in the same order), *symbolic* of primary Western values (cleanliness, orderliness), and transformative (of the landscape).”ⁱⁱ Even Grimes admits that he is taking this to an extreme so as to point out how general this definition is and how it therefore allows anything to be defined as ritual, but this is something we see in a lot of definitions and discussions of ritual, mine included. Grimes eventually resolves his issues with the use of ‘ritual’ as a meta word, by suggesting that what happens in the hospital is not ritual specifically but a ritualization of actions. “I am willing to think of hospital birth as ritual provided we signal the metaphoric move we are making by the use of a special term such as *ritualization* rather than rite.”ⁱⁱⁱ Using the word ritual as a kind of umbrella word to encompass a spectrum of meanings, Grimes defines ritual at one end of the spectrum as ritualization or ritualized actions, and at the other end as “rites”

I think it is very important that we understand and be conscious of our choices when using the word “ritual’ to describe many different ways of working. We need to be clear that we are using ‘ritual’ in a broader and more generalized sense where ritualization and rite are ends of the spectrum. Where I once would have said that brushing my teeth is a ritual, I agree now that it is a ritualized action. Clearly the work I do most of the time,

what I call ritual most often would fall into the end of the spectrum as a 'rite'. Grimes defines rite as referring "*to a set of actions intentionally practiced and widely recognized by members of a group. Rites are differentiated, even segregated, from ordinary behavior. Often they are classified as "other" than ordinary experience and assigned a place apart from such activities.*"^{iv} I think it is important to see that Grimes is adding "intentionally practiced" which touches on one of the core elements of magic from the wiccan perspective: intention, and differentiating the actions of a rite as set apart from every day actions, which touches on Mircea Eliade's distinctions between sacred and profane.

In searching for a definition of ritual it is easy to stumble over the issue of what to do with meditation and prayer. Meditation and prayer are both prescribed and repeated sets of actions which are created by an individual or group for the purpose of better understanding the self and/or the Divine. And generally meditation or prayer is a time set aside from the every day, profane, world. We even talk about having a time of meditation and quiet as sometime different from the rush and noise of daily life. It is also an intentional act and one sometimes associated with the sacred if not a specific manifestation of the divine. So does this make them both rites or ritualized actions?

Grimes again proves useful here. Grimes explains that conventional ritual theory splits the work of humans into two categories: "ritualistic (nonutilitarian, expressive) action and nonritualistic (utilitarian, means-end oriented) behavior."^v It is this distinction between expressive and means-end orientation that I think is one of the final pieces to defining what is a rite and what is ritualized behavior. Meditation and prayer are both means-end

oriented. They may have ritualistic elements in them, but their purpose is to achieve an end result, generally a particular state of mind. Rites are expressive in that they have as a goal the expressing of thoughts, opinions, ideas and even emotions. While there is usually an end goal to the magic at the heart of a ritual and that goal can be very utilitarian in nature (finding a job or sending healing energy) and so a means-end orientation in part, the primary purpose of the rite that the magic is a part of is expressive. So to the spectrum of types of ritual I would include a distinction about whether the purpose of the action, not just its component parts, is expressive or about an end result. As the dividing line between ritualization and rite is not always going to be easy to see, the distinction between expressive and means-end is not always going to be easy to see.

Understanding, and accepting that I am using ritual where Grimes uses rite, and that rite is part of the spectrum of ritual actions, I can finally define ritual for myself and my work as:

A set of expressive, sacred actions, intentionally done in one or more prescribed ways, outside the boundaries of profane life for the purpose of transforming the self and/or the community.”

Or to put it less academically and more practically:

Ritual is a dance with the divine that stretches and changes us and the world around us.

ⁱ Davis-Floyd “Birth as an American Rite of Passage” p. 8 quoted by Grimes in “Deeply into the Bones” p. 24

ⁱⁱ Grimes, Ronald “Deeply into the Bones” p. 26

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- iii Grimes, p. 28
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 - v Grimes p. 28