

Commentary Paper

Conduct a ritual self-inventory. Spend a day keeping track of the formal and informal rituals you engage in. How do you tell the difference between ritual and everything else, and what difference does it make?

My evaluation of daily habits as ritual or routine align closely with Levy's definition, where routines are "valued by the quality of their result and often of their efficiency" and rituals are "valued by the experience of the process to reach the result." In reflecting upon an average day, I have categorized seven actions into one of three categories: routines, rituals, and the in-between.

Routines are daily actions that I repeatedly perform but do not consider ritual because I am not actively and mindfully engaging my senses to create a meaningful experience. Within this category falls: brushing my teeth; and my morning routine of eating breakfast and reading the news. The former meets some of the criteria used in defining rituals, such as preparation (squeezing toothpaste onto a toothbrush and relocating to sink), specific temporal designations (after waking up and before going to bed), and physical sensations (the movement of my arms in brushing, the vibration of the electric toothbrush against my teeth, the taste of minty toothpaste). It can be argued (especially by dentists) that the quality of brushing one's teeth is an important part of the endeavor. However, brushing my teeth ultimately fails to meet my standard for being a ritual because I am neither emotionally stimulated or mentally engaged while performing the actions. I am frequently half asleep and zoning out when brushing my teeth, rushing to complete the gestures as quickly as possible and requiring only that the quality of the outcome is satisfactory. Similarly, although eating breakfast stimulates my taste buds and olfactory nerves and reading the news my brain, the "autopilot" mindset of completing these tasks reduces my

morning habits to a routine. A shared aspect of both of these routines is their solitary nature; for the most part, these actions are performed by myself without seeking or participating in social interactions.

As alluded to in defining my routines, actions that I consider rituals hold emotional significance and require active, intentional engagement. Surprisingly, only one of my seven repeated daily habits are pure ritual: meal prepping. My process of meal preparation requires significant mental effort (from sourcing what recipes to follow to planning grocery purchases) and incorporates all the senses (tasting and smelling the product throughout creation, examining produce visually to guarantee freshness, touching ingredients in preparation, and listening for timers signaling the finality of a dish). Most importantly, the meal prep process is one that generates significant emotional value. The pride in creating food that is delicious, visually appealing, and creative constructs a certain sanctity around meal preparation to ensure that the quality of the outcome is as ideal as possible.

Three daily habits of mine are both routine and ritual: exercising, showering, and journaling. Each of these holds an aspect of emotional engagement and an aspect of autopilot-like disengagement. Because these actions are a form of self-care that I follow, I am emotionally invested in the process and the quality of the output. In my favorite forms of working out (spin class and running), I chase the endorphin-fueled euphoria that appears when I am present in the moment. With showers, I have recently incorporated a habit of ending with a cold rinse. In addition to immediately activating all my senses, I take pride in pushing myself to extend the duration of these cold rinses as a measure of my capacity for endurance and resilience. The most emotionally-engaged of these three, journaling is a way for me to reflect and ruminate at the end of each day, a means for me to vent when I am upset or celebrate when I am gleeful. On days

that I am exhausted or busy, however, these three actions are squeezed into my schedule due to obligation, with a focus on completing the tasks as efficiently as possible. When this mindset shifts, the quality of my output goes down along with my emotional investment in the quality. As both routine and ritual, these three habits form an obligation for participation but also an opportunity to create meaning and emotional attachment to the outcome.

The characterization of my daily habits as routine, ritual, or a combination of both affects the time and effort that I allocate to them in my schedule. One insight I gained from this reflection is that the habits I rely on the most for self-care take the form of both routine and ritual. While this approach to self-care currently works, it leaves me to wonder if perhaps self-care should be more ritual than routine.

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21A.00 Introduction to Anthropology
Spring 2022

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