

Along the track

Our Need for Ritual

Are you ever struck by the increasing number of roadside memorials appearing in recent years – bunches of flowers, a photo, perhaps a cross, a handwritten message or some personal memento? These expressions of grief are sad reminders of a tragedy, a life lost in unhappy circumstances. I walked past Kensington Palace some weeks after Princess Diana died, just after the mountains of flowers and wreaths had been removed. They were being quickly replaced by just as many. In Sydney, Paris and Nice, so many people brought cards, or toys or flowers to each site.

Such tributes are not just reminders of a lost loved one, or of our feeling of helplessness in the face of tragedy, they are also expressions of the need for ritual in our lives. Particularly, but not only, in times of crisis and human hardship, we need some type of ritual to connect with each other, to show our respect, and try to give some meaning to something that seems incomprehensible.

At these times in particular, people search to satisfy 'a genuine yearning: for a deeper spirituality, for something which will touch their hearts, and for a way of making sense of a confusing and often alienating world' (Water of Life 1.4). For many, traditional rituals and liturgies that we have inherited don't always serve the complexities of modern life – some feel such rituals are out of date. For many, the language of our inherited rituals do not speak to them, some even find it alienating.

Despite in some countries religious belief and practice markedly declining, nevertheless new options, religious, spiritual, and secular, are emerging. Individuals and groups are adopting them in order to make sense of their lives and give shape to their spiritual aspirations. Those aspirations don't go away simply because we don't believe in religion. Rituals were developed to express deeply-held beliefs or spiritual needs long before organised religion appeared.

Without relevant and appropriate rituals in our lives, we can be left feeling disconnected, confused even, feeling that some deeply held beliefs or special occasions are not appropriately marked or celebrated. Rituals (and ceremonies) add depth to our lives, making the ordinary seem special, they can add a further dimension to life in the good times and the bad, in the ordinary times and when we want to mark some event or occasion as special.

Rituals can help us to see everyday things in a new way, we consciously recognise that this person, this occasion, this place perhaps is special, it reflects our values and beliefs, our real priorities. I went to a wedding once where we were told not to dress up, just come along. Stubbies were distributed for us to drink during the ceremony in the park. I wondered what those who designed this gathering were trying to convey, what 'set it apart', made it special, how it nourished the spirit within?

Finding time to touch the sacred is a basic need within us. Otherwise we simply operate at a level that tends to deny our spiritual dimension, our need to nourish our soul. People have recognised that need for thousands of years – our times may be different but the need is not. We might be surprised how much ritual already plays out in our lives.

Are there people we hold dear? How do they know, how do we tell them, treat them? Is there something we do regularly so they know? A friend of mine received a phone call from his father each Sunday night, as did his brothers and sisters – it became an important ritual in their relationship.

Are there special moments that you set aside in the hope that you won't be interrupted or distracted, no emails, no texting. Is dinner still a special part of family life? Do you cherish a few quiet moments each day? Even the simple things like regularly telling or reading a story at bedtime, a weekend meal, a family gathering all play their part in helping us develop rituals in our lives. Even the weekly footy match has elements of good ritual about it.

From time immemorial, people have set aside places as sacred, as a community or as individuals. We still need to do that. Some places represent something special in our lives, they provoke memories and feelings within us – in their own way they mark sacred times and spaces in our lives. For many of us, when we think of sacred spaces, houses of worship may come to mind. As you step through their physical thresholds, with their great doors and religious symbols, you move not simply from outside to in, but between two modes of being – the sacred and the 'worldly'. Removing shoes as one does before entering a mosque or making the sign of the cross with holy water helps us mark this passage. Sometimes when we enter the times or places we find 'special' we need some way of marking that passage in our lives.

Rituals can give us a sense of connection. Rituals can help ensure that the important moments of life that really count won't get lost. Rituals can pull us back to what's important, to what is sacred in our lives. They help us express our need for companionship, our need to connect, to mark special events and places as well as people. What rituals do you have in place to celebrate Christmas this year, to mark how it is special, to show that it celebrates something very sacred?

Regards
Jim Quillinan

Email: jquillinan@dcsi.net.au