

What is a ritual?

A ritual

- has a repeated pattern
(something we do over and over again in much the same way)
- does not have just one meaning
(rather a ritual is a matrix of many levels of meaning; hence, we talk about a ritual being "thick" or "dense" with meaning)

In a ritual

- we perceive something with our senses
(it involves visible, audible, and/or tactile experience)
- an action is done
(not just something we say, but something we do)
- language is used or implied
(we express meaning of what we are doing with words)

Ritual

- evokes our participation in the stories connected with the tradition
(giving it "depth" and making it "thick" with meaning)
- is the way in which the beliefs and ideals of the community are simultaneously generated, experienced, and affirmed (Emile Durkheim)

Rituals

- separate us from the ordinary and the mundane
(causes us to leave some things behind so we can attend to others)
- are a threshold (liminal) experience in which we are not bound by what we have been in the past, but are not yet propelled into the future
(here, through symbols and actions, we participate in the sacred stories that shape our identity)
(here we engage in a kind of "holy play" which puts things together in a new way)
- reorient us to the world we live in day-by-day but in a transformed way (Victor Turner)

Ritual

- gives coherence to understanding our experience
- shapes our attitudes, mood, and internal motivation
(our "disposition for action" [Clifford Geertz])
- helps us know instinctively what is real and important
- helps us understand how to act in light of these priorities
- holds us accountable for our choices (Catherine Bell)