

PREFACE

The Weave of Rituals

IN MODERN secular societies, religion is often considered antiquated and its traditions a fossil of benighted people dwelling in a medieval worldview, lost in reveries of salvation. Some look down on piety as primitive, and ritual practices as childlike. Certainly secular academia avoids religion and eschews the scent of spirituality. Ethics are allowed inside the ivy walls, but anything that smacks of faith or belief is left on the steps of the divinity schools. Our siloed rationalized disciplines are enough to contain all the “truth” that is needed. A life of meaning or purpose? Perhaps the philosophy or religion departments can attend to that.

Yet, can we imagine our lives without rituals?

Most of us have daily rituals—as simple as our morning coffee or afternoon tea. Many of us measure time with rituals—national holidays to mark the beginning or end of a season or to celebrate the harvest in autumn. Holidays tied to biblical history, such as Hanukkah, Passover, Christmas, and Easter, occur at the solstice and equinox, weaving us into solar cycles. We find light in India at Diwali and remember the dead in Japan at Obon. These are times that celebrate seasonal changes, commemorate historical events, and memorialize our ancestors. They give us a pause that mutually restores us and renews the life around us. A calendar without such

punctuation seems somehow bland or even incomplete.

Equally important are those rites of passage that transition us to different stages in our journey—birth, death, and marriage. These rites move us from one state of being to the next, providing an inflection point of change. In this process, an individual is carried by the community of humans and nature across a liminal state. Ideally, such rituals lend support for an individual’s growth, development, and maturation, woven into nature’s rhythms.

They also help process emotions in a way appropriate to the rite of passage. Joy and delight, grief and anguish can be expressed in these rituals through music, words, flowers, and symbols. This is why religious traditions recognize the importance of ritual. As the Confucian Hsun Tzu says: “The beginning of [joy and sorrow] are present in humans from the first. If one can . . . broaden or narrow them . . . express them completely and properly, fully and beautifully . . . so that they may serve as a model to ten thousand generations, then that person has achieved true ritual.”

Rituals are a weave of orienting, grounding, nurturing, and transforming us not just within the context of human life and society, but also within the concentric circles in which we dwell. These ever widening circles embrace Earth and the cosmos. Rituals reconnect us to the continuity of being of universe, Earth,

and humankind. They nurture us with the elements of life—earth, air, fire, and water and restore us with the gifts of food. They orient us to a dynamic cosmos—a pleroma filled with stars, galaxies, and planetary systems. They ground us in the Earth community in all its life-forms and the immensity of species and ecosystems, transforming us with a new spiritual and moral energy to contribute to the well-being of society.

Reading the work in this issue of *Orion*, we’re brought back to the vibrant potential of ritual to renew our sense of cosmological belonging and earthly entanglement. We are reminded that we are woven into nature, which has its own rituals of birth and death, mating and migration. Rites of nature—sunrise and sunset, seasonal variations, bird choruses and whale song—are primal nodes of transformation, drawing us into the great fecundity of life.

We are far from disconnected. We dwell in kinship to one another, to stars in the heavens and sea stars in the oceans. We recognize now that we have descended from them both, Earthlings seeking our way home. Rituals interwoven with nature’s pulsations provide a vehicle for our journey.

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