

## What do humanists think about ritual?

The need for ritual is innate. It is born of a deep need to articulate times of profound experience and transition, and is an essential part of what makes, and keeps, us human. Over human history, as we encountered those life-changing events, we naturally highlighted them by adorning them with art, music, poems, and prose. We created meaning in the collection of activities that heighten the moment of change, as we forged the activities into ritual.

In turn, rituals can act as the punctuation marks in our life, providing us with a sense of structure. On the grand scale, they support a narrative of our lives, building a bank of shared memories and shared experiences. On a smaller scale, they are a chance to take time out from the routine and chaos of our day-to-day lives and express those things not often expressed.

We find we need ritual to enable us to connect with our deepest thoughts and feelings on those profound occasions, our highest hopes and most debilitating fears. We need it to face the realities of our changing bodies and relationships. We use language that authentically articulates our experience of ourselves in the world, to ourselves and to those closest to us. In fact, it is an acknowledgement that we are, at our core, a social species, and we feel the need to mark the important moments in our lives with the people who matter most to us.

### How do rituals help us?

For example, when we look at the ritual of a wedding, the elements of the ceremony that matter are common. The love of the couple for one another needs to be spoken aloud, asserted in front of an audience, which 'witnesses' the declarations. The ritual of the exchange of vows, and often rings, highlights the significance and solemnity of the occasion, which reminds all attending that the couple are about to significantly change an aspect of their lives.

For funerals, the importance of ritual is often part of the grieving process. Funerals are seen as the place to let go, say goodbye, and express feelings and thoughts 'one last time'. Again, the standard components of a funeral offer comfort to those attending as it provides a sense of expectation about what is going on: the eulogy, the choice of music, and the readings.

Rituals also have the power to bring disparate individuals together to collectively celebrate or memorialise national or international events. Remembrance Day is a good example of this, where, in towns, cities, and villages across the country, people gather to remember those who gave their lives in war and conflict. Here, an inclusive ritual that highlights the sacrifices made can bring together a community.

### When rituals can hurt

There are occasions, however, when ritual does not help, but – occasionally – can actually harm us. Within the funeral industry, there are innumerable accounts from people who attended 'traditional' religious funerals that left them alienated, frustrated, and depressed because the platitudes offered were at best irrelevant and, at worst, an offensive contradiction to the values held by the person who had died. The complex process of recognition, acknowledgement, and letting go of the deceased cannot take place at this type of funeral if the grieving do not agree with comments in the ceremony, such as 'leaving for a better place', and so the grieving process and subsequent healing process are stymied. Inserting a deity into a ritual where the attendees do not believe in such things can be difficult and can often prevent the ritual from being able to fulfil its purpose. National and community-based ceremonies and rituals that are written and performed with religious people in mind will often make non-religious people feel undervalued or, worse, unwelcome.

At its core, ritual is meaningful and beneficial when it reflects the person's belief system and the core elements of that system that hold meaning for that person. This makes for a psychologically healthier individual and, by extension, for a substantially healthier society.

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