"Renovating Ritual"
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
First Parish in Wayland
March 4, 2018

In writing a sermon, I fairly often ask my partner Bill his thoughts about the topic. And so, earlier this week, I asked him, "What comes to mind when you think of ritual?" Immediately he responded, "meaningless."

I don't think Bill is alone in his perspective. For many, ritual—especially religious ritual—is perceived as the empty repetition of words and movements. Perhaps ritual seems like religious 'mumbo jumbo' without any emotional impact or intellectual insight. You may wonder, what's the point of ritual—especially if you're someone who doesn't feel compelled to appease a god with the proscribed ritual actions?

I get the disdain for empty, meaningless rituals. If I had not had a healthy dose of skepticism toward the religious ritual in which I was raised, then I wouldn't be here today as a *Unitarian Universalist* minister. And yet, I also wouldn't be here today as your minister if I had not learned to love and appreciate the importance of meaningful rituals. Much of what I do after all is lead rituals . . . like the weekly worship service we are here, right now in the midst of celebrating.

So, what *is* ritual? At its most basic, ritual means a pattern of word and/or movements. While primarily associated with religion, psychologists also refer to rituals a patient may follow to relieve anxiety. And, there is also the common usage of ritual as a regular action a person takes—like the early morning walk to survey the neighborhood Ove takes in the book *A Man Called Ove.* His walk is his morning ritual.

In religion, ritual often means precisely following a set of scripted words . . . like those of the Catholic Mass or the Apostle's Creed. Such repetitive scripts can feel like rules that bind us—we *must* say x, then y, and then z. And, well, we UU's are not very fond of such rules. *We* celebrate *freedom . . .* right?!?

But, here's the thing: freedom understood as unbounded options is not always a good thing. The world is a big place. A *really* big place. It can be easy to feel a bit lost and unmoored. There are times we may even feel a bit overwhelmed by the all of it. We need ways to not only make life seem more manageable, but to also to make it feel more meaningful.

Rituals can help us to do both. The popular author, Joseph Campbell, wrote, "A ritual is the enactment of a myth. And, by participating in the ritual, you are participating in the myth."

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In other words, rituals are a way that we engage in a larger story about the world and our places within it. Ritual connects us with a sense that we are part of something larger than ourselves, that the days of our lives have a bigger meaning.

I'd like to illustrate this musically. Every day we engage in a stream of distinct activities. We eat, we sleep, we drive the car, we talk on the phone, and much more. One way to portray this sequence of actions is as discrete, individual notes. Or, as Polly will illustrate on the piano, as a series of notes played *staccato.* [play musical example] In this style, the individual notes are distinct but not really connected to each other in any meaningful way. *Staccato* literally means "detached." Now, Polly will play the same notes, but *legato*. [play musical example] Sounds different, doesn't it? *Legato* means "connected" or "bound together." The notes appear in relationship to the other notes.

What if we thought of our lives not as a series of distinct activities, but as a song of connected notes? What if we understood our individual lives as part of a larger story?

Traditionally, religion has been a key vehicle for telling cosmic stories about the nature of the universe and our place within the world. Religions tell stories about the origins of life and the meaning of death as well as how to live rightly and well. Religious rituals such as holiday celebrations, baptisms, dedications, funerals, memorial services, weddings, and more are all vehicles to remind us of these stories. Stories like that of the birth of child on a starlit night in Bethlehem that reminds us of the holy miracle of new life. Or, stories of a teacher who gave up a youth of great wealth to sit beneath a tree seeking enlightenment. Religious stories—taken as historic fact or as allegorical myth—depict cosmic narratives that can become a frame and container for our own lives.

However, when a particular religious story no longer feels relevant or alive or 'true' in any sense, its rituals also cease to be meaningful. But, this doesn't have to mean that *all* ritual is meaningless. Perhaps it simply means that you need to find new rituals. Rituals that connect you with a narrative of the world that *does* make sense to you.

We see this kind of renovation of rituals in our own Unitarian Universalist tradition. Although we are historically rooted in Christian traditions, most congregations no longer practice the Christian rituals of baptisms or funerals. We do not celebrate a baptism because we do not believe that children need to be cleansed and purified of inherited sin. Rather, we celebrate the gift and possibility of every new life in a child dedication ceremony. And instead of funerals that focus on a particular belief in the afterlife, we hold memorial services that celebrate the <u>life</u> of the one who has died. Nor do we have a UU

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wedding ritual that every couple must follow. Rather, the love and commitment of each couple shape the content and form of their ceremony.

I point to these examples because they illustrate the ways in which our Unitarian Universalist tradition weaves together a sense of ritual *and* of freedom. We do have rituals—but we also encourage flexibility in creating rituals so that they will feel relevant and meaningful to those who participate. Ritual does not need to equal "meaningless." The right rituals can be powerful tools for creating meaning in our lives.

Indeed, I wonder if we may engage in rituals more often than we are aware. Already this morning, I tried to point out the way in which many of us engage in a ritual by entering this space and sitting in the same place, near the same people. Placing yourself in a particular place or with the same people creates a familiar pattern that can feel comforting. We can lean back into our pew and feel 'at home.' This fills us up.

Are there other ritual elements in your life that fill you up? Perhaps you have a daily ritual of walking the dog in order to get outside and move for a few minutes—reminding yourself that you are too are an animal in need of exercise and fresh air. Or, I suspect many of us have annual rituals that we look forward to each year—perhaps it's how we celebrate our birthdays or a place we go every summer and when we're there we *always* make sure to do a certain thing. Such familiar patterns remind us of who we are—they reinforce the stories of our lives as well as what those stories say about who and what matters to us. To use another musical reference, these rituals are like a refrain or motif to which the score keeps returning.

Imagine your life without a favorite ritual. Without that birthday cake shared with family or without the summer trip. Imagine that First Parish was no longer here on Christmas Eve or we stopped holding the Rummage Sale! Such changes may not be matters of life and death, but we may feel strong pangs of loss as we imagine life without some of our favorite rituals.

Sometimes we have to remake the rituals in our lives as the stories of our lives shift. Our children leave home and holidays are not the same. We move to a new place and the new congregation doesn't feel the same—or, you're in the same congregation but a new minister shows up with her own way of celebrating (or not celebrating) certain rituals.

Although we often come to rely on rituals as the places of familiarity that remind us who we are, we can also find ourselves needing to renovate the old rituals or even to create ones. But why? Do we even *need* rituals?

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Perhaps we don't *need* rituals, but I do think we a sense of meaning. I think we need our lives to feel like they are more than ongoing series of unrelated, '*staccato'* events. We need to feel like we are part of something larger, part of a story, part of a song. Rituals can be one way that help us to feel this sense of meaning. Rituals can *create* meaning.
I'll give you an example from my life. Last night we had homemade pizza for dinner like we do nearly every Saturday night. When I grew up, my family always had homemade pizza for dinner on Saturday night. To this day, my parents have homemade pizza every Saturday night. By now, I've lived away from my parents longer than I ever lived with them. And yet, this weekly meal is a moment in which I feel connected to my faraway family as well as to the decades long story of my own life. More than just a meal, this ritual creates meaning for me and for my son who also knows the larger story.

Why bother with ritual? In response to this question, John Halstead, a humanistic pagan journalist and activist, writes,

> That's what ritual is for me: art. [. . .] It is dance and poetry and song all wound together. [. . .] Ritual and poetry point to something that cannot be fully expressed in representational language. Or rather, instead of pointing us to something, ritual and poetry invite us to experience something.

When we engage in rituals, we have the opportunity to experience life in a different way. Our activities can point us to something larger than a single moment. Our lives do not need to be *staccato* notes, they can become part of an ongoing song, an epic poem, or a work of art.

I don't know what your rituals are, but I encourage you to notice them. Notice the activities that you return to again and again that fill you up with a sense of joy and connection, with a sense of meaning. Ask yourself why *these* activities matter to you, why they give you meaning? Or, perhaps you notice that you need a ritual of release—a way of letting go of an old hurt or a deep sorrow. Notice if you have ways that you release the experiences of pain or anger, grief or disappointment. These too are important rituals.

Rituals need not be empty repetition. Rituals can be intentional patterns of making meaning in your life. They can be chosen activities that link you with a sense that your life is part of something larger. That you are neither alone, nor detached, but bound together with others in a larger story of living in a shared world.

So may it be.
Amen.

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