

Grounding Through Ritual

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We sat on the floor of the empty house around a small candle in a way which had become very familiar to us. My wife, our 2 children, and I were saying goodbye to our small rental house after living there for 1 year and preparing to start our next journey in our newly renovated home in Seattle. We each took a turn to recall one of our favorite memories of our time living in the rental house and one hope of what we might experience in our new home. It was 2016 and our children were teenagers, anxious to get into a larger living space where they could entertain their friends.

This ritual began in 2005 when we left our home and jobs in Seattle with our 2 young children to move to Bolivia for 4 years. From the time we left Seattle to the time of our return, we moved 6 times, facing countless challenges and uncertainties. In order to provide some sense of grounding and consistency for our children in the midst of all the transition, we began a ritual of remembrance and appreciation as we left each of our homes. After a while, our children looked forward to lighting the small candle and telling their stories.

As the COVID-19 Pandemic lingers on into its chronic stage, I believe it is important for all of us to find some sense of grounding amid the constant uncertainty and change. We can do this by cultivating a practice or ritual reminding us of what grounds us in challenging times; some unchanging belief, value, or principle which can provide a stable foundation underneath the cracking surface of what we used to call “normal”.

A ritual is defined as any activity that we perform at least as much for its *symbolic and emotional value* as for its practical value. We perform a ritual because the act in itself has meaning, or because doing it makes us feel better about ourselves, or both.

Ritual acts give time-structure to our lives on daily, weekly, and annual levels. They assist and encourage the formation of trust and community between people. They give shape to public expressions of powerful emotions. They help to reorient and stabilize our own feelings when we need to comprehend and cope with crucial life transitions.

As physicians, we perform rituals every day. The actual act of taking a history and performing a physical exam is a ritual which our patients have come to expect and often miss if we don't carry it out completely. “Making rounds” is a long-standing ritual which, when done well, can provide community, form trust, and give structure to our daily lives as trainees or attendings. We perform daily rituals at home such as establishing a morning routine, reading a bedtime story to our kids, or sharing a meal with others.

Lately, I've been feeling disoriented, not knowing what to expect to happen, uncertain about what news to believe or not believe. So, I have turned to certain rituals and practices to provide structure and grounding to my life: waking up early and practicing body movement and meditation, making “breakfast” for my young adult kids (at lunchtime!) to connect in some small way, taking an evening walk with my wife and our dog to reconnect at the end of the day.

These rituals help me cope with all the other rocky stuff that happens with the rest of my day.

What rituals have you held onto through the pandemic? What rituals have been lost because of all the stress and confusion? What rituals would you like to establish to look back on when all of this is over as I do when I reminisce about our time in Bolivia? Here are some suggestions you might consider:

- Start your day with a short period of time devoted just to you, doing whatever you choose that allows you to feel more grounded.
- Start your clinic day by bringing everyone together for a brief check-in; not to go over the patient list, but to actually tell each other how you are feeling each day.
- Take a few minutes to walk outside in the middle of the day. Take some deep breaths and truly take in your surroundings.
- Make an intentional transition from work to home such as remaining in your car for a few minutes breathing deeply and letting go of your workday before entering the house or changing your clothes before engaging in any home activities.
- Make a commitment to connect with one life-giving friend per week either by phone, in person, or email.

Establishing some kind of ritual for yourself, or in community with others, can provide just the grounding you need to make it through this challenging time.