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GENERAL PAPER

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Paper 2

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Karan Johnson discusses the role of rituals in our lives.

- 1 When the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski visited the Trobriand Islands in Papua New Guinea in the early 20th Century, he noted the elaborate ceremonies and rituals fishermen would perform before venturing out onto the open sea. They would carefully paint their canoes with black, red and white paint, chanting spells as they did so. But when the fishermen went out into the nearby calm lagoon, they did not use these rites. Malinowski concluded that the 'magic' rituals performed by the islanders were a response to help them cope with the unpredictable might of the Pacific Ocean. Indeed, why do humans embrace rituals so fervently? At the start of every year, people around the world participate in one of humankind's largest ritualised celebrations. To commemorate another trip around the sun, New Year activities include fireworks, kisses and resolutions – as well as some practices unique to specific cultures, such as eating a grape with each midnight clock strike in Spain or burning effigies that represent the previous year in Central and South America. 5 10
- 2 Many social rituals originated when humans started living in ever bigger groups, particularly after agriculture enabled larger populations to live in the same place. That fateful decision has exposed humans to all kinds of violence and diseases, from conflicts within groups to wars between groups, to infectious diseases that can now spread swiftly across entire villages. To prevent such catastrophes from occurring, humans put their very nimble, whimsical minds to work. Because we are so socially oriented, we tend to interpret any bad luck as something that someone – a spirit, a demon, or a god – has done to us, perhaps because our behaviour has upset them. Therefore, we try to find a way to do things that will prevent such disasters from happening again. 15 20
- 3 Research identifies three elements of a ritual. First, it consists of behaviours that occur in fixed succession – one after another – and are typified by formality and repetition. Secondly, the behaviours have symbolic meaning, and lastly, these ritualised behaviours generally have no obvious useful purpose. However, rituals occur surprisingly often within our everyday lives. It is believed that we form rituals based on our values. For instance, people with Christian values christen their babies as a symbol of spiritual rebirth. But rituals go further than helping us to live out our values. They may also make us less anxious. Ritualistic practices can help to bring a degree of predictability to an uncertain future. They convince our brains of constancy and predictability as rituals buffer against uncertainty and anxiety. Studies show that the anxiety-reducing effect of rituals can apply to almost any high-pressure endeavour. Sport psychologists also propose that pre-performance rituals can confer benefits for athletes, such as better execution and possible reduction in anxiety levels. Rafael Nadal, winner of 20 Grand Slam singles titles, reportedly has almost as many rituals – 19 – which he uses before each match. 25 30 35
- 4 All human cultures have their rituals – typically repetitive, symbolic behaviours that we experience as purposeful – though we generally cannot explain how they are supposed to work. These rituals can reinforce a sense of community and common beliefs, but their bewildering diversity can also alienate and separate people, particularly when the valued rituals of one culture strike another as bizarre. Most scientists who study rituals consider their murky origins to be one of their defining characteristics. But recently, researchers have come to suspect that before rituals became purely social and highly peculiar, many may have started out as attempts to avoid disaster. Ritualisation may have helped human cultures maintain behaviours that people thought would keep them safe, even after the initial reason for a behaviour was forgotten. Many rituals also provide psychological comfort during times of hardship, and after they become common practice, they help to bring people together by bolstering communal bonds. 40 45

- 5 Incidentally, the type of ritual does not appear to have a bearing on the reduction of anxiety. Even simple rituals can be extremely effective in reducing anxiety. Paradoxically, rituals involving pain, injury or trauma could hold some type of psychological advantage for those who perform them. For example, firewalkers reported a higher level of happiness after they had taken part in this ritualistic ordeal. There are also some indications that rituals can help us cope with some of the most challenging periods of our lives too, such as when grieving. End-of-life rituals can create stronger connections between the dying and their loved ones. In a 2014 study, researchers found that grief was lower among participants who performed personal rituals, like washing the car of the deceased every week. When we experience loss, we often feel a loss of control, so it is perhaps not surprising that rituals are used to create some semblance of order to regain control. 50 55
- 6 Rituals can also facilitate personal growth and development and are often used to mark personal milestones and achievements. They provide a symbolic way to let go of old patterns and embrace new ones. For example, rites of passage, such as graduation ceremonies, can mark the transition from one stage of life to another, symbolising the process of self-improvement and transformation. But the benefits of rituals also extend beyond the individual – they are evident in groups of people too. Ritualistic behaviour can improve social bonding when we practise it collectively. Having social networks has frequently been linked to well-being, and it is thought that rituals – frequent group gatherings – are particularly good at facilitating such networks. Group rituals indicate that members are like-minded and share certain values, which promote an atmosphere of trust. For example, ritualistic chants have been shown to make football fans feel connected. And for singer-songwriter Beyoncé, saying a prayer in a circle with all her crew is a ‘spiritual practice’ that leads to a perfect performance. In the face of danger, group cooperation may be a matter of life and death. The culture of the army is a great example – the synchronised group movements practised by military units around the world prepare them to act as one in dangerous situations. 60 65 70
- 7 Despite their many benefits, however, there are some downsides to rituals. For groups, rituals can stimulate inter-group bias. More disturbingly, group ritualistic endeavours, such as hazing, the cruel initiation ceremonies prevalent among some student groups or within the military, are extremely harmful. Hazing often involves degrading and humiliating the initiated and, on rare occasions, has resulted in death. Not all rituals are effective because we do not always understand what is producing the risk we are trying to control. Some are even dangerous – for instance, in some religious traditions, self-flagellation is seen as a way to atone for sins or to show devotion to a higher power. While self-flagellation may demonstrate extreme devotion or penance, it can often cause serious physical harm. In addition, some counterproductive rituals, for instance, those relating to dubious health treatments using traditional, exotic herbs, can become resilient once they gain social significance. It is important to keep in mind that to most people, the mechanisms of modern medicine are just as opaque as rituals are. While traditional rituals have been successfully passed down across many generations, the practices of modern medicine are relatively new. When a doctor tells you, I am sorry, but there is nothing we can do for you, that may be true, but it is very discouraging as well, so many people around the world will go and look for other options. 75 80 85
- 8 Overall, research suggests that whether informal, secular, individual or group-based, rituals can have a positive effect on our well-being. Given that rituals have stress-busting qualities, we should adopt pre-performance rituals during stressful situations in our own lives, perhaps before giving a presentation at work or before taking an exam. Like the fishermen of the Trobriand Islands, they could help steel us for the rough seas ahead. 90