

Hidden rituals -Cassandra Wunsch

Our experience of existence, our sense of belonging to a particular place and time, is built around a million million tiny rituals. In the past, our ancestors codified many of these rituals, assigned them a religious significance, fleshed them out with nuance and texture, with sanctity and gods. In the post industrialised age, many of us have removed the more overt ritualistic aspects of our lives... or so we think.

Human interactions and the evocation of responses, both intellectual and emotional often involve ritual components. Acts, symbols, or words that have been assigned a collective meaning, that speak to us culturally without the need for explanations or definitions. This culturally agreed upon language of concepts plays itself out in everything from advertising, through music and art, to our interpersonal relationships and how we present ourselves to the world. These rituals, these 'secret' symbols help us to discern how we are supposed to act, think and feel. You can see the complex interactions of these tiny, ingrained ritual communications in public places the world over.

There have been articles for years about the marketing values of certain colours. Exposure to particular colours has a tendency to increase hunger, others make a potential customer feel restful or calm. Studies now show that the smell of rosemary has a measurably positive effect on memory. In truth the utilisation of these kinds of triggers is no different to a hedge witch, shaman, or ancient healer utilising particular colours or smells to elicit the desired response in their patient. We've come full circle, the only difference is that during the age of the shaman and the witch, we were all at least partially aware of the potential for our manipulation, even if as a population we didn't know exactly how it might be accomplished. Because for many of us, such concepts have been dismissed as flights of fancy or superstition, we can actually be more susceptible to the application of these techniques than we were in the past.

It's not all consumer manipulation in pursuit of a profit margin though. These techniques work in part because they're culturally ingrained, because we're using them every day, in hundreds of ways, without really thinking about them. They spring from our shared experiences and our history. Very few symbols maintain their meaning across cultural boundaries, but within the bounds of those 'in the know' they constitute a simple, fast and powerful communication system.

Before we all leave our homes in the morning, we go through a series of rituals to try to ensure that our interactions with the world go the way we want them to. Some of them are purely physical and functional, we have a shower, eat breakfast, put on deodorant, that kind of thing. Others have no affect on our health or functionality at all, they're purpose is to change the way the world perceives us and the way we feel about ourselves.

Those aesthetics we adopt or aspire to are powerful markers indicating to ourselves and to others information about how we feel, how we'll behave, and how we wish others to behave towards us. Often, I don't have specific needs, so my prep to leave the house is simple. Straight forward. Designed only to indicate to the world (and to myself) that I am a relatively adult individual capable of my own self care. On the days when I have to be a professional, when I need people to believe what I have to say, trust my experience, or treat me with deference, the ritual can be quite drawn out. It involves the careful arrangement of my hair, the application of coloured powders to my face, and the selection of attire suitable to the work.

I'm not a dedicated practitioner of these particular arts, so my rituals never last more than an hour, but it's possible for masters to get up at dawn to begin their preparations so they can be out of the house by nine.

These preparations signal to others the kind of person they are going to be interacting with, but they

also change our mindset. At home with your family, wearing your sweat pants and slippers, you are relaxed and calm. You'll use more contractions, more slang, possibly more casual expletives. In order to become the put together professional you will need to be to give a presentation to the board, interact with clients, or secure funding, you will have to change. Stand up straight, make eye contact, lose the slang and ease up on the contractions. Even in Australia you can't drop a casual F-bomb in the board room. The act of putting your game face on changes you, the way you think, the way you feel. They help you to become the person you need to be today.

These rituals and symbols work in no small part because of the vast shared history we all have. That shared history provides a kind of shorthand that we use subconsciously every day. It's part of why travelling to new places and experiencing other cultures can be at the same time both exciting and confusing. Their lexicon of symbols, their shared understanding of daily rituals, is different to ours. This is something noticeable on a street level, in shopping centres and cafe's, but it's magnified in our art.

You may have heard that artists are creatures of habit. Painters who only wear a certain pair of pants, writers who use different coloured paper for different kinds of writing, and musicians or actors who end up with personal rituals so specific and demanding that they can become a burden on those who have to deal with them! Artists deal in this language of symbols and feelings and reactions in a far more deliberate and focused way even than marketing executives who really want you to buy the new iPhone. They're fluent in a language we're all using, but aren't completely aware of. They weave their spells into images, sounds, and words, and then release them out into the world to evoke a response. To cause people to think and feel things that they otherwise would not.

If you're looking, one place to watch the expression of this subtle collective experience is at public performances.

On a cold afternoon, in a space full of strangers, a choir assembled in the mall. Just their presence, their assembly and stance, caused a change in the flow of the crowd. Some slowed, others stopped, our shared knowledge told us all what was about to happen. They are 'Sisters and Mistresses', and they came from Melbourne for the Festival of voices. A pop medley dragged people out of their middle-distance stares, by ones and twos they formed a second, larger semi circle in counterpoint to the singers.

With a steadily building choral arrangement, foot traffic was slowed to a crawl and the conductor, a master of her craft, divided her attention between her singers and the assembled. The sound was resonant and came back repeated by glass and steel to blend with itself in complex layers. During the final leg of the performance, the conductor instructs the audience to join hands. A woman beside me with long blond hair and sunglasses took my hand, and we neither of us question it. Around us, the crowd swayed in unison, and three times as many voices as sang before lift in the final refrain.

The experience was at once remarkably common, without special effects or flourish, and disarmingly profound. A strange woman a good decade my senior, whose name I never asked, took my hand in a public place. Better than a hundred people, who hadn't practised the song, sang the lyrics. We all did as we were asked because we were the punchline of a ritual we all understood. The performers had shaped the way we felt. The way we experienced the environment we were in and the way we responded to each other.

Once aware of it, the power and diversity of symbolic and ritualised behaviour is everywhere. This single conjecture allows for the comforting possibility that the complex world of interpersonal relations is less an art subject to loss, and more a mechanism that evolves over time. As artists, writers, thinkers and dreamers move into the future of changing technology some comfort and clarity can be obtained from the realisation that we are not in fact adrift in a virtual sea with no

paradigm to build our works upon.

Stories will continue to be told, and the undercurrent of human experience, that language of feeling that at its deepest transcends culture and race, will continue to grow in the telling through new mediums. Our rituals evolve, they grow and shift, and the emphasis

At multiple points on any given day, we all engage in ritualised behaviour. We don our specialised robes designed to place us in a particular frame of mind and apply our 'war paint.' We know when to touch each other, and when to avert our eyes. When to sit quietly and listen, and when it is appropriate to clap.