

Creating your own rituals

We all look forward to the traditional holidays — the family gatherings, favorite foods and much-cherished rituals. These rituals help us celebrate transitions and mark the “inevitable facts of human experience” that “punctuate and clarify” critical times in our own lives like birth, marriage and death, according to the late anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff.

But what about the ordinary transitions we all experience that have no rituals attached to them? Some examples include relocating to a new city, sending your last child off to college and moving to a retirement community. These, and many others, are transitions with no accepted rituals. And that, says Myerhoff, is a problem that lends itself to a solution — designing your own secular rituals.

Francesca Gino and Michael I. Norton, Harvard professors and colleagues, found that those who participated in a ritual acknowledging a loss were better able to handle and manage their grief (“Why Rituals Work,” *Scientific American*). For example, after a breakup, the person who was left took pictures of the two of them, cut up the picture and burnt them in the park where they first kissed.

A personal example that I will never forget is the morning our daughter, Karen, a high school senior, came bursting into our bedroom to announce that she had decided to go to work, move into her own apartment and not attend college. Shocked, I screamed, “We will discuss this later.”

Coincidentally, that very morning, I was on my way to hear a speech by Myerhoff who was discussing how rituals can help



NANCY K. SCHLOSSBERG
Correspondent

people deal with “marginal periods” — when they are shifting from one phase of life to another. As she described the many significant events and nonevents that we fail to ritualize, she used the case of 18-year-olds moving out of their parental homes. I could not believe that she was talking about what I was experiencing. I left the speech, called my husband and said, “Don’t get angry with Karen. I know how we need to handle this.”

Based on Myerhoff’s speech, we decided to ritualize Karen’s departure by giving her a celebration dinner and inviting our closest family friends. We chose gifts and wrote poems to commemorate her past and celebrate her future. We promised to pay for phone installation, which would connect Karen to her past, but expected her to pay the monthly phone charges, connecting her to her future. And that is the point of a ritual: To acknowledge that you are leaving one part of your life but have not quite moved to the next phase.

Rituals can also help make sense of senseless things. A woman I know lost her father in the Vietnam War. He is missing in action. She discussed the pain of not ever knowing. She keeps hoping and wondering. To promote healing and offer support, two veterans

started Run For the Wall. They motorcycle cross country once a year to draw attention to those not accounted for. The woman whose father is lost finds this group ritual comforting, and she looks forward to it. Myerhoff talks about the importance of group activity, in this case group solidarity.

Older people often agonize over the decision to stay in place or move to a retirement community. One woman expressed the dilemma when she said, “I am moving with mixed emotions. I keep going backwards, then forward. This might be the most difficult transition I have faced.” The inbetween period that Myerhoff describes applies to many older people — seeing yourself as independent and young at the same time realizing that others see you as old.

A man, age 89, considering a move said, “I am not ready yet.” His partner, age 86, replied, “If we are not ready at 86 and 89, when will we be ready?” When they finally decided to move from their beautiful apartment to a retirement community, they developed a ritual to ease the transition. Following Myerhoff’s suggestions, they decided to have a July 4th party to say goodbye to their old apartment and announce their moving to a smaller apartment in a nearby community. Their ritual followed the guidelines Myerhoff suggests: an activity shared with others, an opportunity to name the confusion, a chance to receive solace from others as they rehearse for the future. The group talked about the transition and toasted the old and new apartments with champagne.

In conclusion, rituals help you deal with who you were and



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who you are becoming. They are particularly helpful when you are betwixt and between.

“People facing situations that induce anxiety typically take comfort in engaging in preparatory

activities,” says Myeroff, “inducing a feeling of being back in control and reducing uncertainty.”

Nancy K. Schlossberg, a Sarasota resident and former professor of counseling at the University of

Maryland, College Park, writes self-help books, blogs, lectures and runs workshops on coping with change. You can contact her through www.transitionsthroughlife.com or at nancyks4@gmail.com.



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