

The Ritual Self: Reaching for the Sacred with No Help from God*

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Before there was a Ciudad de las Ideas, it was really hard to learn the meaning of life. There once was a man who spent thirty years searching from the hottest deserts to the coldest Arctic wastes for the wisest person in the world, one who knew the answer to the question, What is the meaning of life? At the end of the search, the wisest person said, “Oh, yes, the meaning of life. Why, the meaning of life is a good bowl of bean soup.” The man who had been searching for thirty years was astonished and a little angry. He said, “What, you mean I’ve spent all that time, and endured all these hardships, to find the wisest man in the world and all you’ve got to say is that the meaning of life is a good bowl of bean soup?!” And the wisest person in the world replied, “What, you mean it **isn’t** a good bowl of bean soup?”

Alternate punch line: “Well, if you would rather have chicken soup, have chicken soup.”

Anyway, I do think that a good bean soup is part of the meaning of life. But no doubt there’s more. Now, Prof. John Searle, a distinguished philosophy professor at the university where I teach, the University of California at Berkeley, may or may not be the wisest man in the world, but he has interesting things to say. He was recently being interviewed by the Cal alumni magazine about a book he had just published casting doubt on free will. He said,

Philosophical ideas often upset me. I was very sorry when I finally had to come to the conclusion that God doesn’t exist, for example. That really upset me. I was a teenager when I came to that conclusion and that really hurt. But you have to follow the ideas where they go.

Now, what might that “hurt” have been in Prof. Searle’s experience? What exactly might he – or someone like him, perhaps even some of us here – have found hurtful to give up? And was it logically necessary for him – or us -- to do so?

Well, since I scarcely know Prof. Searle, let me speak very generally. One thing you would almost certainly give up is the **reassurance** that comes from believing in a benevolent and all-seeing God. (How do I know God has those qualities? If you have to believe in God, then certainly that’s the right kind to choose, and therefore the kind you would have to give up when you stop.) Secondly, there are the benefits of **certainty** as opposed to a lifetime of doubt and questioning. (True, some people prefer the doubt and the questioning, but let’s leave that aside.) Thirdly, one might also give up on attending worship services and the likely **sense of community and tradition** that are associated with them. And, finally, one might also be giving up on a search for the **realm of the sacred**, simply because that realm

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seems to be the monopoly of one or more divinities; and to enter there you definitely have to be willing to participate in a lot of God-talk.

Now, it is this last cause of hurtfulness that I want to address here. And I will quickly acknowledge that foregoing the search for the sacred might not be very hurtful at all for many former believers turned atheist. Not everybody is interested in the sacred, or needs to be. But most if not all human groups do at least seem to recognize such a realm. And so my first premise is that it's worth seeking – a premise I will amplify in a moment.

My second premise is that, even if we don't believe in the existence of God, religiously-based rituals, even though they are saturated with God-talk, are often a good way to carry on the search. (Of course, they are not the only way – meditation and drugs, for example, are also on offer.)

And my third, and most important, premise is that even committed non-believers can find a way to participate in many religious rituals without violating any principles they may have about rationality and self-consistency. This is so important that I will repeat it: you can participate in many religious rituals and **not** be inconsistent with your principles of rationality.

It's all a matter of **reframing** your participation so that your rational self is not offended -- a matter of using the right conceptual lenses to look at what you are doing, if you will.

Before turning to the matter of how to **reframe** acts of ritual participation, though, let me briefly return to “the realm of the sacred.” Socially, it has characteristics of being set apart in time and often space from the ordinary and mundane. Psychologically, it feels as though the realm is located **upward**, as Jonathan Haidt, a University of Virginia psychologist, tells us in his excellent book *The Happiness Hypothesis*. Downward are animals and objects of disgust, while upward are feelings of transcendence and humility, awe before something much larger than oneself. We humans are somewhere in the middle. And in the modern world, where we are always struggling to push, push, push, ever forward, and always faster, a time and place simply to back off is very welcome.

Although the realm of the sacred is usually also the realm of the gods, either plural or singular, it need not be. Humans are free to use human materials, ranging from a connection to nature to a connection to the human community, to create sacred spaces and times.

Now, I turn to the matter of **reframing**. Let's begin the search for a reframing strategy by imagining a worship service in some church or synagogue, though of course worship occurs in private and in all sorts of other settings. I'll use examples from Jewish and Christian ritual practice since I am most familiar with these, and since they are very challenging, given the centrality of their idea of a single transcendent God.

Now let's assume that you are a non-believer, an atheist and a rationalist – and that you find yourself in this worship service because you have been invited to a confirmation ceremony of the son of a dear friend, and you have decided to attend.

So, you are sitting in the service and everyone around you is saying “May God grant us peace.” You are implicitly expected to join in. Well, you are for peace, so that is okay. And you like the “us” idea since, you believe in community. And you even like “grant” in a perverse way, because it reminds you of what you really think, which is that in fact nothing is simply granted, that you’ve got to work hard at achieving peace just like achieving lesser goods, and that “grant” is something of a euphemism for all the hard work the community of “us” will need to do. But the God part is just too much. That you can’t accept. You could be polite and mumble along with everyone, or you could stick to your principles and be quiet. Or – and here is where it begins to get interesting -- you could substitute your own mumbled version, “May we grant ourselves peace.” No one would notice and you would have been true to your atheistic principles and said something which inspired yourself, even though nobody else heard you.

You could even go one step further and use the G word, and acknowledge to yourself that you were using it only **metaphorically**. You would say “God,” but you would know you meant by it something important and special to you, something elevating and flavored with the sacred, something like “our collective better selves.” That, at least, would probably be my own intended meaning.

Having gone this far toward sincere ritual participation, you might go a step further still. You look around you and you see many other colleagues of the person who invited you, many of them atheists like yourself, and they too are mumbling the G word. And you wonder, what sort of metaphors are they using? Well, supposing that they are thinking about anything at all, their metaphors are probably all different to some degree. For Janice over there the G word is a stand-in for “all of humanity.” And for James it is for his own inner voice that reaches for the sacred in himself. And for Jorge it is something like the noosphere of Teilhard de Chardin.

In fact, you conclude that even your fellow worshippers who believe in a God of the traditional anthropomorphic sort are incorporating a metaphorical element in their beliefs, and that many of those metaphors are rather different from one another. For some, God is a metaphor for a kindly father, and for others a just and all-seeing king, while for still others a compassionate savior from eternal damnation.

In light of all this supposed heterogeneity of meaning and intention, you now realize that “God” is just a poetic word, with powerful historic reverberations and resonances, and that people use it as a lowest-common-denominator, generic, term to help coordinate something else that they are doing together, namely creating a psychological environment in which they can touch the realm of the sacred. An actual God, the sort of God that atheism rejects, need not be there. Humans have created this environment, for themselves and by themselves, for their own spiritual purposes.

And now a further step: you recognize that all this promiscuous metaphorizing using the G-word is just part of a larger and more complicated activity being undertaken by this community of worshippers. Explicit language, about God or whatever else, is just a part of it. There’s all the singing, and the swaying and kneeling, and the display of ritual objects, and the reading of historically sacred

texts, and the way people greet each other on entering and leaving. You realize you are in the middle of a **theatrical production**. It's organized, it's scripted (with some improvisation, to be sure), it's emotional, it's didactic, it's inclusive, it's involving. And most interestingly, **it's cut off from the real world**.

In short, you are able to **reframe the whole activity as theater**. Or, better yet, if the community of worshippers is doing a lot of singing, it's opera. You could call this group of worshippers your **Contemporary Ritual Theater Company**. (And if you didn't understand that they were a local theater company when they had you involved in all that choral recitation, you would definitely understand when they kept asking you for money.)

Now, with regard to the sacred, in order to succeed, this **Ritual Theater Company** must perform two important functions. First, it must stimulate creativity. The worshippers collectively create an environment for one another that none of them can construct by themselves. So, people have to show up. Because it's voluntary, it needs to be attractive. And, for at least some people, they have to feel that the ritual materials and interactions within the Ritual Theater Company don't create just any kind of environment but a **sacred** one. This can only work if it is done **artfully**, blending traditional ritual and adaptations of tradition. (Whether they succeed or not at this is another issue, of course, for probably the majority of ritual theater companies in the contemporary Western world don't do a very good job. Boring, empty, phony, stuffy, too new-agey,...!)

Now, if the first function of the Ritual Theater Company is to help the participants in their creative endeavors, its second main function is **to protect**. Against what? Well, in the theatrical moment, the words one has uttered, the chants one has chanted, the bows one has bowed are not to be evaluated against the standards of science and empirical rationality. The question is not whether they are true but whether they are helpful. Have they protected the creative process from the mundane and empirical? Have they allowed the ritual participants to imagine a different and better world, and to stretch themselves personally in directions that are somehow enlarging and more meaningful? Have they, temporarily, at least, ensured that the empirical "whatever is" does not drive out the sacred "whatever ought to be"?

Of course, at some point, the show ends and we all re-enter the world of the everyday, and also the world of personal self-awareness. What happens to us now, on "the morning after"? What happens to you after you have left that rather moving confirmation ceremony? Remember, you are an atheist. While performing your role in the theater, you were in a different world; you suspended rationalistic judgments about yourself. But now what? Are you ashamed of yourself? Will you vow never to return to the ritual theater?

I hope none of the above. But I think that is possible only if you are able to protect what I will call your **Ritual Self** from imperialistic aggression against it by your **Empiricist Self**.

Who exactly are these two Selves? We are all home to multiple selves, each of which gets to take over our **Whole Self** in a particular context. The workplace self

does so at work; the parental self, in the nursery; the sports-fan self, at the ballgame. So why not let the Empiricist Self do its thing when the real world needs to be understood and managed, and the Ritual Self do its very different thing when the world of moral and spiritual potentiality beckons?

Now in fact, the Empiricist Self and the Ritual Self either are or ought to be partners rather than rivals. The Ritual Self proposes, and the Empiricist Self disposes. The Ritual Self comes up with ideas that may or may not connect us with the sacred, and the Empiricist Self checks for feasibility and cost, and makes needed comparisons with other such projects. The Ritual Self mutters, "May God grant us peace," and the Empiricist Self says, "Oh, yes, I understand what you're trying to say. Peace is a great idea -- now get out there and run for city council."

I conclude by observing that, when it comes to understanding and managing our own selves we need to do some **reframing** as well. Most of us have come of age believing that "The Divided Self" is a terrible thing. It means anxiety, stress, neuroticism. But this is only one construction of our internal divisions, and it needs some reframing. If "division" means a constructive and integrated **division of labor**, between the Empiricist Self and the Ritual Self, it is a good thing. And for that happy division, I say, with suitable irony, "Thank God."