

A REFLECTION ON THE ART AND PRACTICE OF RITUAL WITHIN A FAMILY GOVERNANCE SYSTEM

By James E. Hughes, Jr.

I have noted in my work with families that those families, who recognize the important passage in their families' members' lives with ritual, seem to do better in their pursuit to overcome the "shirt sleeves" proverb. Perhaps this should not be surprising since the creation and practice of rituals designed to recognize the important developmental steps in the life of a human being, and of the family and the tribe of which he is a part, are at the core of what anthropology teaches us is successful to tribal life. Tribes, as I will explain below, are the extended generations of an original family. Anthropology further teaches that tribes are the result of a family in its second and third generations forming clans and then those clans in the fourth and fifth generation electing to stay together and thus creating a tribe. From such beginnings many tribes have successfully continued for dozens of generations, thus overwhelming the proverb. The Iroquois would be a good example. Clearly, such a tribe is not based on shared "DNA" given the very small amount of unique "DNA" its individual members share from a common ancestor. Rather it is the stories of the experiences and practices of the earlier generations of the tribe, which link these persons as a tribe. These linkages are part of what defines them as a family of affinity rather than of blood. The rituals the tribe creates, often unique to themselves, and representing their "differentness" are the outcome of the tribes' stories and experiences. The tribes' rituals offer to its members a way of linking themselves to their ancestors and to their stories and to the uniqueness of their tribe and their special place in it.

What is the nature of ritual and its place in the development of an individual and of the family or tribe of which he or she is a part?

Arnold Van Gennep in his book, *Rites of Passage*, explains that a family or tribe's rituals, as rites of passage, assist an individual family or tribal member's successful development at various stages of life by providing within the family or tribal community, a process for that individual to first, break away from an earlier developmental stage; second, to be introduced to and to learn the new information needed for the next stage of his or her development; and third,

for the reintegration of that individual into his or her family or tribal community with that new information to begin the next step of his or her personal development, all toward continuing the successful life of that family or tribal community.

Ritual thus serves two purposes in the life of a family seeking to thrive for many generations. First, it offers a process for helping individual members of the family to develop from one life stage to another and second, it helps the family itself succeed by assisting the needed development of its members so the whole family is strengthened in its own process of development from family to clan to tribe and then for many generations into the future.

What are some of the important life stages of individual family members and of the family as a whole that rituals within families might be created to honor?

First: Coming of Age, the movement from child to adult. – All tribes and many religious communities recognize with ritual the coming of age of their members. Often such rituals involve the young person's being taken away from his or her parents and being taught the tribes or religious communities' secrets, its mysteries. In many earlier societies this role was assigned to the child's aunts and uncles as well as to the tribe's elders. In religious communities this role was given to the priests and priestesses. Such ritual processes often involved the child living apart from the tribe with other children of his or her age. This is Van Gennep's breaking away stage. While living apart the young person received knowledge about the tribe's or religious community's special wisdom as well as discovering his or her own special talents and how they could be used to help the tribe as a whole -- Van Gennep's second stage. Finally, when ready and now as a young adult, and no longer a child, the newly fledged adult member reintegrated into the tribe (Van Gennep's third stage), often gaining a new name as he or she began life as a member of the tribe or religious community. Elaborate tribal and religious rituals were developed to recognize the completion of this process of successful reintegration of tribal members.

Second: A New Elder – All successful families and tribes recognize the need for elders for good governance. My view of the importance of elders in the family governance process was, I hope, made clear in Chapter 1. The creation of a new elder is an extremely important point in the development of a family or tribe since it recognizes the willingness of the group as a

whole to grant to an individual the authority to mediate the family's or tribe's disputes, to tell it when it isn't following its rule of governance, and to maintain its stories. The evolution of an individual family member to this status is also a major developmental step for such an individual since it is often a reflection that that individual has finished doing his or her individual work and is now seen as wise and ready to act for the family/tribe as whole. Many tribes recognize this step in an individual's development with rituals to announce the grant of the tribes' authority to such an individual.

Third: The Arrival of a New Member – Rituals recognizing the birth of a new family tribal member or the marrying in of a new member are very important. All tribes and religious communities recognize with elaborate celebrations the birth of new members. These rituals not only announce the individual's arrival but offer the tribe or religious community a way of reaffirming the many prior generations from which this child springs, which even more importantly giving to all current tribal or religious community members a means to celebrate and reaffirm the possibilities for their future. Ritual is also important in this case to give the family, tribe or religious community a way of committing itself to the legitimacy of this child and thus of his or her right to nurturance and future membership.

The marrying in of a new member is another important developmental step in the life both of the individual entering the family or tribe and of the family and tribe itself. All families, tribes and religious communities elaborately recognize a marriage. The rituals celebrating the entry of a new family, tribal or religious community member celebrate the growth of the community and legitimate the new members right to be a part of that community. Such rituals recognize that this new member is breaking away from another tribe, needs new information about the mysteries of the tribe he or she is joining and most importantly offers a process for the new family, tribal or religious community member to integrate into his or her new set of relationships.

Fourth: The Death of a member.—The Death of a member is ritually observed by all families tribes and religious communities. Rituals to help the individual members honor the life of the deceased members not only serve to assist continuing members with individual grieving

but offer a way for them to integrate the deceased individual's life into the stories linking them as a family, tribes, or religious community.

Fifth: The introduction of new outside members. —Families seeking to govern themselves well introduce into their midst Trustees, Protectors, Members and Advisors. In other chapters of this book I have elaborated on the important, even critical, roles in family governance that such outsiders play. Rituals to celebrate the arrival of such individuals into the lives of individual family members and of the family as a whole is an important celebration of these individuals' roles and a legitimization of their future authority and responsibility in family life and governance. A ritual for their welcoming announces and establishes their proper position in family life. It makes it much more likely that, having been welcomed by the family as a whole and through ritual properly indoctrinated into the families' life and governance that they will successfully perform their roles and functions.

What are some of the forms of ritual a family could study in developing its own unique rituals to express its differentness?

Most religious communities have rituals such as baptism, naming, confirmation, Bar or Bas Mitzvah, marriage, ordination, last rights, and funerals to recognize the developmental stages of their members. Many of these rituals can be modified by a family to celebrate the developmental stages of its individual members. Secular communities whether monarchies, dictatorships, or republics use music, speeches, special dress, dance, food and beverage, elections, graduations, marriages and funerals to celebrate the developmental stages of their members and of their communities. In my experiences many of these forms of ritual can and are modified by families to celebrate the birthdays, marriages, anniversaries and deaths of their individual members. Cultural anthropology also offers families seeking forms of ritual many examples of the unique ways in which human communities have evolved rites to celebrate the stages of development of the individual members or tribes.

In concluding this short chapter on ritual, what I hope is clear is that the range of creativeness of human beings in expressing their desire to recognize and celebrate the developmental stages of their lives, and of the family's and communities of which they are a part is astonishingly broad and integral to successful individual and family development. Apparently

all human beings sense the need for such celebrations as a way of affirming the critical steps in the development of each individual and for the survival of the families and tribes of which they are a part. We seem to sense, for our individual wellbeings and growths, and those of our family's those moments when we must break away from one stage of life, learn new things, and then reintegrate as more developed beings into the families and communities of which we are a part. Ritual within families and tribes evolved to recognize and celebrate these moments of our development and in doing so to strengthen the bonds of relationship to our families and to our tribes all toward the greater likelihood of ours and their long-term survival and successes.

May each of your family's celebrate these individual moments of development, as the critical steps in your family's development, with rituals you develop that celebrate in your own unique way these important steps in the lives of your family members and of your family as a whole. As you do so you will discover your "differentness," you will add to the family stories, and most importantly you will honor and grow your family's human and intellectual capital. In all these ways you will add to your family's wealth.

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