

Nuggets and Bright Lines

- Mastery Tool
- Meaning
- Distraction Destroyer
- Specific
- Individual



Rituals

The definition of a ritual is something along the lines of the performance of a series of prescribed actions in a pre determined sequence which has a specific and important meaning. There are also links to tradition and religion within the various definitions of a ritual. The one thing that was missing from the definitions I researched were the terms, regularity or consistency. For the purposes of this article, this is a key point.

Let's move away from religion or tradition and look at rituals as a tool you can use to help you achieve. I don't think I was really inspired by rituals until I was bowled over by George Leonard's book, 'Mastery'. This is a great place to start as Leonard is such an advocate of rituals and manages so powerfully and simply to explain their life changing qualities. His stories revolve around people's attempts to master specific skills. He eloquently uses sports to illustrate his points. He describes the processes, so many of us recognise, as we take on a new venture, full of enthusiasm and excitement, diving head long into the process before surfacing to realise we are brutally inept and things are infinitely more difficult than they appeared. Anyone relate to this?

In a chapter that remains one of my favourites of all time, of any writing, Leonard goes on to describe the journey of the 'newbie/rookie' who has to traverse this treacherous path of mastery. Treacherous in that it claims most travellers in the early days, leaving only a few survivors. Those who become a fully fledged member of the survivor core have something in common. They all manage to treat their endeavour or their practice as a ritual. They do it consistently and regularly. They turn up and perform the required practice, essentially irrelevant of how they feel and how successful they are. The actions they take have a baseline that is process like, in that they contain the characteristics of consistency and regularity.

The other thing about rituals that has weight is that they have meaning, often a highly significant one. Take the 'scapegoat' ritual. In the realms of The English Language most of us understand a scapegoat. It comes from times past when societies performed ceremonies ritualising the passing on of blame to a goat that was then released into the wild or sacrificed, rendering the wrongdoing and associated guilt gone with the animal. History has it that some cultures amongst them The Athenians, raised humans for such a purpose, so strong was the need to apportion blame. Away from the detail, the point being that rituals are historical acts which have significant meaning. Something to hold in mind here. What could be more meaningful than your own quest for improvement?

Cal Newport in his book 'Deep Work' describes the power of rituals, particularly in this time when distraction is such an issue. The problem with this new age distraction challenge is that, like many things the consequences it bestows are often not fully realised and certainly not immediate. Our modern information technology is, it appears, consciously, via the dedicated work of the best innovators and creators in this field of 'attention grabbing and holding' hijacking our minds and we are, on the whole, unaware. It is accepted and 'normal' behaviour to spend four to eight hours of the waking day in a mental state of screen fixation, focussed on subjects chosen for us. Millions of humans are choosing this way of spending their time. The danger here, if it is not obvious, our lives are being stolen from us, with our permission and it is having significant effects. The double whammy is that not only is it possibly doing irreversible things to neural and physiological functioning and therefore our capabilities, we are also losing that which can never be replaced. It seems that in the battle to regain control of our attention, rituals are one of our most powerful tools.

Underlined by the work of James Clear in 'Atomic Habits' the use and development of rituals in your life can pay great benefits. In our quests, we are able to think, act and influence things as we work towards a particular goal. What this requires is a conscious effort to ensure that very particular things get done. These are often very small and seemingly insignificant things that compound over periods of time to produce what appear to be amazing results. In theory all quite simple it would appear. Reality tells a different story. Let's use two examples. What percentage of the human race of adult age, if they had the choice, ability and environmental factors present would choose to be optimally healthy and financially independent? A full one hundred percent one would think. Yet the reality tells us that in terms of health nowhere near this figure take the necessary daily steps of optimal nutritional choices, sleep and exercise. In terms of financial independence, statistics state that ninety five percent of the population are outside this status. Yet it is possible to achieve this with attention to a few simple, regularly repeated steps over a period of time.

We humans have a tendency to easily allow our focus to be taken. This renders performance of specific activities over a prolonged period difficult for most, causing outcomes of variability. Reverse the scenario and take a look at experts or people who have achieved something of note. You will find two things at least. One they did something consciously and specifically on a regular basis. probably almost daily and they

did this over a period, in all likelihood of years. In order to achieve this, especially initially, they had to do the activity whether they felt like it or not. One of the basic rules of success is that how you feel about doing something will have to become an irrelevancy. The repeated actions become what we call a habit, with the formation of ever stronger neural circuits until it becomes almost harder not to do the act than to do it. You may consider the activity itself the ritual but where the ritual process really comes into its own is in the early stages of this habit formation, when it is not yet a fully formed, myelin engrained process. It is in this stage that you can consciously create a pre action ritual that facilitates the activity and increases the chances of it becoming habitual.

For example let us say you set a goal to exercise every morning at 6am. The following is an example of a ritual to facilitate and engrain the habit:

- Set an alarm 60 minutes before the time you need to go to bed the previous evening.
- Switch off and put away your mobile phone at this time.
- Lay out your training kit and training shoes where you will have to move them to leave your room.

These are three simple things you can do that will increase your chances of achieving the habit formation. They are your own ritual. Try it and see. Rituals are powerful. They can get you going on the road and help you persevere when you hit the inevitable plateau. Success can be viewed as boring. Let people think what they will. Most people have a markedly distorted view of what it takes to achieve anything. It takes focus and repetition, something that is not so easy in the rich and invasive world of communication we are in. Your rituals can be an indispensable tool to protect you from the ever present distractions. Build a number of them around your key activities and see how they significantly and quietly impact your life.

The Author

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