

Instructions Unclear



A ZINE ABOUT RITUALS – SPRING, 2019

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Titles were written by Sonya Mann, excepting "Faith and Doubt" and "Facienda," which were chosen by their respective authors.

Dates were included when available and appropriate, such as with writings from years past. Undated writing can be assumed to be recent, circa early 2019.

In either case, the majority of images were presented without dates. A few images were edited for color, and most have been cropped.

Across the board, final edits took place in March and April, 2019.

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Wearing a Groove

Baba Yaga softened, as much as she could soften. Her braided eyebrows creased together gently. "Doesn't mean we don't know what stories are. Doesn't mean we don't walk in them, every second. Chyerti – that's us, demons and devils, small and big – are compulsive. We obsess. It's our nature. We turn on a track, around and around; we march in step; we act out the same tales, over and over, the same sets of motions, while time piles up like yarn under a wheel. We like patterns. They're comforting. Sometimes little things change – a car instead of a house, a girl not named Yelena. But it's no different, not really. Not ever." Baba Yaga pressed the back of her withered hand to Marya's cheek. "That's how you get deathless, volchitsa. Walk the same tale over and over, until you wear a groove in the world, until even if you vanished, the tale would keep turning, keep playing, like a phonograph, and you'd have to get up again, even with a bullet through your eye, to play your part and say your lines."

Deathless by Catherynne M. Valente

Published in 2011

Protocols of Meaning

An introduction to the zine

Written by Sonya Mann

Once you start thinking about rituals, everything looks like one. What is formulaic yet sacred? So much, it turns out.

First, a tight definition: Merriam-Webster's website says that "ritual" (as a noun) means "the established form for a ceremony." Most often, "the order of words prescribed for a religious ceremony." Alternately, "a ceremonial act or action" or "an act or series of acts regularly repeated in a set precise manner."

The Merriam-Webster summary is fine for a dictionary. It gets close to what people usually want to communicate with the word "ritual." But reference books tend to elide the important subtext – in this case, the *why* of rituals.

We use them to bond emotionally, either within a community or as individuals. We use them to solidify shared values or norms. A ritualized commitment holds more weight than an offhand one; contracts hold more weight than handshakes.

The word "ritual" is associated with combined ceremony and habit. It can be a one-time thing, sure, but rituals tend to repeat and accrete more significance over time. Physical or sensory elements can be integral to a ritual, and they may or may not be fungible.

Christmas is a ritual – in fact, it's a bundle of rituals that add up to a larger one. Sacrificing Athenian youths to the Minotaur on a seven-year cycle is a ritual. Life changes that provoke intense sentiment, like marriage and death, are handled through ritual... even by atheists like me. (In fact, the finality of a funeral arguably hits harder when you don't expect to see your loved one again in paradise.)

Using a specific coffee cup every morning, if it means something to you, if it signifies The Start of the Day, is a ritual. Derisively quote-tweeting your ingroup's target du jour while sipping your coffee and avoiding email? Yeah, that probably counts too.

Sarah Perry wrote in her 2015 Ribbonfarm essay "Weaponized Sacredness":

Sacred values must be signaled as valuable in a sufficiently costly manner that sincerity is assured (or a believable public demonstration of sincerity, which anyway has the same effect on both members and outsiders). Ritual energizes the maintenance of sacredness and its power, a costly signal displayed to all (sincere believers or otherwise).

In general, rituals serve purposes. Of course they do! The behaviors that we've evolved to find satisfying are not random. And it doesn't matter whether we understand them, at least until we mistakenly bulldoze one of Chesterton's fences.

For millennia, humans have been striving to imbue moments of our lives with reverence. What is the texture of rituals? The mouthfeel? How do they taste, and what nutrition do they provide? Rituals can literally involve sustenance, but they don't always, and still we hunger for them.

I wrote and curated *Instructions Unclear* to skim the surface of these questions. Throughout, the concept of "ritual" is treated as an interpretative lens rather than a semantically precise designation.

The zine is not meant to be comprehensive. (For example, there's nothing in it about bureaucracies running on rituals long since stripped of resonance.) I hope to expand on my thoughts in future writings, or perhaps Twitter threads.

Contributions and feedback from others are welcome! If you want to get in touch, send a Twitter DM to @sonyaellenmann (fast response) or email me@sonyaellenmann.com (slow response).

Thank you for reading.



Photo by Pierre Acobas
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Adornment



Photo by torbakhopper
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The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence [...] is a charity, protest, and street performance organization that uses drag and religious imagery to call attention to sexual intolerance and satirizes issues of gender and morality. At their inception in 1979, a small group of gay men in San Francisco began wearing the attire of nuns in visible situations using camp to draw attention to social conflicts and problems in the Castro District.

Wikipedia page about the Sisters
Version timestamp: 14:24, 19 April 2019

Faith and Doubt

Written by Vivian Mott
@GlitchesBrew

I flip through the ebook pages. Reverence to the spirits of nature. Herbs associated with healing and protection. A skull from a bird... well, those are in short supply within city limits, so I've substituted a bone from now-eaten groceries.

Lights off, I pronounce the words, knowing they're imbued with powerful historical context. But it seems like the incantation means nothing when I recite it. I make the motions associated with banishing my fears and insecurities into a figurine in the center, and I'm left afraid that my efforts won't work.

I sigh, blow out the candles, and try not to feel silly.

For most of my life I've been an atheist, after childhood Catholicism and before delving deep into alt-psychology (aided by the intuition boost of estrogen). Actually, "atheist" understates it. I held a grudge against religion; I'd been told that researching stem cells and being transgender were abominations. The grudge was generalized. I hated all tradition and faith with the same intensity.

I saw what people called lost ancient beauty, and thought, "Good thing we're smarter than that now." I saw gods as kludgy explanations for natural phenomena long since decoded, and spirits as wishful thinking gone amok. Both, I thought, were standing in our way to further progress. Magic was just a way to feel like you were affecting that which you couldn't actually change.

And yet.

I review the spell formula. Evocations of deities whose names might mean nothing to me, except when propped up and misused by modern Christians – but once upon a time they meant so very much, and not just as fables told to children.

Gods are not mere stories – they are egregores, thought-constructs born of the memetic genes floating in the primordial soup of

human awareness, and ones time-tested to appeal to humans for thousands of years.

Humans looked at the way the trees grew around them, the way the rain fell and the wind blew, and they named it God, or Yahweh, or Elohim – so many words people came up with for the same thing, each with a history. It's a beautiful concept that completely fails to land with me.

Magic, in my current understanding, is a method of using emotion and metaphor to direct the subconscious, giving it a direction to focus toward and a toolkit to work with as it flails about, making it more likely to produce something and notice opportunity.

I can see where these names fit into the ritual, the way they hold that much meaning to people – but the experiences of the modern world just don't build into something consciously communal like a god.

Someday, maybe I can have enough reverence and feeling for these gods, these time-tested, resilient egregores that spring from natural phenomena and reinforce their emotional power every time lightning strikes... but for now a lot of the symbolic components won't do. I don't have the required emotional connection to them.

I try to boil the ritual down – not to its parts, but to what the parts do. A power source here. A vent there. A barrier in the center. Processes that grab your emotion and keep you engaged for a time, with payoffs at relevant points – mulling over your goals as you light the candles, pacing in the incantations that gives your emotions time to process and catch up.

Forays into hypnosis have taught me the value of a good metaphor, of an intuitive mental model that resists attempts to compromise it, as a powerful tool to process the world. Tell someone their name is locked away in a box and they won't be able to remember it, because they have an intuitive understanding that boxes are separate, closed spaces where things get put away and not accessed.

In this light, the metaphor-driven religion of the ancient world looks less like the cluster of wishful lies I once thought it was, and more like a machine – parts interlocking, generating their own emotional fuel, confirmation bias giving them a jolt of rejuvenation every time the rain falls.

I take this time-tested, subconscious-honing formula, and I consider the parts that aren't working.

The raven skull wasn't meant to represent Air merely because the creature once flew. Air is associated with intelligence, and ravens are notoriously clever. And bird bones are surprisingly light. The experience of lifting one up would catch you off-guard with its lack of heft.

I substitute a set of lock picks, maintaining the connections to subtle movements and self-sufficient freedom of movement. Lock picks are not the lightest tools in the world, so my choice isn't quite as good, but it'll do.

Water is roughly as relevant as ever, the same very molecules circulating since ancient times, and goes unreplaced.

Herbs that I've never taken don't seem to fit with Earth's nourishment, regrowth, and fortitude. So I opt for a potted succulent, enduring and healthy no matter how lazy I am about its care.

With a depressing lack of any supernatural beliefs whatsoever, I compromise by representing Spirit with my phone – all its learned autocorrect quirks, browsing history, and idle processes arguably comprise the best portrait of my soul that technology can provide.

Fire, a force of destructive, passionate will, is replaced with an airline ticket stub, the one I used to see my then-dying girlfriend across the Atlantic. Getting it, and seeing her before she passed, required standing up to my family in a real, angry (if nonviolent) way for the first time in my life. It would mean nothing to anyone else, but to me, it means the triumph of emotion, passion, and will over fear and tyranny.

It means that enough willpower is able to destroy anything in its path to get what it wants. How glorious it can be when this happens!

My memory will fuel this psychological machine far more effectively than any other conceivable source of metaphorical fire.

Lastly, the protection circle. Written with the names of God, names that mean protection and stability, names that mean something so sacred that no demon or idea-construct dare cross it – but to me nothing is sacred, and those names mean false hope and being failed by that same kind of protection, they mean desperate and unanswered prayers to be born in a different body or to different parents. They are names of a pure and benevolent God, to be sure, but one that does not resonate with me.

At a friend's recommendation, I replace them with a pattern of rectangles – a brick wall. Simple, solid, and effective. The metaphor of a brick wall providing resilience has echoed in my mind every time I've seen or brushed against one; its rough texture, its dense weight, its structure of solid and mortar components – these all must become intrinsic properties of Protection for the ritual to work right, and I let the metaphor roll around my mind as I slowly and deliberately draw the chalk lines.

I light the candles. I turn out the lights. I speak my intent as a magician to use this power, ancients' data adjusted for my era. I read over the spell again, wishing I had the reverence for its spirits that I'd need to follow it as written. I read the words, trying to grasp the nature of the gods, represented through these emotional connections.

Earth's certainty and love. "The ancients couldn't have all been delusional," I think, as I pat the hardy plant's leaves, a sign of irrepressible life. Fear has no place to hide.

Water's tide and nourishment. "Their tides washed indiscriminately, but in the right direction." I swirl the glass of water around, letting it make waves, but not spilling a drop; I set it back down, knowing that it may wave and ripple, but it's all swirling around the same place. Uncertainty is the way of life – it is not to be feared.

Air's nuance. "The focal points of emotional intensity, the drawing of internal ideas, seeds the unconscious with resilient metaphor to

work with and gives it a goal to work towards after confirming its strength with the natural forces of the outside world. All the little things make sense together." The tension wrench of constant questioning, the rake of hypnotic experimentation, the pick of precise observation, the bump-key of epiphany and willingness to embrace the "petty" solution – all forces that give me strength as they push me towards the truth. "I am capable, powerful, and have a way forward." I can feel the wind blowing through me, lifting doubts out of my mind, turning a desert to an airborne cloud and leaving nothing behind.

Spirit's perfection and realized vision. "Anyone who saw all these psychological dynamics and quirks in our head – our imagination's dependence on emotion and meaning, our ability to prime ourselves for certain kinds of ideas – would have tried to develop a heuristic for it instead of waiting to find the precise neurochemical causes. The only thing they got 'wrong' was thinking that their spirits and forces, which we can now model as memes and egregores, had a molecular existence – and they couldn't have even known molecules existed! Their worldview had no reason not to be wise."

I open my phone's keyboard, and consider that a sufficiently wise autocorrect algorithm may deduce that it is being typed, and while it's unlikely to know what a finger is, it'll "know" (in some sense) that it has a personality. "I have an essence, a soul, an identity – and it has a goal." My scattered, self-loathing thoughts now have something to bind them together, an idea that repels my fears like holding a cross before a vampire.

Fire's passion. Fire's determination. Fire's knowledge that no matter how hopeless things look, our creativity and drive can find a way out. Fire's indomitable rage over all that tries to hold it back, Fire's warmth and light that brings love to those it wants to protect, Fire's damn-the-consequences approach to getting what it needs now, no matter how ephemeral or brief.

I look at the ticket, and place a ten-pound note over it. A souvenir I brought back. Proof that my rage and love got me something I'll never regret fighting for.

"Fear and doubt are pointless. For all intents and purposes, magic is real. And it will give me what I want."

I feel the strength of earth in my muscles, the water in my veins, the oxygen in my brain, the collective soul in my mind – and now Fire is raging up underneath it. Confidence, strength, fluidity, identity, and passion, all woven together, forcing away the doubt, the malevolent spirits of self-sabotaging memes or paranoid possibilities. There's no place for them here anymore, and I focus on the little figurine in the center, walled in by the sensible reality of brickwork.

It's unchanged from the first attempt – a cheap toy picked up from a local store, not particularly meaningful. Before it was just filler; now it's a representation of my old self's noncommittal approach, my scared and doubting self that was too afraid of looking silly to do a ritual properly, my acceptance of mediocrity so I wouldn't have to deal with the shame of failure.

It's easy to concentrate on it and feel the old thoughts being burned away by elemental forces shifting into the toy, projecting all of the inferiorities that I've overcome into the sole representation of their continued existence.

As I blow out the candles, I analyze the ritual, thinking of how my subconscious may have been filled with metaphorically productive ideas – how through its language of symbol and miracle, the ritual served as a reminder of everything I have, everything I care about that gives me strength, and taught me how powerless my fears are in the face of these things.

The psychological curiosities are secondary to another question, though: Did the ritual work? I think that it did. After going into this full of doubt and fear, I feel sure that I'll like whatever comes next.



Photo by Kevin Dooley
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Loss and Legibility

Written by Sonya Mann

First, a lengthy anecdote posted by Redditor /u/deerpig:

I've lived in developing countries for several decades now [...]. Most people [...] buy nearly 100% of their food in local wet markets. There are little family grocery shops peppered around the market where you can buy oil, sugar, salt, sauces and a smattering of tinned food. But most of what you buy is fresh. The stalls (which are often little more than little old ladies sitting on a mat on the ground) have a wide range of vegetables, that are sometimes bought directly from the farmer – or from the village where they come from. But most is bought from a large wholesale market that aggregates produce from small farmers. Few small farmers think of themselves as "organic" but then I've never seen a small farm that uses pesticides or chemical fertilizers. The farmers often don't know how to use them and couldn't afford to use them if they did. [...]

You form relationships with the people at shops. And once people get used to a giant white guy who can barely make it through the labyrinth of crowded back alleys, always mindful of some jagged shard of wood or rusting metal that for [me] is at eye level, they take care of you. I remember twenty years ago when living in Thailand there was a stall [...] at the very back of the market that sold fried chicken. I've been all over the planet, and I must say that their fried chicken is the best I've ever had. The stall was very popular and you often had to wait for three or four people in front of you before you could buy

anything. One of the daughters often stood on a stool and took orders and then shouted them down to her brother bagging the chicken. When she saw me arrive from across the market she'd wave at me and put up two fingers asking how many pieces I wanted. I'd wave back and let her know how many pieces I wanted, sometimes 1 or 3 or whatever. By the time I got the stall they already had my chicken ready to go ahead of everyone else. [...]

Going to market every day is not a chore, it's an important part of your day. I remarried when I moved to Cambodia and my wife and I go to market together every morning and eat soup noodles while talking about what we want to buy for dinner. It's my favorite part of my daily routine. It forces me to get up early every day, and makes me think clearly about what I or we are going to cook that day.

Poorer countries – do they provide a glimpse back in time for First World residents? No. But the effect is not far off, as illustrated by /u/ deerpig's story. (Granted, the downsides are left undiscussed.)

In the 19th century, the Industrial Revolution remade the world. Subsequent technological and economic developments only accelerated our cultural reorientation toward the individual. Close-knit hamlets, or approximations thereof, are no longer primary institutions in wealthy countries.

Modernity has unmoored us from communal understandings of ourselves and what is important in our lives. Sure, we still "live in a society," but it's a fundamentally transformed one. Couples therapist Esther Perel noted the momentous shift in her 2007 book *Mating in Captivity*:

Today, we turn to one person to provide what an entire village once did: a sense of grounding, meaning, and con-

tinuity. At the same time, we expect our committed relationships to be romantic as well as emotionally and sexually fulfilling. Is it any wonder that so many relationships crumble under the weight of it all?

Later on, Perel added:

In our world of instant communication, we supplement our relationships with an assortment of technological devices in the hope that all these gizmos will strengthen our connections. This social frenzy masks a profound hunger for human contact.

In 2008, reflecting on the same theme from a different angle, *One Perfect Day* author Rebecca Mead described observing a couple as they married on a sultry beach:

I realized as I watched them on the sand [that this] was the wedding package they were really buying into. It was the same wedding package sold to every American bride and groom by the American wedding industry, which provides not just the products and services for weddings, but the compelling fantasies upon which their use is grounded. This husband and wife were saying "I do" to the long white gown and the tiered cake and the wreaths of flowers – the trappings of the traditionalesque, bizarrely transferred in their case to the tropics. They were saying "I do" to the sentimental murmurings of a minister-for-hire, an official with whom they had no past and no future; "I do" to being, for a fleeting moment, the center of attention, and to having that moment ritually preserved by the flashing of cameras. They were saying "I do" to their celebration as individuals whose own tastes and desires were paramount, trumping the practices of

the past and the oversight of religious institutions and familial authorities; and "I do" to their consecration as a world unto themselves, there in romantic isolation at the water's edge, about to invent their future together. And they were saying "I do" to the wedding industry's own assumption of nuptial authority, administered through bridal magazines, bridal stores, department-store wedding registries, and all the other venues in which romance and commerce have become inextricably entwined.

Decades earlier than Perel and Mead were noticing such things, during the 1960s, gonzo reporter Hunter S. Thompson wrote in *Hell's Angels*:

One afternoon as I sat in the El Adobe and watched an Angel sell a handful of barbiturate pills to a brace of pimply punks no more than sixteen, I realized that the roots of this act were not in any time-honored American myth but right beneath my feet in a new kind of society that is only beginning to take shape. To see the Hell's Angels as caretakers of the old "individualist" tradition "that made this country great" is only a painless way to get around seeing them for what they really are – not some romantic leftover, but the first wave of a future that nothing in our history has prepared us to cope with. The Angels are prototypes. Their lack of education has not only rendered them completely useless in a highly technical economy, but it has also given them the leisure to cultivate a powerful resentment... and to translate it into a destructive cult which the mass media insists on portraying as a sort of isolated oddity, a temporary phe-

nomenon that will shortly become extinct now that it's been called to the attention of the police.

Sounds familiar, no? We've been beating this drum for a while, and the percussion only gets louder.

I don't think that modernity is bad, per se. I am glad that my fiancé wasn't chosen by my father after consulting the local headman. I'm glad that capitalist innovation has unlocked unprecedented material prosperity, however unequally those gains are distributed. I even think that classical liberalism and its successor neoliberalism – or whatever label you prefer for the cumulative political effects of the Industrial Revolution and the nascent Computing Revolution – have been largely good for the world.

But there's something missing. Something that I need, and that others seem to as well.

We evolved to live in small groups that functioned through a holistic synthesis of pragmatism and mysticism. The material and spiritual worlds were one, inseparable. Worship was instrumental as well as transcendental. That modality was destroyed long before the 19th century, but its absence is still keenly felt.

Lou Keep, of the blog Samzdat (yes, spelled like that), wrote a brilliant essay called "Man as a Rationalist Animal" in 2017, analyzing James C. Scott's seminal book *Seeing Like A State*. I've taken the liberty of quoting Keep's commentary at length. (The brackets used for emphasis come from the original text, whereas brackets denoting redactions or errors were added by me. You should be able to tell which is which without much trouble.)

In the [cool kids scene] of the 2000's, opposition to Christianity was a given. No subject was more likely to unite than a good old bashing of fundamentalists. Marxists, Anarchists, Libertarians, Liberals, Randians – it crossed political borders. (I'm from California, if that

helps.)

It was hard not to – it's not like the fundies had any coherent reasons they could articulate. Every other day some [class indicator] pastor would announce opposition to "the gay agenda" or seek to return to "a Christian nation" as though that were a desirable thing that had ever existed (like, deism duh, etc.). If that wasn't bad enough, when pressed for an explanation, they'd just read some passage from John or Corinthians. "And? Was that all?" Readers take note: if someone is busy mocking you for your holy book, justifying your actions based on your holy book is a terrible rhetorical strategy.

Standard interpretation: "The olds are lamenting the loss of an oppressive institution that has no objective value, right?" *Right?*

So this is what churches do in our language: they're probably the single most important economic institution in rural America. Period.

Here are some obvious economic effects: Nearly every church functions as a community safety net, where tithes collected are distributed to poor members or members experiencing sudden economic shock (disemployment, medical issues, etc.). Depending on the church, this is actually a lot more immediate and a lot larger than government distributions that approximate the same thing. They also function as labor banks, wherein members help one another with projects that they could otherwise not afford (think of home improvement projects coordinated through the church, wherein one can afford to repaint

their house or call on the labor expertise of a fellow congregation members [say a plumber] to perform a simple but otherwise costly repair). Hell, one of the biggest things they do is something almost no one seems to think about: most churches provide free after school programs for poor congregation members, which is a humongous cost for parents. "Big deal." Yeah, but the cost of childcare is actually fucking enormous.

Note that most of those are vastly more important for the old and the retired ("it's just the olds complaining!"), both in terms of cost (local members helping for free) *and* autonomy (one is less likely to have to enter the anonymity of a retirement home, etc. if community members are there to help).

Churches have many more nebulous effects that are even larger: they improve social trust, which has a stupidly powerful economic effect. They provide local networking effects, allowing members to find new jobs and move up using church connections. Many studies relate churches to decreased violence and drug problem in communities (although I suspect this is confounded by social trust and the kinds of people who tend toward religiosity). A lot of these aren't going to have great studies attached, because they're under the radar and understudied. But want to see something that will knock your socks off?

Gruber's results suggest a "very strong positive correlation" between religious market density, religious participation, and positive economic outcomes." [The quotation marks are unclear in the original Samzdat post.]

People living in an area with a higher density of co-religionists have higher incomes, they are less likely to be high school dropouts, and more likely to have a college degree." [Again, the unclear quotation marks come from Samzdat.] Living in such an area also reduces the odds of receiving welfare, decreases the odds of being divorced, and increases the odds of being married. The effects can be substantial. Doubling the rate of religious attendance raises household income by 9.1 percent, decreases welfare participation by 16 percent from baseline rates, decreases the odds of being divorced by 4 percent, and increases the odds of being married by 4.4 percent.

[...] Note the most important part of that: one has to live nearby other co-religionists for these effects. "The kids are turning to atheism/the Devil" is a sign that all the co-religionists are going away.

In other words, churches are a cornerstone of local economic activity but they have to be churches. You can replace a Widget Factory with a Zigdet Factory and it'll be the same, but we have no idea how to replicate church attendance.

This has another effect: any attempt to "stop" these negative effects won't work. They only work based on the logic of the community. Because *metis* is both the world-view *and* the action, undoing one messes with the other. You can literally see this happening right this very mo-

ment in the midwest: church attendance collapsing is deleting a lot of those benefits even while the government tries to fill the void. It doesn't "work" in the same way, because a lot of those effects are based on shared culture and trust that a government agency just can't replicate. They only come with a shared worldview.

In a weird way, maybe that welfare participation is the (attempted) replacement, but then it's hard to square the simple economic replacement with this:

And, attending religious services weekly, rather than not at all, has the same effect on individuals' reported happiness as moving from the bottom to the top quartile of the income distribution.

"Man, this sounds like something everyone should know!" I agree, but also HA! That will never happen. I know how to argue for cultural conservatives to my left-wing, coastal audience. But how do you think the average *actual* conservative argues for that? "Faith", "family values", "God", i.e., *irrationally*.

I know this is hard, but imagine actually being a conservative Christian in a dying town. Everything I just described is going away, nothing seems able to replace it, and things are just getting worse. The most noticeable difference by far is going to be "cultural" – what language would you use? "Loss of faith and family" is actually pretty apt. Let's say that their arguments are identical to mine, just shrouded in local language. Fine – all that means is that [i]n the final analysis, the conservative [C]hristian recognizes that they're being deprived even of

the power to complain, which is to say, *even of the power to explain their powerlessness.*

Do these excerpts that I've strung together add up to anything? I think so, but I can't articulate my grand point, beyond saying that subjective human wellbeing resists deconstruction into data. (To be honest, that is Lou Keep's point more than mine.)

I wish that I had a better conclusion to offer, not so mealy-mouthed and ambiguous. Please forgive my uncertainty.

Fruits of Habit



Photos provided by @fire__exit

Everybody wanna be a bodybuilder, but don't nobody
wanna lift no heavy-ass weights.

*Ronnie Coleman, eight-time Mr. Olympia winner
(Sources vary on the quote's provenance)*

Facienda

Written by Tototavra
@totoTavrinky

Rituals are, of course, not about the good or the just or even about the affairs of a body or soul, but rather about bringing into reason the affairs of the universe, being the mind. Rituals are the imposition of the episteme, the reduction of the metis.

They do not have a heart, they cannot become, they can hardly even be, they only are. They cannot try to be good, because they cannot try. To try would be to introduce energy and bring life, but we are not to do that, not because life is the domain of the God, but because it is of the Devil.

Life and energy are evil not because they violate the just, or any of those simple explanations, but because they defy and unmake, like a joker. They cannot be accounted for, made in line with the good, the reason. They cannot be known, they cannot be passed down.

So then why would we have any rituals? They cement, enfirm, and steel. They do not laugh, but unlike laughter, you can count on them.

Faithless, Feckless

Written by Sonya Mann

I wish that I believed in God. Would I be correct? I don't think so, although I have wise friends who disagree.

My view is that religion can be good or bad – it depends on the religion, its specific tenets, and the behavior of its practitioners. Either way, faith is a powerful force in people's lives. One which secular life has been unable to replace. Nevertheless, I'm a staunch atheist.

A pious Sonya would be a different Sonya, but she might be happier. Religion provides structured morality; it provides an existential purpose beyond self-gratification; it provides the opportunity for absolution. (Or is that just Christianity?)

Absolution has the strongest pull on me. I want to be able to confess and hear that my sins are forgiven due to sufficient penitence. It's a primal need, I suspect, widespread if not universal.

Without a way to atone, I carry my guilts indefinitely. They don't necessarily make me a better person, but they persist and compound. How do I resolve my transgressions, without believing that any authoritative forgiveness exists?

Even if every person that I've harmed had forgiven or forgotten, I would still know that I am a person who has done rotten things. And I do not believe that a transformative divine force exists.

I have tried to logic my way out of the conundrum. The pragmatic approach: Guilt isn't helping me to live kindly and thrive, so I should let go of it. Great! If only I could instruct myself what to feel.

My wetware seems to be incompatible with secular redemption. And my pesky atheism stands in the way of other options.

People say that I should start going to church, even as a nonbeliever, and see what happens. I like the idea and yet I haven't done it. Perhaps that is a revealed preference – I *think* that I long for religion, but if my heartache were as potent as I claim, wouldn't I be attending services?

There is a part of my psyche that prioritizes the sense that I am accurately understanding the world. That part of me disdains religion. My head is winning its contest with my heart.

What have I done that's so horrible? Nothing. I've been the normal level of awful for a human being. Worse than some, better than others.

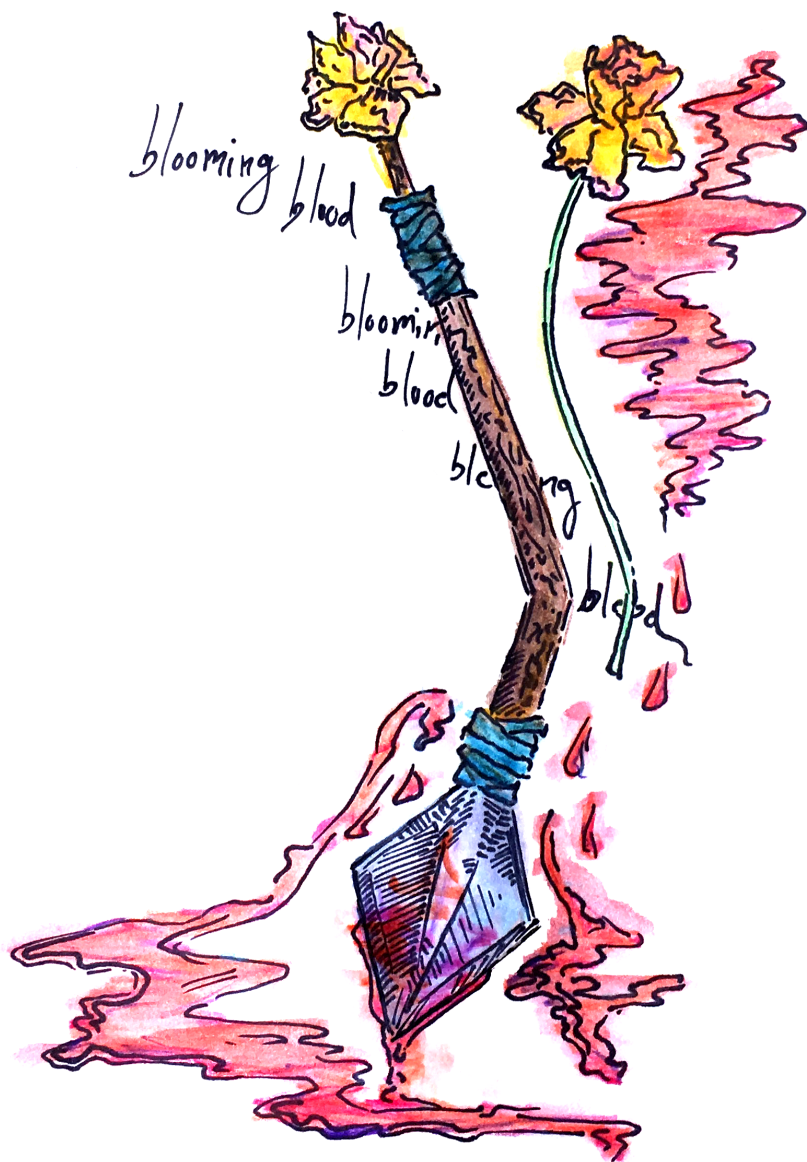
I am still too ashamed to confess the specifics.

Of course, reputation matters too. If you are predisposed to think that I'm an okay person, the details might make you hate me. I don't know.

Do I feel dishonest, not fully disclosing my flaws and how I have erred? Yes. I have been cruel. I have betrayed the trust of those closest to me. Such actions deserve censure.

My most recent sins plague me the most. I'm sufficiently disconnected from who I was as a child, or a teenager, to disregard those long-gone Sonyas. However, the wrongs that I committed in 2017 or later are too proximal to dismiss. I feel morally culpable for 22-year-old and 23-year-old Sonya.

She was me. And I'm frightened that I'm still her.



Anaphora Again

Written by Sonya Mann

February 19, 2012

You are given your name.

It happens within the first few days of your angry existence.

Your newborn skin is as red as a bruise, and full of wrinkles.

Your grandmother says, "Oh, she's a little rosebud."

You are given blonde hair.

You started out with soft Titian baby-fuzz,

but now you look almost as Aryan as your parents did
when they were small.

Your eyes aren't as blue as theirs were, though,

and your mother tells you that she was

even more blonde,

as a little girl.

You are given the advantages of

white upper-middle-class old-money America.

Every other summer,

your maternal grandfather hosts all of his progeny

at a tremendous glossy hotel in Wisconsin

next to a lake

with its own rippling gloss.

You are given

a lovely mystical Christian context,

within which you become an atheist.

You have all the bellicosity of one of those tiny shrill-voiced dogs
that everyone loves to hate.

The sermons at your family's church focus on themes such as

How the Sound of One Hand Clapping is Like a Heartbeat.

You are unimpressed.

Clapping one hand hardly makes a noise.

You are given – always given, foremost given –
something to rebel against.

You make a habit of classic teenage angst,
the same kind that everyone loves to talk about.

You spend at least five years
sobbing and identifying with Sylvia Plath,
because what could be more cliché than that?

You attend a Catholic high school that holds Mass almost monthly.

You never walk up for Communion.

You guess that your religion teachers assume
it is because of your scorn
for all things sacred.

You are given so many chances.



Illustration by Mike Lay
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Purgatory

Written by Sonya Mann

March 30, 2014

// 1 //

I am in the hospital watching my grandmother die. She may not perish immediately. She may pull through her visit to the land of smelly bodies and numerous tubes. But I look at her face, and it is remarkable that she has supermodel cheekbones under loose skin.

Despite its unanchored sagging, her skin is very thin. Thin enough that her blood shows through, red in the cheeks and blue in the vein on her forehead. Grandma's eyelids are small and colored like gold-enrod. The gaze beneath is clear when she reveals it with a blink.

Her lashes and brows are short, almost transparent, but she has close-to-full locks of muddy grey hair, threaded lightly with white.

The eyes lies to me. Grandma is easily confused.

Her state of waning engenders tenderness. Grandma is like a fat but frail moon, swollen and yet so vulnerable.

Her intestines are distended. The colon specifically. Medical staff are trying to relieve the pressure, sucking fluid through her nose and soon through a rectal tube as well.

With tears on her cheeks, Grandma tells me that I'm an impostor. I do not reassert reality. If the relationship is not true to her right now, then it is not true.

I long to wipe the wetness from her face, an ancient desire like a mother letting a baby suckle, but I would rather not alarm her. Is she firm enough to touch?

I tell her who I am again, and again Grandma is unsure that my words are truthful. I substantiate with a babble of memories, describing my visits to her as a child.

Concentrating in the hospital is hard. Harsh sounds that the nurses don't seem to notice, the beeping of ineffective alarms and *scrape scrape* as beds are pushed from place to place.

I'm comforted by the soft creaks of a machine that nourishes Grandma's sleep, and the blue numbers that say her oxygen is at 100. Is 100 good? I don't know.

Grandma moves softly, shifting in her sleep. Her body is quiet for the most part, tired and old enough that it won't protest against the tubes and wires that track her functioning. A nondescript tan blanket, like the kind at a hotel, is rumpled around her shoulders. She grips the bar of the bed in her sleep. One finger is clamped by a monitor that glows red.

I think of her as a child who played hard and fell asleep. Last night Grandma was so deeply fatigued that her nurses were concerned; perhaps a stroke had struck. The doctor came in, worried in an abstract sense but personally unfazed. He pushed on her chest and shouted for her to wake up. For a moment she did, naturally distressed, but she sank back onto the pillows almost immediately. Like when you restart your phone even though the battery is low – your start screen flashes before lapsing into black.

Now we are in a private room, warm and quiet. Grandma slumbers. None of us plans to wake her, but when she rouses herself I will read something out loud.

In the hospital, my attention is fractured because we occupy a nervous liminal space. Normal time is replaced by anxious time.

Yesterday my dad said to Grandma, "Hospitals are where people are born, and have their broken arms fixed..." His tone was lighthearted. The truth is that many people die here.

Yesterday, when Grandma was briefly in pain, she said, "I feel like I am going to die." I replied with some attempt to soothe and comfort, but I didn't contradict her.

Luckily Grandma hasn't been in pain for most of this ordeal. Scared, confused, and tired – but with minimal physical discomfort.

// 3 //

My father is spooning broth and Jell-O into Grandma's mouth. Suddenly music swells in from outside, like rainbow soap bubbles. I recognize Bonnie Prince Charlie's melody: "The Skye Boat Song." I'm little startled but mostly delighted. My dad puts down the spoon and pops into the hallway to check whose boombox it is. But there's a real harpist, holding that swanlike instrument, plucking and strumming.

Soon our turn with this volunteer is over, and the musician moves on, presumably to charm some other hospital hallway. The melody stays in my head.

// 4 //

I am keeping watch. Sitting with an ailing relative is an ages-old practice, one that has persisted as long as humanity and across various cultures. I expect it to keep persisting.

And yet there is a peculiar modernness to this episode. If it weren't for Modern Medicine™ my grandmother would have passed away a few health episodes ago. Further in the past, a sterile hospital environment would not exist at all. As it is, the off-white room has been familiar to a couple of generations. Grandma is monitored via cutting-edge physician's magic.

At the moment she is sleeping and a screen displays her levels. Oxygen at 95. I am not a medical initiate, so I don't know what 95 means.

I sit here typing with my thumbs on a popular type of mobile device, the words recorded in an application rather than an archaic notebook. My dad's tablet computer lies to the side, in its businesslike case of pebbled black leather, streaming classical music from

an internet radio provider. The visiting experience is defined by Apple's iProducts (and imitations thereof), Pandora's music service, and Starbucks beverages – a blonde roast, to be exact.

Despite the markers of this decade, I feel my adherence to ancient tradition. The reciprocal allegiance of family evokes a fierce internal response.

I am here because Grandma cared for my father when he was helpless. As he did for me, and as I will do for him when he becomes feeble. The abstract genetic considerations, our so-called shared blood, are not what motivates me.

I cannot relieve Grandma's swollen intestines, but I can read to her and say cheerful things. I can even sing if she wakes up and wants to hear a hymn. It is Sunday, after all – the Christian Sabbath. Accordingly, she rests.

Perhaps one day I will be slumped in a hospital bed, pumped with the latest concoctions. My grandchild will sit next to me, writing on a holograph screen projected from a forehead implant or some other sci-fi gadget, blasting Yo-Yo Ma out of their own ears. That moment, too, will echo millennia of similar vigils.

The bonds of flesh and care roar into full strength when there is illness. I look at Grandma as one of my pet rabbits. I almost speak to her thus, in a bright voice peppered with endearments. Her face has many fine lines and white hairs that subtly sprout from her chin.

I want to press my fingers into the deep hollows of her cheeks. She is beyond the concerns of vanity, unselfconscious like a baby. Others clean her and feed her and bring mental stimulation into the sphere of her perception.

I know that Grandma still has an inner life, because she says astounding things on occasion. Her sense of humor is not intact, per se, but it's present. I imagine that she sits with God in her mind, a solace throughout her life. I hope that He soothes her.

I see them sitting in the garden of her old house in Palo Alto. I remember yellow sunlight and cool spots of green foliage. A mysterious

next-door neighbor treated his yard like a dump, which I wanted to explore. Sensible adults prevented this, wary of juveniles' uncanny ability to find anything rusty and sharp.

My grandparents didn't have pets after their children left home, but I imagine that she would have liked a sweet kitty. One of the cuddly ones, who would settle its paw in her concave cheek, and groom her grey hair with a raspy tongue.

Grandma's hair is not like a storm. It's like a cloudy, solemn day – so was her life. I am watching her breathe. My love follows her lungs as they surge and subside.

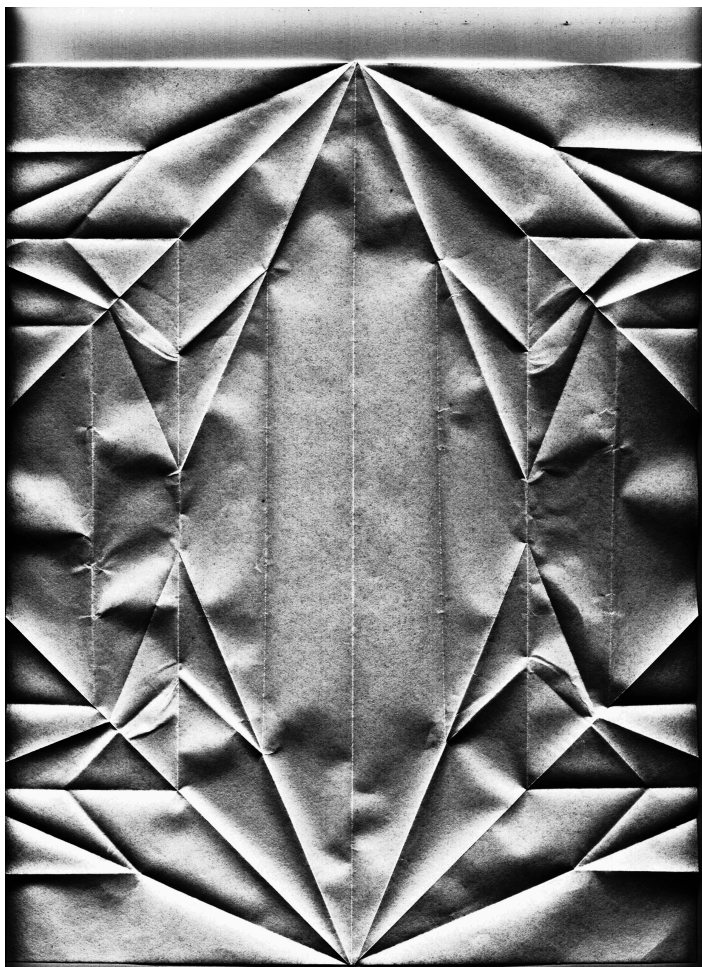


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Pining Away

Gnon put the selection pressures in a box. "There," he said. "Now we will live in the Dream Time."

"But we can open the box," said Moloch.

"That is true," said Gnon.

Adam Strandberg
@The_Lagrangian
November 17, 2018

You know these things, and nothing is like the sun was smitten, and the third angel followed them, saying to say, I pine away, I pine away.

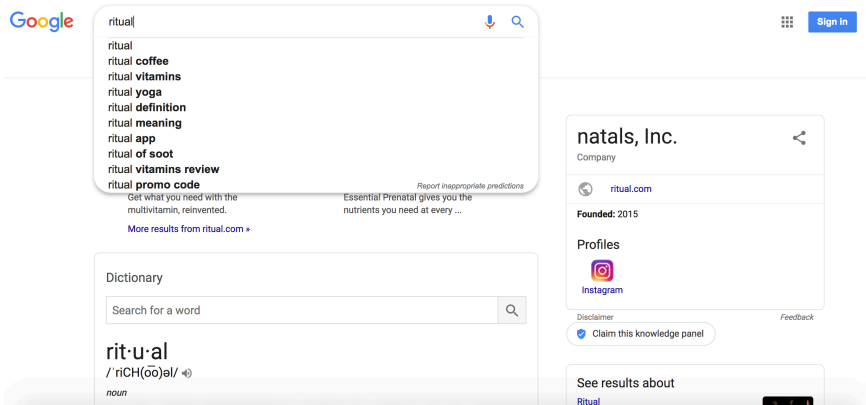
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February 28, 2019

Instructions Unclear

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February 4, 2019