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Integrating Self and Systems Through Ritual

Towards Deeper Systems Practice

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Abstract

We propose that co-designed rituals are a way for people to consciously identify and navigate their relationships to the systems they are embedded in, and to construct or reshape both healthier selves and healthier systems. Using experiences from a toolkit we have created to support the design of secular rituals, we show that making rituals designable creates agency for people trying to navigate and cope with intractable situations. We further show how the process of co-designing and preparing for rituals is itself a large part of dealing with challenging situations, and pose questions on how this approach may be replicated in more formal systems change and organizational contexts.

We propose that this approach to ritual design is a promising avenue to engage in the production of systems. The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the tensions and inequities in our global economic and social systems. It is becoming increasingly clear to a large portion of humanity that change is desperately needed. While political action is a lever for change, deeper systemic change will unavoidably require changes to how we act, relate, and identify as individuals and groups within the systems we occupy. We identify ritual as a kind of “lost technology” to help navigate that change.

Introduction

Systems change work works at a variety of levels of leverage (Meadows, 1999). Most systems design tools operate from levels 4 down (focusing on stocks and flows, and feedback processes), with a lot of recent attention given to co-design. An emerging area of practice and inquiry is on how the beliefs and reactions of the people involved in co-design affect the process of designing (e.g. (Scharmer, 2009)), and focus on transforming those people as part of the design process.

We propose that rituals are one such tool for operating on higher levels of leverage (5 and up: the design of the system, and its intent and governing paradigms), that rituals operate on both people and systems, that rituals can be designed, and that ritual design offers alternative modes of sense making and design that are missing from mainstream systems practice.

In this paper we establish the theoretical foundation for these claims, discuss insights from designing a toolkit for ritual design and from designing rituals, and suggest directions for further inquiry into the role and value of rituals in systemic design.

Human systems co-evolve with people.

We start with a premise that human systems are constructed by and co-evolve with people. This includes both systems in the sense in which sociotechnical systems (STS) studies defines systems – a constellation of people, artifacts, and practices that evolve with each other – as well as a broader definition of human collectives – communities, cultures or nations.

The social sciences offer a variety of theoretical perspectives that support this view. Sociologists (e.g. Berger & Luckmann, 1966) suggest that concepts, beliefs, identities and social institutions arise out of interactions between people; when institutions fail or disappear, people are forced to create their self and sense of being. Anthropologists suggest that culture and communities are created and held together through symbolic interaction, or as Geertz puts it: “man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun” (Geertz, 1973, ch. 1, pg. 5). Psychologists and psychotherapists note that people construct identities in ways that are influenced by the social contexts they find themselves in, whether consciously or unconsciously (see e.g. McAdams & McLean, 2013).

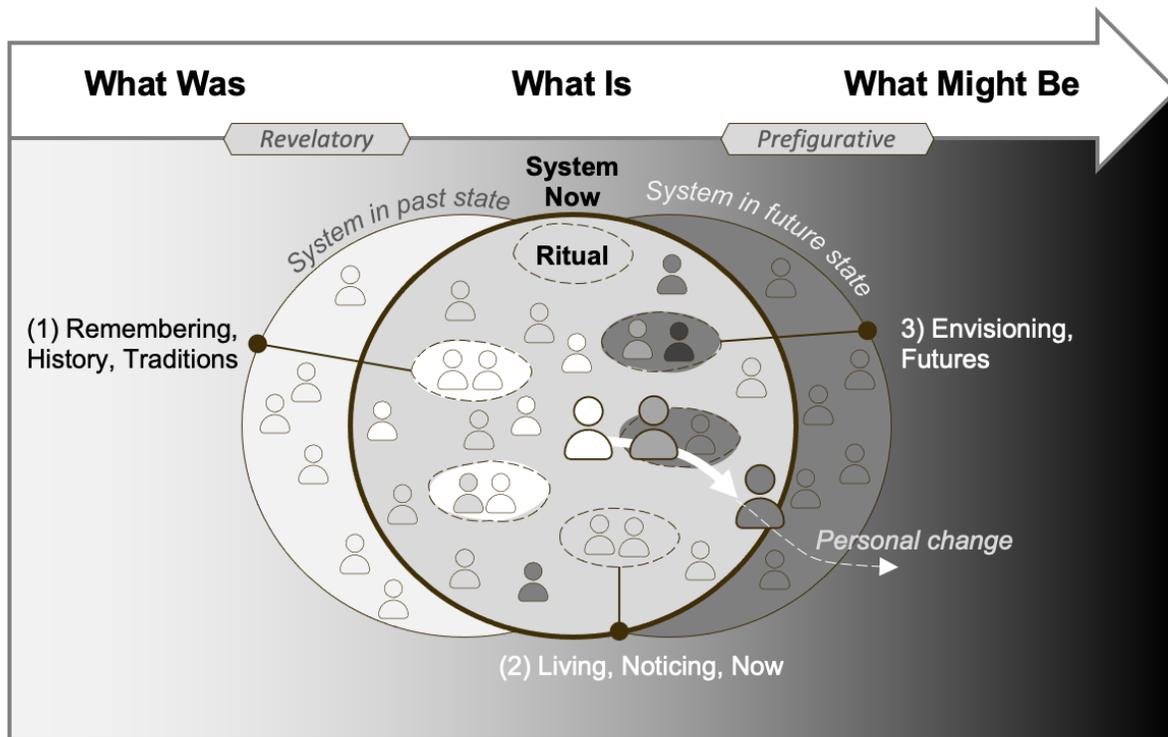


Figure 1: People are shaped by the systems they are a part of. Navigating system change and personal change are interconnected, and ritual can provide anchors to past, present, and future.

As systems-oriented designers we are not separate from the systems we are attempting to influence. When we are in a system, we are shaped by it. When we are acting on a system to change it, our actions are shaped by who we are. To change systems we often have to change ourselves: whether to acquire skills that help with the difficult work of systems change or to envision and embody new identities and roles that need to exist in the desired future system.

Two examples are useful to illustrate the ways in which systems and people are explicitly shaped.

Making selves when making systems

In 18th century France until about the time of the French revolution, measurement standards for goods were different in every town and village. These standards were set and negotiated locally.

As James Scott relates in *Seeing Like a State* (Scott, 1999), “every act of measurement was an act marked by the play of power relations”. Local conventions “... were the result of long struggle, and even a small increase above the customary level was viewed as a threatening breach of tradition.” This local variability made it difficult for the state to predict inflows of money and resources and to plan wars and other expenditures. Attempts were made to standardize measures for greater control.

Revolutionary leaders realized that using standard measures (i.e. the metric system) meant that in addition to better resource control, it would create a more homogenous experience for French people as they engaged in transactions, thus reducing distinctions between classes.

Shaping the measures was part of an intentional attempt to shape the people of France into a new kind of person: the French citizen, who would bear a new identity and would behave and act unlike a person who lived in a feudal system.

Shaping systems by altering selves

In the mid 19th century in the kingdom of Travancore, southern India, the Nadar caste started to challenge the social hierarchy. Caste separation from the higher castes was maintained by a variety of rites that prescribed the actions higher and lower castes could take. Among these were restrictions on what clothing subordinated caste people could wear; for the Nadars, this was a prohibition on covering the upper body, for both men and women.

Starting in the late 1850s Nadar women started to cover their upper bodies, often going so far as to wear the same kind of upper cloth that was reserved for the higher castes. This change to a visible symbol of inferiority was fiercely resisted by the higher castes, leading to decades of sporadic violence and riots. It took decades of persistence before this symbolic difference between the Nadars and higher castes faded away.

As Kertzer (1989) explains, "... changes in the larger political economic system gave a lower caste the opportunity to improve its economic status. They took advantage of these [...] circumstances to use ritual to assert their right to higher status in the community and to more power over community affairs." Resistance from the higher castes to losing such power and dominance comes as they seek "to salvage their own position of ritual superiority."

In summary, the Nadars were making a claim to be a different kind of self by adopting a symbolic action reserved for others. This altered symbolic action stands in for, and helps create, an altered reality. Thus, the Nadars were able to push through changes to the caste system by making changes in norms and identities, i.e. changes in selves.

Towards deeper systems practice

Systems thinking has a bias towards certain ways of understanding and acting

Systems thinking's roots lie in systems analysis, with mathematical and cybernetic concepts at the heart of the methodology. To date, this influence is reflected in an emphasis and sophistication in mapping practices, with much less clarity and consensus about designing interventions. As Sevaldson and Jones (2019) put it: "The third wave in systems thinking challenges the proposed universality of the different systems approaches and instead suggests applying them pragmatically and critically... What we need more than anything is systemic design praxeology". Discussing (Buchanan, 2019) they say "He argues against specific method, and even against systems as analytical sites—spaces where we might analyze from a distance and then intervene."

We propose that systems thinking has biases towards certain ways of knowing and acting — that systems thinking in its present state is

- *intellectual* (i.e. it works through dialogue and visual sense-making),
- *rational* (i.e. it tends to emphasize linearly designed interventions and formal ways of knowing),

- *expert-led* (i.e. its participatory practices are poorly defined), and
- *analytical* (i.e. it tends towards analyzing from a distance and then intervening)

This limits how well one can understand or change systems. Human systems do indeed possess some mathematical and logical properties, but they also contain humans who are much more messy and unpredictable than any analysis is able to contain.

This approach also elides the systems thinkers themselves. For instance, while systems practices often ask “why should we draw the boundary around the system in this way?”, they rarely ask “how is the way in which we are choosing to draw the boundary influenced by who we are?”. In these practices, the systems practitioners are disembedded from the systems they are attempting to influence, and they are disembodied in how they perform the tasks of knowing and designing. This means that systems practice can, while appearing to take a holistic approach, continue to perpetuate the worldviews and biases of the people doing systems practice. It also means that systems practice does little to help practitioners become aware of their own biases and their own selves.

We are hardly the first to make this observation. An excellent summary of this situation is provided by Rajagopalan and Midgley (2015), who suggest that “the capacity for critical reflection on boundary judgments, especially those regarding our knowledge of knowledge- generating systems (subjects), can be enhanced through new ways of knowing. Our experiences with the significance of cultural dimensions to the creation of meaning shows that there are possibilities both for alternate ways of knowing and for enabling shifts in attitude.”

Drawing on Heron and Reason’s (1997) framework of forms of knowing, they point out that “It is due to a culturally situated limitation in self-understanding (especially prevalent in modern Western cultures) that we are usually only consciously aware of one or two of these modes at any single moment in time... It is particularly training in arts, crafts and other bodily practices that promote attunement to, and reflective regulation of, the different ways of knowing.”

Selves as units of change

There has been a turn towards practices which surface and operate on the subjects of design, the designers. A prominent example is Theory U (Scharmer, 2009), which through its concept of “presencing” uses a variety of dialogic, reflective, and explicitly embodied practices to identify beliefs and emotions that are influencing the design process. Having made these influences visible, the theory goes, the designers may then account for them and include them in the process of designing as well as in what aims and purposes are being worked towards. Conversely, making these influences visible renders them able to be reasoned about, discussed, resolved, and discarded if needed. As a result of going through this process, participants emerge with a clearer understanding of themselves and of each other, and find their conflicts mitigated if not quelled. As a result, they are better positioned to take on the difficult work of creating transformation through design.

We suggest that rituals are another such practice, but one with broader application. Rituals are technologies of knowing as well as means of transforming people and their relationships. As systems designers, we can therefore employ rituals to transform ourselves as design subjects in addition to transforming the people who comprise the systems we are intervening in.

To understand how, let us first describe how rituals work psychologically and socially.

Rituals and systems

Re-Defining “ritual”

Ritual is often defined narrowly, as, for example: “A religious or solemn ceremony consisting of a series of actions performed according to a prescribed order” ([Oxford English Dictionary](#)).

Originally understood in the anthropological literature as being about the religious experience and the structure of society, rituals became understood as a way in which societies produce people and institutions as well as a mechanism by which people transform those institutions. In this sense, ritual creates a liminal space where new selves and relationships can emerge, and then be brought back into the mundane world (Turner, 1969, 1982).

In this paper, and in the Ritual Design Toolkit we’re developing ([ritualdesign.net](#)), we take a broader view of ritual and define it as: **A nameable container that enables action for making meaning and managing transformation.**

A ritual is a...			
Nameable Container	THAT	FOR	AND
	Enables Action	Making Meaning	Managing Transformation
<p>Allows people to point to a situation in need of navigation</p> <p>Creates clear markers between the ritual and other activities (opening, closing)</p> <p>Often imbued with an intention or set of values: may be seeking a defined result</p>	<p>Action and embodiment occurs</p> <p>Energy and attention are directed (individually and/or collectively)</p> <p>May reduce effort required for support or involvement by others (e.g. community, family, colleagues)</p>	<p>Felt experiences that can be meaningful and memorable</p> <p>May connect to or create stories:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - bring <i>past</i> events to life - navigate <i>present</i> challenges - live into a desired or imagined <i>future</i> 	<p>Transformation becomes more visible, recognized, and recognizable</p> <p>Identity and/or community creation, acknowledgement, and renewal</p>

Figure 2: Components of our working definition of ritual

Our work seeks to confer more power and potential on ritual - which we believe also opens up the possibility that we might *derive* more power from them.

There can be an unthinking quality, lack of agency, and lack of intention in “actions performed according to a prescribed order.” So much so that an alternate definition of ritual is also: “any act done regularly, usually without thinking about it” ([Cambridge English Dictionary](#)).

These regular acts, often small and cyclical, can become “habit” or “routine:” your morning coffee, shower, or commute. Focusing only on these, however, misses an important class of transitional and transformational rituals, such as coming-of-age, marriage, or moving. The field of ritual design includes both, as shown in Figure 2.

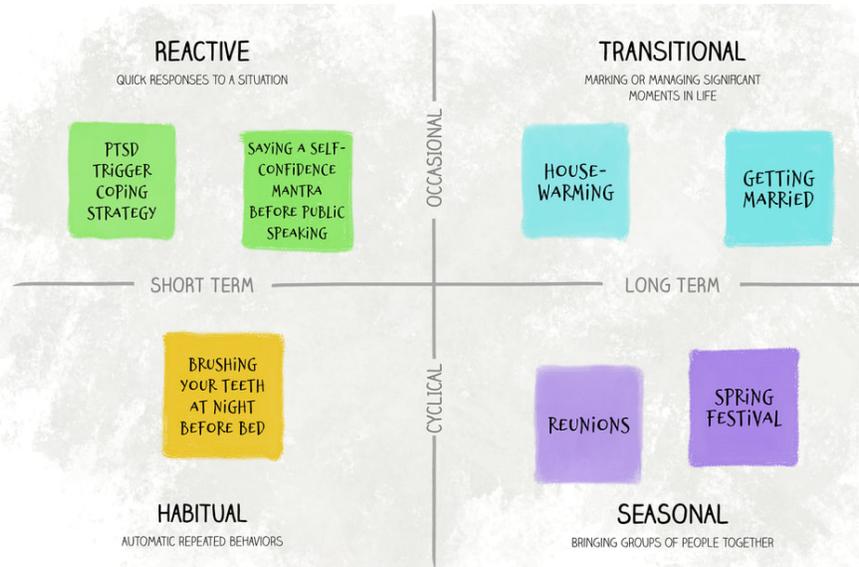


Figure 3: Framework that illustrates different types of ritual, based on their temporality.

When convention also comes to dominate and prescribe the form of larger rituals, we can call them ceremony: “a formal act or series of acts prescribed by ritual, protocol, or convention” ([Merriam-Webster Dictionary](#)). The distinction being that in ceremony you know what’s going to happen: there’s a script and a timetable.

Religious studies scholar Catherine Bell (1992) points out that “ritual, long understood as thoughtless action stripped of context, is more interestingly understood as strategy: a culturally strategic way of acting in the world.”

Our notion of ritual aligns with Bell’s, and therefore seeks to infuse our practices with context and thoughtfulness. As a result, there’s also more space for emergence: instead of centering convention, success is based on the effectiveness of fulfilling intention. That may require going off-script, and creating new elements of culture along the way.

We believe our definition of ritual creates more space for:

1. Variability, evolution, and design in how rituals are done.
2. Creating culture.
3. Deeper systems change, catalyzed and managed through ritual.

Rituals in Systems

More than most other tools of systems practice, rituals enable direct action on systems. Rituals are a tool for structuring, modeling, and enacting human intentions within systems.

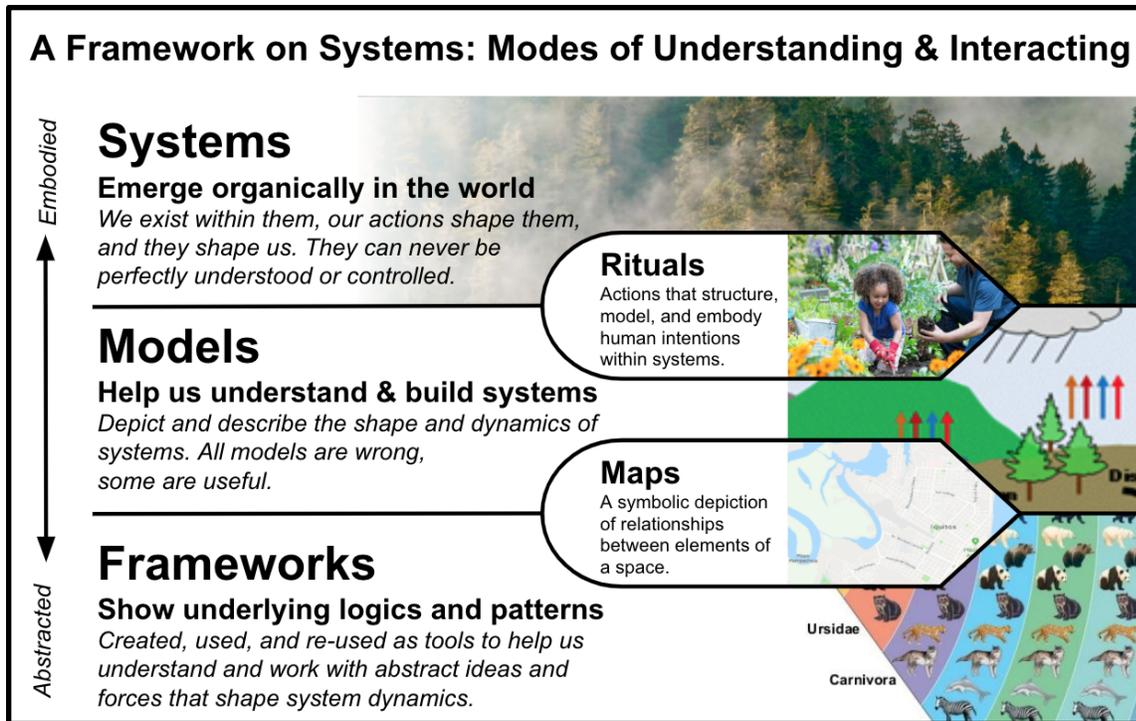


Figure 4: Framework that situates the concepts of systems, models, frameworks, maps, and ritual.

Figure 4 situates ritual alongside some of these other tools. In referencing this diagram, it's worth noting that – once created – rituals, models, maps, and frameworks become elements of the system they're seeking to describe or shape. The system absorbs them, and can be changed by them.

An educator who's spent decades facilitating children and parents on rites of passage experiences explains that "rituals, by their very nature, are ancient systems thinking methods. They acknowledge and invite connections between forces seen and unseen, which are brought to bear on circumstances that impact individuals and their village. They compel all of one's senses to collectively awaken ... link[ing] the present with the past in the service of the future" (Blumenkrantz, 2016).

Rituals exist within systems and their basic building blocks are: Time, Space, Energy, People, and Symbol. When you work with these elements in a ritual space you are also shaping the larger systems, the people, and their relationships.

You cannot remove people from these dynamics, as you can with the other tools of systems practice in Figure 4. As rituals operate on and within systems, they affect the people in the system.

The force that rituals exert on systems and people can act in one of two ways, that have an inherent tension between them:

- To preserve and maintain the system
- To push and evolve the system

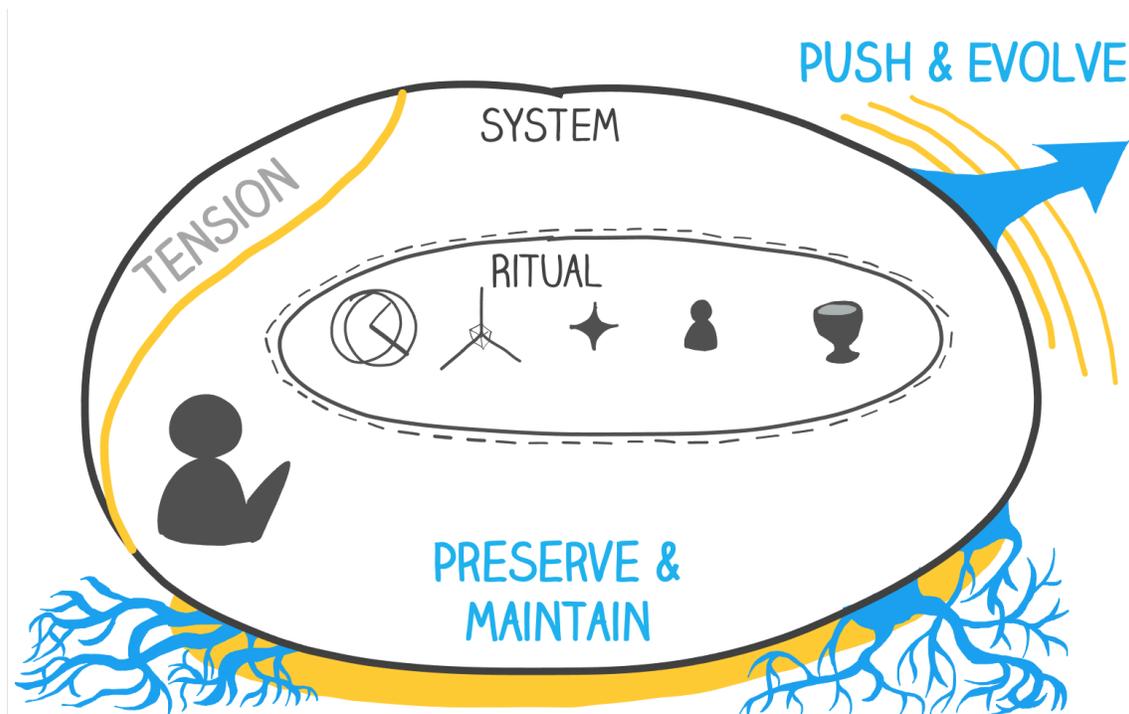


Figure 5: Rituals can be used to either evolve or maintain systems.

As Bell (1992, pg 120) describes how rituals act to maintain systems through tradition: "... ritual "invents" tradition in order to afford a sense of legitimized continuity with the past and to experience tradition as fixed. In the fixity of ritual's structure lies the prestige of tradition and in this prestige lies its power." These also become a way for power to be maintained and challenged in systems. Kertzer (1989) provides many such examples, stating in one that: "This [political] order was upheld by a ritual complex, and it has been through ritual attack that the Ramada men have begun to redefine the local hierarchy to their benefit" (Kertzer, 1989, pg 111).

If used well, we see ritual as a powerful tool to keep both systems and the people within them healthy.

As we work to address the increasingly urgent crises our world is facing - in the form of ecological destruction and the climate crisis, racism and white supremacy, poverty and wealth gaps, and political divides - we believe ritual is an essential tool for both deeper personal change and deeper structural change.

A contemporary example: NFL players take a knee to fight for racial justice

Let's start to look at these dynamics with a recent example from the United States of America. Colin Kaepernick and Eric Reid are football players who, in 2016, started kneeling during the national anthem that's sung before games. Their intent was to protest widespread police brutality against black people. This ritual challenges America's narrative as a land of freedom and equality. It makes the issue of systemic racism visible and explicit in a way that invites reaction, response, and participation.

There are multiple systems and rituals at work here. The United States of America is a system, in which watching and playing football is an important ritual for many. Singing the national anthem before each game evokes belonging, solidarity, and hope. Kneeling instead of standing disrupts this ritual. It exerts a pressure on the league. All of a sudden football was challenging America in ways that many fans found uncomfortable. And this, in turn, puts pressure on the nation because it reveals divisions and problems in a way that can't be denied.

This simple act of kneeling has power, precisely because it was performed in a ritual space. It reveals divisions and calls into question what it is to be American. Those who identify with kneeling, may see it as a way to push the system to evolve and improve. Those who don't identify with it see it as an affront to their identity and ideals. They are not motivated to change. For the health of the American system, it is real work to hold and integrate these.

This action has enabled Colin Kapaernick to become a leader in social movements, in a way that translates off the field. And this action has spread to other contexts: Now in 2020, you see kneeling by athletes in other sports and the Black Lives Matter movement itself.

This ritual action was designed. Before Kaepernick started kneeling, he tried quietly sitting out the anthem on the bench. But after conversations with a fellow player and friend who's a war veteran, they started kneeling to make the dissent more active, intentional, and - actually - respectful.

In this story we can see the power of ritual as "a strategic way to traditionalize," and - at the same time - to "challenge and renegotiate the very basis of tradition to the point of upending much of what had been seen as fixed previously or by other groups" (Bell, 1992).

The opportunity of ritual in systems practice

The affordances of rituals

Rituals appear to have a variety of affordances that are particularly relevant to the challenges faced in systems change at social scales:

- Inscribe identity
- Make and mark transformation
- Create or change relationships
- Negotiate social contracts and conflict e.g. (Turner, 1982) and (Robey & Markus, 1984)
- Support contemplation and inspection of experience (Imber-Black, 2012)
- Make change manageable

Importantly, much like the "presencing" method, rituals create a suspension of normal rules. By so doing rituals reveal the world and the self, and thus enable us to transform and create both.

Rituals can also be prefigurative practices. We draw inspiration from Asad's (2018) definition of prefigurative design: "Prefigurative design prompts practitioners and researchers to both imagine alternative futures and to structure design processes to manifest them in the present. These practices are experimental and incomplete and iterative to negotiate and collaboratively build the relationships, processes, and structures on which these alternative futures will be modeled."

Rituals are a powerful mechanism for prefiguration. They create an experience of a new reality that we want to inhabit. This differs from traditional design visioning practices in how rituals help us leave our current reality when we temporarily inhabit the desired reality. This allows us to change ourselves to be more like the kinds of people who would exist in that reality, and helps create the sense of meaning and purpose that enables us to work towards that reality.

Rituals can be designed

Though the first discussion of ritual in systems design dates back to the early '80s (Robey & Markus, 1984), it is only recently that interest in rituals as a technology has surged. Rituals are being investigated in medicine (Compañ, Moreno, Ruiz, & Pascual, 2002), neuroscience (Graybiel, 2008), psychotherapy (Imber-Black, Roberts, & Whiting, 2003). Closer to the practice of formal systems design, ritual is understood as part of the design process (Christrup, 2014), as a mechanism for new solutions (Sas, Whittaker, & Zimmerman, 2016), and most recently and significantly as a mechanism for organizational change (Ozenc & Hagan, 2018 and Ozenc & Hagan, 2019)

Ritual Design Toolkit: Findings from our work to-date

The need for a toolkit

All these approaches suggest qualities of rituals or provide specific rituals for those contexts. This leaves open the possibility of having a more generalizable approach to designing rituals, for use in spaces and situations not recognized by experts. When attempting to create such a toolkit or process, we worked with these principles and constraints

- Expertise-agnostic: support users (ritual designers) who have and do not have experience designing gatherings
- Secular: not demand any specific beliefs
- Modular, affording meanings and intents we could not anticipate

Our process

We started with a literature review of both books on ritual and design tools. We followed this with a generative session to identify some of the key elements of ritual, and the process of designing gatherings and experiences.

Once we had some prototype tools, we used them to analyze, deconstruct, and reconstruct some existing rituals we were familiar with. This led to further refinement of the tools and intuition about a design process to follow.

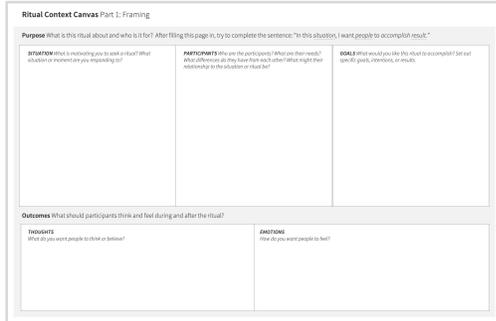
Having created a complete toolkit, we used it to design rituals with a variety of people in a variety of contexts. These were, specifically

- Friends and acquaintances experiencing life transitions that produced challenges for meaning and identity
- A festive gathering for the Greenermind community the authors are members of
- People who walked into a popup studio at Burning Man

Through these experiences we have continued to refine the toolkit, and refinements are in progress at the time of publication.

The ritual design toolkit

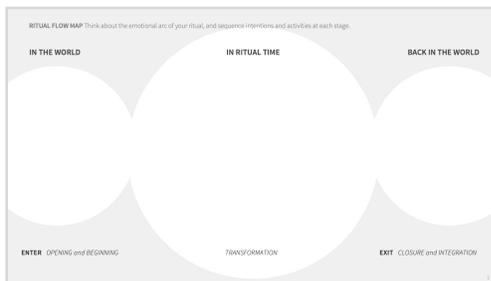
The tools we've built so far are on our website and are freely available. There are four main elements so far: a context canvas, a flow map, intent cards, and methods



The context canvas where you take stock of the situation, your goals, and the elements you'll be working with.



The intent cards help you get even more clear on the kind of change you're looking for.



The flow-map helps you architect the experience. Most rituals have three parts: a beginning, middle, and end ... and they create a bounded space of 'ritual time' that's distinct from 'world time'



Lastly, there is a set of method cards that have actionable tactics and tips for different potential elements of a ritual.

Figure 6: Elements of our Ritual Design Toolkit

We've recommended a basic design process that uses these tools together, but each tool is designed to be used flexibly and independently. We hope this structure and process can make building meaningful rituals both accessible and powerful.

What did we learn?

Studies of ritual in the academic literature almost always analyse rituals after they have been found to exist, and rarely do they discuss what designers and facilitators experience when creating the rituals. Our action research produced insights into this aspect of rituals, and these insights further support the proposition that rituals can be used as a systems design tool.

Three core insights are pertinent to this paper: that co-design generates meaning, the act of designing reveals the system, and the design process shapes the designer.

Co-design creates meaning

Our tools were created informed by the awareness that we could not as experts know for certain what experience would be meaningful for ritual participants. When co-designing with people, we noticed that people often needed to prototype the ritual interactions to find what would work and have power for them.

Metaphor and play were an important part of the process of designing and finding meaning, and often the emotional impact of the emerging ritual changed significantly if the designers were able to identify a metaphor. Therefore, the co-design process did not just uncover what people found meaningful, it also generated meaning by finding and applying new lenses to prior experience. Going through the design process helped bring attention to the idea and experience of the ritual, and deepened the engagement. This made the ritual more impactful and transformative.

Contrasting this with the experience participants had when we designed rituals for them, it is clear that people who participated in the act of designing a ritual had a greater sense of agency. In one case, a design participant who was halfway through a design process noticed that an upcoming ceremony touched on many of his needs for the ritual, and was able to add elements to that ceremony to have the ritual experience he desired.

The act of designing reveals the system

In our second example, one person utilized the context canvas to examine closely a ritualized meeting they were having with friends. The tool became a support for conversation, and helped the three of them go deeper into their context and needs.

Thus, the act of designing helped focus on their history and relationships, think about the nature of the ritual, and identify new directions to explore together. Delving into ritual "enables inexperienced students to reassess something that at first seems obvious, marginal, or simply invisible" (Bell, 2009).

It is important to note that what is revealed as salient is subjective and dependent on the people involved in this conversation. Thus the "map" that is created is not an objective artifact, and it reflects the state of the people as much as the state of the system they are in.

The design process shapes the designer

Our final insight is that the design process shapes the designer. By far the most common refrain we've heard from people who have both used the toolkit themselves or had a design session facilitated by us is that the toolkit gives them agency.

For example, we helped 19 & 20 year old college students design rituals last year, during the early months of pandemic in 2020. Our involvement was marginal - we merely explained the tools and suggested a rough process, and the students attempted to engage with the material. With a couple of weeks of effort, students created rituals of a variety of degrees of complexity and focus on the self.

As one student noted: "All our rituals had to do with thinking internally. None of us were looking to a higher power to solve our problems, making it our own responsibility." Through attempting to design rituals for themselves, the students went from being people to whom the pandemic was happening, to people who believed they could act on their own selves and surroundings towards a desired future. The emotional texture of their experience became amenable to design.

Though we knew that rituals transform the people who participate in them, evidence for ritual designers being changed by the design process suggests additional affordances for rituals when used as a systems design tool.

Conclusion

Systems change involves changing people, and changing people is a means of changing systems. Rituals operate on people and their relationships, and through doing so also operate on systems. Thus, rituals act as revelatory and prefigurative practices: they make visible selves and systems, and create space to envision and inhabit desired selves and systems.

To summarize, we propose that there are three ways to integrate selves and systems through ritual and ritual design:

- *attend to and examine systems and selves*: rituals make visible normally unexamined relationships, norms, and identities
- *shape the people who will act in the system*: rituals create space for people to play with and create new identities and selves, and provide a container for a lived experience of those selves. Additionally, rituals help envision a lived experience of a desired future system, and reveal the qualities of the selves who either inhabit or can work towards the creation of that future.
- *shape the system by shaping its dynamics*: rituals can transform the rules and norms prevalent in a system, challenge existing practices and sociopolitical order, and give meaning and validation to new practices

Finally, ritual provides balance to the ways in which we have been doing systems practice. By putting people as both subjects and objects of ritual design, rituals provide a balancing alternative to traditional systems thinking and design practice:

To the *intellect*, ritual adds balance by being *embodied*.

Rational sensemaking is balanced by *non-rational (but not irrational!) meaning-making*.

When being *expert-led* is insufficient, ritual is *participatory*.

And to our love affair with data and *analytics*, ritual opens us up to powerful, and perhaps liberatory, *poetics*.

Limitations and Future Questions

This is a work in progress. It is limited by how frequently this toolkit has been used, and by the lack of a formally structured evaluation process. As we continue to field-test the toolkit and broaden its community of practice, we also hope to make deeper connections to prior work in the disciplines we have previously identified.

In the spirit of collaboration, we offer some reflections as practitioners and some provocative and personal questions:

- If and as we look and feel inward as we do our work (whatever this may be), and engage others in that work, might we start to uncover ways that our minds and bodies have already been shaped by the systems we're a part of?
- How are our actions, tools, and methods defined, constrained, and limited by that conscious and unconscious training?
- How are the systems we're a part of, and may either take for granted or not see, limit the system change we're working towards?
 - What change is possible and not possible based on this training?
 - What do our systems make easy and hard?
- What personal change is required for system change?
- Who else needs to be empowered and involved in system change work?
 - Who is following who's lead?
- By centering the human body, creating and investing in human relationships, and interfacing more directly with natural systems - what possibilities does ritual open up?

Future work

Our primary means of continuing and enriching this work is through ongoing design practice and engaging with a community of ritual designers. This will allow us to conduct contextual and participatory inquiry into ritual design as practice both with and without our toolkit.

Secondly we plan on forming a more robust theoretical foundation in systems design practice. Past experience and published literature suggests that if we used this lens to examine systems change practices we would probably find rituals and ritual design are already happening in some ways.

Finally, we plan on making this body of knowledge and these tools even more accessible, perhaps by making it available in a workshop setting or as a curriculum.

A note on ethics

At the presentation of this work at the RSD9 sessions in 2020, questions were raised about the ethics of "shaping people and selves". These are valid concerns – design has a history of being co-opted into unjust and exploitative practices, and design communities struggle with these dilemmas to this day.

However, we believe ritual design is arising under quite a different set of circumstances. Rituals already exist in world cultures, and people are already being shaped by them, often before they possess the insight and wisdom to understand how. Most people experience rituals as participants and not as stakeholders; and many traditional rituals fail to address modern life and its challenges. Rituals are commonly already described as being disconnected from the concerns and values of people, and are often sites of contestation between old and emerging cultures.

A ritual design toolkit and a discourse on shaping selves therefore empowers humans to understand when they are being shaped by rituals (creating ritual literacy). It lets people see rituals as a technology they have access to, and provides support if they choose to use rituals to transform themselves.

In short, framing rituals as a means to shape selves is arising in a context where rituals are commonly undemocratic and their operations often subtle and unexamined. We therefore believe that enabling ritual design is both necessary and morally defensible. However, this makes it all the more essential that ritual design be made accessible to all people, and ritual literacy be widespread outside the confines of academic discourse.

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