"Rituals play an important role in society. Rituals remind us of what is important and provide a sense of stability and continuity in our lives. You can also use rituals to work more effectively and stay focused on your goals."

-Cathy Stucker, author, speaker and consultant

There are certain subjects that are ubiquitous in the field of human potential and leadership. There is a plethora of articles on motivation, productivity, creativity, innovation and on it goes. But there is one subject that has, unfortunately, been both underrated and neglected, a subject that determines the quality of life by giving it meaning and structure as well as habits, and that is - the profound power of ritual.

For his birthday each year, for over twenty years, I treat my brother to a trip to Connecticut for our yearly camping ritual. It is always wonderfully renewing and gives me a sense of uniformity. We are the best of friends and our time together reflects the joy we had in our childhood. We fish, exchange ideas and watch mindless movies.

During one of our campfire chats, I expressed my frustration about attempting to come up with a topic for my new article. He didn’t miss a beat. “What about rituals?” he asked. “Look at what we do every year and the grounding it gives us.”

My mind took flight as we examined the rituals we take part in every day - from personal to social to business. Most rituals are so ingrained in us that we don’t even recognize or label them as such. Rituals are often rejected as primitive, unnecessary, religious or time-consuming and yet - we are the sum total of our rituals. They even impact our social health. Social interaction and being connected to others is, according to a mass of research, one of the main keys to living a healthy and happy life.

Ritual not only determines who we are, it also creates habits - and habits determine everything about our life experience, both positive and negative. We fail or succeed based on our rituals. Denise Lammi and David Wojtowicz write in their article, Why Rituals are Important in Your Life: “Rituals add substance and meaning to actions and events at both the individual and social level. Rituals can also create new values and structures.”

An extremely positive payoff for ritual relates to a subject I have referred to a number of times: brain research proves that we have a limited amount of willpower and
discipline. When we employ will power we literally drain our brains energy, halt creativity and hamper our ability to focus. Rituals allow us to make certain elements of our behavior routine and automatic so we don’t have to constantly rev ourselves up and push ourselves to action. When we develop positive habits, we don’t have to use up our finite supply of self-control.

The reality is: if you want to ramp the quality of your life, you may want to fold a few positive rituals into the fabric of your life. But first, you have to hit the pause button long enough to take a quick inventory of your rituals - on every level. Start in the morning and whisk through your day. What do you do when you first get up? If you’re caring for children, what is your routine? What is your attitude when you begin your work day?

In my out-of-the-box life, for example, I usually begin my day by doing my hygienic routine and then have a cup of coffee with my wife. If I am not on the road speaking, I fire myself up by mentally, running through what I want to accomplish for the day and then breaking it down into priorities. I launch myself at my computer with a second cup of coffee, do my work and then head to the gym most days at 5 PM for a rigorous workout with a fifteen-minute meditation. Later, my wife and I read the papers and catch up on our day. Of course, we also have a ritual of seeing friends and that ritual is broken down into smaller rituals.

So, what are your rituals? They are easy to spot. Think about driving a car. You get in, fasten your seat belt, check the rearview and side mirrors and off you go. You perform these acts without conscious thought. In a sense, a ritual is like that. In order to uncover them you have to reflect. Think about your typical day, note your rituals and without judgment, rate them on a scale of 1-5 as being healthy or not - the score of 5 being healthy.

Asking yourself the right questions is the one sure way to discover what rituals you can change or ones that you can incorporate in your life to make it even more exceptional. Ask yourself a question and you will always receive an answer. Questions uncover the gold of thinking.

Using your mental inventory of rituals ask yourself “What rituals would increase the enjoyment of my life experience?” “How would I feel if I had more energy?” and “What ritual could I do that would make me feel more energetic?” (i.e. more exercise, a shift in
the quality of food or reducing food intake). “How would I feel if I were more enthusiastic about what I do and what ritual could I perform that would make me feel more enthusiastic?” “How would I feel more grateful and what ritual might I perform to feel more grateful?” “How could I feel more connected to others and what ritual might I perform to feel more connected?” “How could I feel more productive and what ritual might I perform to feel more productive?”

In Harvard professor/author Dr. Ben-Shahar’s highly popular course in Positive Psychology, he teaches students how to be happy. One of his Eleven Happiness Tips is to create rituals. He notes that “The most creative individuals whether artist, businesspeople or parents have rituals that they follow. This routine frees them up to be creative and spontaneous.”

Rituals are woefully lacking in most businesses because of the perception that rituals are time-consuming. This is faulty thinking. True Leaders create ritual to bring unity and connection to the team. Rituals put on the ‘pause’ button and produce a sense of fellowship by allowing others to connect to a higher purpose or larger goal. Rituals are about paying attention and that is something we can use a lot more of - on both the personal and business level.

Here are five simple rituals that can have an enormous positive impact on your life - both personally and professionally:

1. One of the most important rituals that you can develop is to create a gratefulness list. Simply commit to writing - every night before you go to sleep - five things for which you are grateful. In the morning, look at the list before you launch in to your day. This is a simple and extremely powerful ritual which will help you sleep more peacefully and begin your day with a positive attitude.

2. Take a pause before booting your computer up in the morning. I arrange my pens and put a note pad out. Before I make a phone call, I yet again rearrange my pens and make sure I have a blank notepad. That is my ritual. It helps me come to the present and focus. All research shows that this kind of singular focus (coming to the present) makes us more efficient.

3. Have a monthly lunch date with coworkers.
4. Sometimes we don’t see the value of meetings. But studies have shown that often meetings serve as a ritual for employees to sit, acknowledge one another and their work. This fuses the team by instilling a sense of culture.

5. Start your meetings by offering respect to your colleagues. Ask for any declaration of admiration or appreciation that anyone might like to express. It works. Make ritual part of your conscious choice and you will take the leap to having an exceptional life.

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