

The Need for Rituals

By Amy Stahl

On a bright summer day on the shore of Payette Lake, a couple dressed in white, with hands gently intertwined, stands before a ring of wildflowers and branches. A minister speaks quietly to the 60 friends and family seated behind them. They listen intently.

“We stand within a circle — a living circle of sky and earth, and a circle of friends and family,” the minister says, reading from a book she holds before her. “We honor the circle today, as we have since ancient days — the giver of light and of life ... It is the shape of the fiery sun, the moon, and the unending procession of the seasons. Jyl and Paul step into this circle of leaves and flowers as they prepare to enter the mystery of marriage.”

Together, the couple enters the ring of flowers. Later they exchange rings, kiss, recite their vows, and the wedding ends with music, laughter and tears.

This celebration, while personal, is but one of many rituals celebrated by people around the world. Christian rituals — like baptisms, communion and confirmation — are representative of the religious ceremonies that bring special meaning and spirituality into our daily lives.

Perhaps life would be as rich without them. Yet we cling to them, cherish them and pass them along lovingly to the next generation. Why?



GLENN OAKLEY PHOTO

Acolyte Chris Burley lights a candle in St. John's Cathedral.



Arnold Panitch and his son, Adam, use the candles of the Menorah to celebrate their Jewish identity.

Peter Buhler, a BSU history professor and expert in religious history, says humans throughout time have used rituals as a way to draw themselves closer to a higher power. "It is a way of communication between the sacred and us mere beings," he says. "Rituals are symbols of things that transcend just us — the limited human condition."

There is a tendency to categorize religious rituals as formal ceremonies, such as High Mass or Divine Liturgy of the Eastern Orthodox churches, which are performed in a temple or other designated place by a holy person.

Rituals, however, are the domain of all people — not just those who have received formal training, Buhler says. It doesn't matter what the ritual is, who performs it, or where — merely that it fulfills a basic need. He asks: "What is the difference between the eucharist, Easter, symbols of what is sacred and some pre-Columbian native in Arizona planting a peyote button and dancing around appealing to some special force?"

Warren Vinz takes Buhler's interpretation a step further. Vinz, chairman of BSU's history department and specialist in religious history, believes they are part of the

ongoing "human search" for unity and security. "Participation in rituals creates a sense of community that results in a sense of security," he says.

Not surprisingly, there can be many interpretations of a single ritual. But that's to be expected, Vinz says. "Different kinds of rituals mean something different to us because we are all different." To illustrate his point, he cites three views of baptism: "For some, it is an essential ritual for salvation. For some it is a ritual that brings a new life — if it's an infant — into the community." Others, he says, view baptism as a movement from one phase of life into another.

Historically nearly all religions, even those that have outwardly eschewed them, have engaged in some form of ritualistic behavior. Some examples:

- Mesopotamians slaughtered sheep to read their livers, Vinz says, "in a search to understand the will of the gods through very close readings of omens."
- Muslims face Mecca and take a submis-

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Rev. Joseph da Silva, left, says Catholic rituals have changed with the needs of society.

sive, kneeling position on a special rug in their daily prayers to Allah, Buhler says.

• Buddhists use yoga, according to Buhler, "as a ritual way of transcending the profane and finding their way into the sacred in the same way as singing a hymn to reach God."

While creating a sense of unity, rituals also can help those seeking to reaffirm their own identities. BSU social work professor Arnold Panitch is among those who use religious ceremonies in this way. Panitch and his family celebrate Hanukkah by lighting candles on their Menorah "because we are transmitting a tradition, a memory and we differentiate ourselves from others who are not Jewish," he explains. As a Jew and "a member of a minority group in a majority culture," Panitch feels it's important to "celebrate something of my own, to renew and restore my identity."

Panitch feels strongly, too, about sharing his faith with his son. "It's good for him to know what it's like to be a Jew ... by doing this we give him some kind of cultural as well as ritual identity."

Not all people are as introspective about why they engage in rituals. Some may disagree with the myth or reason for the ritual but nevertheless enjoy participating in them, Buhler says. Christmas carols, gift-giving and other holiday traditions are good examples. "Even people who don't celebrate Christmas in a religious way exchange gifts and eat together," he says.

Buhler says some people find spiritual satisfaction merely by performing a ritual. He says, "Bow, kneel, stand, sing, recitations: Does anybody really think about the meaning of the words? Maybe, but most likely not. The recitation is a ritual."

A trend seems to be surfacing nationwide in what appears to be a return to fundamental religious practices. A 1990 *U.S. News and World Report* story indicates that growing numbers of churchgoers are turning to orthodox religions and ancient ritual to find "the fullness of worship."

This resurgence is seen, at least in part, as a method of coping with an increasingly chaotic and impersonal world. Buhler explains, "One of the difficulties in modern society is that we really have a hard time in a world filled with diversity in terms of values, religious choices — a world that's so fragmented."

As society becomes more technological, people grow more disenfranchised — and more driven, says the Rev. Joseph da Silva, pastor of St. Paul's Catholic Center at BSU. "People have more money but they're work-

ing themselves harder to get there, stay there," he says. Consequently, many look to rituals to "enter into another world." Think of an audience member listening to a symphony performance, da Silva says. "They and the whole group are simply swept away, taken beyond themselves."

On a more pragmatic level, da Silva says he thinks the tactile elements of religious rituals — music, candles, food — appeal to the spiritual senses of today's churchgoers. In other words, parishioners value things that are common to their everyday experience but which allow them "to go beyond what is normal."

Da Silva warns though that rituals don't necessarily "bring God down." He says, "For Christians it isn't magic: 'Now God is here, now he isn't.'" God, he says, is always among the faithful. Rituals merely allow them to be "lifted into something beyond their own concerns and issues, into something bigger."

It should be noted, da Silva says, that although some Catholic rituals have been handed down for hundreds of years, many have changed with the needs of society. For example, he says, core elements continue in the eucharist that are expressed differently in each age and culture. Other changes within the Catholic faith include the widespread use of English in services and the active participation of congregation members in some ceremonies. Essentially though the same rituals, with some modifications, are performed by 900 million Catholics around the world.

In some cases, these shared rituals have sustained ethnic groups — such as those in the former Soviet Union — that have faced persecution by hostile governments. Rituals have become lifelines. "It was the only way they could maintain their identity and hope in the bleakest period," da Silva says.

Ironically, religious freedom has created quite different problems for some in the new Confederation of Independent States. Rather than a source of unity, rituals are becoming weapons used to exclude some elements of society. What was once a life-giving identity, da Silva says, "can be expressed destructively toward people of a different background."

Nevertheless, most people hold fast to rituals because they provide something special, something that goes beyond the daily experience of humanity. They form a bond that draws people together in a spiritual way. For where there is no spirit, there is a "poverty of soul," Vinz says.

As Ninian Smart, author of the book *The Religious Experience of Mankind* puts it: "If people go through the motions of religious observance without accompanying it with the intentions and sentiments which give it human meaning, ritual is merely an empty shell." □

RITUALS AND SYMBOLS

By Sheila D. Reddy

Rituals and symbols used for healing are the topics of a popular two-day workshop Boise State anthropologist T. Virginia Cox has taught twice in recent months. Students in the workshops explore the healing rituals of other cultures, in part, by making their own personalized symbols. BSU graduate Sheila D. Reddy was among those who participated in one of the one-credit workshops. Following is a description of her experience:

Prayer sticks, fetishes and shields are used in the Native American culture to create a path from the common to the sacred. The path is a personal one leading individuals to a better understanding of what creates a sense of harmony and balance in themselves and therefore in the universe.

In my own life there have been odd moments — on a busy freeway, at a supermarket meat counter, in a neon office full of desks, in line at registration or on a hot day in a crowded park — when I realized I had lost my sense of what was really important.

The balance wasn't there, or at least it was distorted.

It had nothing to do with my response to the slick commercialism of what my life was supposed to be, but a loss of connection with my inner self. I needed to restructure my sense of reality, regain a power base that would allow me to "sit back and watch the show" when I was stuck in a long slow-moving line, or maintain a sense of peace in a busy office. I did not want to be a casualty in an age dominated by consumerism and technology. I needed to take that journey inward to find my own inner happiness and place of healing.

A part of that journey was to rediscover and acknowledge what symbols were important to me. In her workshop on "Healing Rituals and Sacred Sym-

ols" BSU anthropologist T. Virginia Cox reflected on prehistoric and historic symbols and rituals, pointing out that they provide an atmosphere open to changes in reality and perception.

The workshop was not focused on soon-to-be-forgotten notes. It combined the

understanding of the cultural use of symbols, the construction of personal symbols, and the roles they play in health and healing. This "hands-on" method was doing and thinking, not just passively listening or talking.

As I looked at the white front of the medicine shield I was to paint, it occurred

to me it would not take art skills to create what symbols I felt were important, but personal honesty and introspection.

What had I learned on my journey? I needed my family, time to meditate, friends, work I liked, a constant connection to my inner self, a closeness with the Earth, a sense of reality, and a vision of the path I was on so I could maintain a sense of peace, ease and inner composure.

The symbols created on the shields at the workshop were personal — as individual as each of their makers — reflecting form, but allowing for cultural and personal differences. For myself, the workshop provided me with a unique opportunity to recenter ideas and separate from the ordinary those elements that keep life in balance and harmony. □

