



Rituals:

EXPRESSIONS AND CELEBRATIONS OF BELIEF

The mandate of Seventh-day Adventist education is to integrate faith, religion, and learning. This is what makes our school system distinct and different from public education. The primary purpose for our schools is to provide spiritual training for children and youth. The classroom is, of course, a location where students acquire practical skills and information, but the curriculum should not be limited to reading, writing, and arithmetic—it must also include reverence and belief.

Adventist educational institutions are privileged to be able to illuminate and indoctrinate their students. But this honor is granted for only the short time that students are enrolled in our schools; therefore, teachers should put greater and more intentional emphasis on the growth of the student's spiritual life. School staff should not just be concerned about producing graduates and young people who can finesse standardized tests, but also about producing spiritually formed adults who have a vibrant

relationship with Jesus. One practical way to accomplish this goal is to incorporate meaningful rituals into the school program.

Rituals: A Definition

According to the Oxford dictionary, a ritual is “a prescribed order for performing a ritual ceremony, especially one characteristic of a particular religion or Church.”¹ Or more broadly speaking, the incorporation of standardized values and practices into the activities of a group of people. Rituals usually focus on conventionalized actions that have little practical significance but great symbolic meaning. Often when people face situations whose outcomes potentially have great importance, they rely on rituals to help them feel that they are in control.

Rituals serve many purposes:

1. They give special significance to certain times and places.
2. They create a sense of continuity by linking the past to the present, and the present to the future.

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3. They objectify and establish spiritual relationships.
4. They give a sense of legitimacy and value to spiritual concepts.
5. They create a sense that important things in daily life are unchanged.
6. They create bonds between and among people from many lands and cultures.
7. They are expressions and celebrations of belief.
8. They provide solidarity and reinforcement of shared beliefs.
9. They socialize children in preparation for the cultural and spiritual roles they will ultimately fill.

People sometimes have a negative view of rituals, regarding them as either meaningless formalities or as dangerous activities used by fanatical groups to brainwash members into mindless submission. However, rituals are an important part of the social system of every society, occurring in the political realm as well as in friendships and family events. Rituals are crucial for cohesion and membership; without them, there would be no unity or unique collective relationships.²

How societies function—their social norms—are in reality the outcome of a series of rituals. In general, within each society, people act and interact with one another in a fairly structured and predictable manner. For example, in the United States, children learn that in the morning it is appropriate to greet other people by saying “Hello” or “Good morning,” and to say “Thank you” after someone does something kind for them. Thus, throughout the young people’s lives, these rituals remain part of their customary behavior and help them integrate smoothly into the social structure of their culture.

In like manner, rituals are basic to the fabric of a religious organization. They can play a vital role in the process of helping young people build a relationship and a lifelong connection with Christ. However, for rituals to achieve their desired goals, they need to be carefully planned and orchestrated, and their meaning must be clear to each participant.

Adventists might think of themselves as having few rituals in comparison with other religions, but in reality, we incorporate many rituals and liturgy into our corporate and personal lives. When we invest daily time in worship and meditation with the Lord through reading the Bible, praying, singing, etc., we are incorporating elements of ritual ceremony into our spiritual lives.

The Role of the Classroom in Developing Rituals

Incorporating rituals in the classroom might appear to be a difficult task, but in reality, this is something teachers do all the time. A number of administrative rituals occur in classrooms every day. Teaching children good behavior when they are part of a group (society or classroom) is integral to the curriculum and is frequently ritualized. The “good morning routine” is a ritual in which the teacher addresses each student at the beginning of the day with a warm personalized “Hello.” According to Greenberg, in an article she wrote for Scholastic.com entitled “The Value of Classroom Rituals and Routines,”³ this ritual helps communicate that it is considered good manners to greet each person by name to help him or her feel comfortable. Even though most



Religious rituals, like Christmas pageants and weeks of prayer, play a vital role in the process of helping young people build a relationship and a lifelong connection with Christ.

Christians might not consider this to be a religious ritual, it is a way of combining etiquette with Christian caring. Another suggestion from Greenberg’s article is the “Social Circle,” whose activities include each child’s hugging a neighbor in the circle to say hello, singing songs, finding helpers for the classroom, discussing what each child has made, sharing news from home, etc.⁴ These excellent development rituals could have a more spiritual focus—thereby combining worship and enhancing connections between the children.

Rituals are important to various aspects of life for many reasons, not just spiritual. They promote group membership and identity, provide a sense of comfort and safety, and help to shape children’s perceptions and beliefs. Rituals are often connected with the celebration of special occasions that mark the passage from one stage of life to another (birthdays, baptisms, weddings).

The expectation and assumption in Adventist schools is that most children come from good homes, but not all of them have

regular family worship, so morning worship is an important ritual in the classroom. When children enjoy this event and are encouraged to participate, this makes worship a cherished ritual that they will embrace for their own lives and later pass on to the next generation.

More About the Purposes of Rituals

Rituals are powerful because they focus on a symbolic meaning, which ultimately contributes to the fabric of a belief system. Below is an expanded discussion of the purposes for rituals:

Rituals give special significance to certain times and places. I will never forget my baptism or my first communion. I even remember the pastor and his personal comments to me just before my baptism, as well as his favorite Bible chapter (Psalm 46), which he recited to me and which I have often referred to in my own classroom rituals.

Rituals create a sense of continuity by linking the past to the present, and the present to the future. I will never forget the first baptism my daughter attended and her first communion service. Now that she has children of her own, she has shared these rituals with her own children to enhance the richness of their faith.

Rituals provide a way to shape spiritual self-image. They have the potential to alter people's beliefs and actions, thereby giving each participant a new spiritual self-image.

Rituals create bonds between and among people from many lands and cultures. When people become citizens of a new nation, they participate in singing the national anthem and celebrating the country's independence day. Likewise, when people join a church, they participate in the rituals of their new spiritual fellowship.

Rituals objectify, establish, and legitimize the individual's relationships with particular groups, such as churches and schools, which become the individual's primary social group. It's important for people to participate in a social community that supports their morals and beliefs. Having a strong social support system helps people cope with difficult times. Through meaningful rituals, the group can direct the problems to Christ and offer emotional support with intercessory prayer (for example, anointing of a gravely ill person).

Rituals create solidarity and continuity in a group's collective spirituality, as well as shared goals and expectations. They provide for a union of interests and purposes among members of a group. Rituals will bring children in the classroom together as a unit and promote coherence and cohesion within the group.

Rituals provide reference points for developmental transition and help to socialize children for the religious roles they will later play in their church, society, and personal relationships.

To be meaningful and memorable, *rituals must contain rich forms, sensory content (sound, smell, taste, appearance, etc.), and physical action.* Think about Communion with its traditional songs and Scriptures, the bread and wine, the Ordinance of Humility, and the planning that ensures that it occurs on a regular basis.

Rituals must be stimulating and pleasurable. To be meaningful, they need to be more than a passing fad or a brief experiment. In the school environment, rituals must be planned so that all students are able to participate and receive some sort of satisfaction, and plans must be in place to incorporate newcomers in a pleasant way so they do not feel left out or uncomfortable.

Classroom Rituals

What rituals other than the glad-to-make-your-acquain-



key part of a ritual is the involvement of every person, which helps students connect with one another and with the teacher. If used consistently, rituals become part of a predictable routine that can help with classroom management.

tance and classroom circle ones can the teacher incorporate into the classroom without detracting from the academic process?

According to Eric Jensen,⁵ rituals must (1) solve a problem, (2) engage all students in a positive manner; (3) be simple and easy to do; (4) be highly predictable so students know what is going to happen and when; and (5) must produce a positive emotional state at the conclusion of the event. Rituals that fulfill these requirements include ones in which the entire class needs to be engaged in a predictable manner: rituals that are used to start class on time, invite a visitor into the room, distribute supplies or prepare to transition to another class, and acknowledge birthdays or other special events. A key part of a ritual is the involvement of every person, which helps students connect with one another and with the teacher. If used consistently, rituals become part of a predictable routine that can help with classroom management. When students know what to expect, they have an easier time understanding what is expected of them. Rituals can also create a positive climate in which participants feel a sense of community, making it possible for the teacher to build upon the resulting positive emotional state.

Just as children must learn the foundations of reading, writing, and mathematics to be able to further develop and use these skills later in life, the same applies with rituals. Humans rely on their memories every day, and what they know and who they become are determined to some extent by their memories. There are several theories on how rituals affect memory. Some studies state that rituals affect the semantic (working), episodic, and “flashbulb” memory. Czachesz has suggested that rituals in the imagistic mode influence episodic memory, whereas rituals in the doctrinal mode influence semantic memory.⁶ The memory of meanings, understandings, and concept-based knowledge are also affected, according to Czachesz.

Singular events in our lives that are connected to a date or time (yesterday I read the Book of Matthew) are episodic; whereas lexical items, which generally involve the acquisition of information that is not directly related to singular events in our lives, are semantic (Matthew is the first book in the

New Testament). Czachesz believes that highly arousing rituals generate flashbulb memories⁷; for example, our first encounter with Christ or an emotionally arousing event such as baptism or a first communion service. The best way for children to start forming a healthy relationship with Christ is to have their minds engaged by all three aspects of memory. When the child’s memory is thus engaged, there is a higher likelihood of his or her retrieving the memory and being motivated and influenced by it to become a spiritually guided person throughout life.

Some Suggested Rituals for Classrooms

1. Regular and meaningful worships in which the students participate actively. Schedule a brief program at approximately the same time each day that includes songs, reading, discussion, sharing time, and prayer. A significant portion can be student led.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Example adapted by The J. Paul Getty Museum

http://www.getty.edu/education/teachers/classroom_resources/curricula/visualizing_devotion/

Websites

- Lesson plan, “Rites of Passage” from *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly*: <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/lessons/rites-of-passage/procedures-for-teachers/341/>
- Lesson plan, “Teaching Tolerance and Compassion Through Religion in Schools” from Bright Hub Education: <http://www.brighthubeducation.com/teaching-methods-tips/69391-promoting-religious-tolerance-in-schools/>
- “Ritual and Christian Origins” by Risto Uro: http://www.helsinki.fi/teol/pro/ihminen/ohjeet/CHAP15URO_PP.pdf
- Article: “Leprosy in the Bible: Quarantine or Ritual?”: <http://www.docstoc.com/docs/19649949/leprosy-in-the-bible-quarantine-or-ritual>
- Chapter 31 (“The Sermon on the Mount”) in *The Desire of Ages* by Ellen G. White: <http://www.ellenwhite.info/books/ellen-g-white-book-desire-of-ages-da-31.htm>
- Chapter 31 (“Publishing, Temperance, and Social Principles”) in *Messenger of the Lord, The Prophetic Ministry of Ellen G. White* by Herbert Douglass: <http://www.whiteestate.org/books/mol/Chapt31.html>
- Suite101.com (“Classroom Ritual Ideas”): <http://suite101.com/article/classroom-ritual-ideas-a165862>; “Creating Classroom Rituals”: <http://suite101.com/article/creating-classroom-rituals-a164030>

2. Create a unit about rituals, ceremonies, and practices that are important to the belief systems of various groups. This will help students grasp the significance of such events in the lives of others and in their own lives. (See the example adapted by The J. Paul Getty Museum in the sidebar on page 28.) To help students get started, ask questions about rituals and their relationship to religion. For example, “How do people learn about how to participate in religious rituals? Are they taught, or do they learn by observation? Do you think it’s possible for people to understand the spiritual beliefs of another culture? How can you understand your spiritual beliefs better as a result of learning about the rituals of your faith?”

3. Schedule brief prayer sessions throughout the school day.

4. Invite the local pastor to talk to your students about faith and spiritual issues and how they are illuminated by rituals.

5. Create a lesson on rituals in the Old Testament or New Testament, or choose one specific ritual, such as the sanctuary service, and build a unit around it. What rituals did Jesus require and respond to? What rituals did He participate in? For ideas, refer to the Websites cited in the resource section.

6. Have students observe and document rituals that are important to Adventism. Communion, baptism, weddings, baby dedications, vespers, ordination/commissioning services, and anointing of the sick are examples. There are also health rituals and practices, as well as ones relating to tithing and celebration of sacred time. We gather on Sabbath to worship and share, and we observe the Sabbath hours carefully, frequently ritualistically. Ask students to see how many rituals they can list that are involved in worship services and other events during sacred time, compared to how many are a part of spiritual life throughout the week. Students can make oral reports on what they discovered, which can be enhanced with video or PowerPoint presentations.

7. Much of life consists of rituals. Think of the rituals you incorporate into your teaching. With your students, begin to record in daily journals some reflections about the significance of rituals in daily life, and useful changes that might enhance your teaching and religious experience. A suggested theme: “What I do daily (or weekly) and why these spiritual experiences and rituals are meaningful to me.” (Discuss the differences between rituals and habits when you make the journaling assignment.)

8. Be creative as you plan spiritually related rituals. It is important to make the connection between spirituality and rituals, but it is also important for you to model a spiritual lifestyle. Your attitude will have a significant impact on the effectiveness of the rituals you incorporate in the classroom.

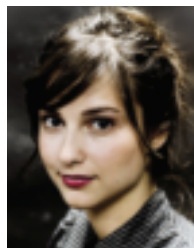
It is not just the ritual itself that is important; it is the atmosphere and example. To be meaningful, rituals must have regularity, structure, and depth. Rituals provide hooks for meaning and intentionality in developing spiritual life and commitment. Every student who enrolls in the Adventist education system needs to be exposed to many experiences filled with spiritual meaning and nurtured in developing a lifestyle focused on the Savior. Teachers have the solemn responsibility to create a fabric of spiritual meaning and relationship for each student. What they experience in your classroom may be the only opportunity for many of your

pupils to know God and to understand the necessity of choosing a life of commitment to Him.

Challenge your students to think about the rituals in their lives and how they reflect their spiritual beliefs. How can they adapt old rituals to make them meaningful to life in the 21st century? What new rituals might they incorporate to enhance their relationship with Jesus? Inspire them to think of rituals as more than mere tradition—they help in creating a connection with God that can provide hope and the promise of a life filled with grace. ✍



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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. “Rituals,” *Oxford Online Dictionary* (n.d.): <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/ritual?q=rituals>. Retrieved October 11, 2012.
2. There is insufficient space in this article to discuss the development of rituals in social and religious groups, their evolution over time, or attempts to use them to initiate changes in a group’s identity and foundational principles. Because rituals are distinguishing features of groups, disgruntled individuals or subgroups may reject or seek to change the shared rituals. By doing so, they are in essence declaring their independence from the group. If many members reject the group’s rituals, this may lead to a splintering of the group and the formation of one or more new groups, which then establish new rituals in keeping with their shared goals and mores. Within a Christian organization, this situation generally arises when there is a lack of equilibrium between rituals and a relationship with Christ. Someone has observed that in religion, rituals without relationship can be deadly.
3. Polly Greenberg, “The Value of Classroom Rituals and Routines”: <http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/article/value-classroom-rituals-routines/>.
4. Ibid.
5. Eric Jensen, “Brain-Based Learning: Practical Applications for Teachers”: *Brainbased Jensen Learning*: <http://www.jensenlearning.com/news/brain-based-learning-practical-applications-for-teachers/brain-based-learning>.
6. Istvan Czachesz, “Long-Term, Explicit Memory in Rituals,” *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 10:3-4 (2010):327-339.
7. Ibid.