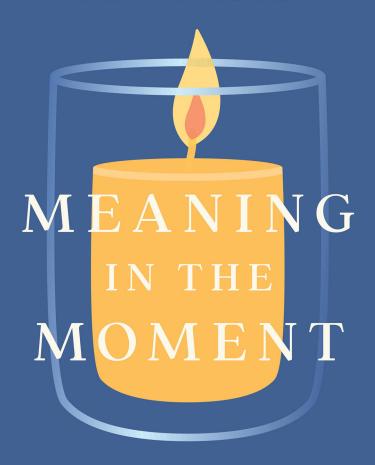
HOW RITUALS HELP US

MOVE THROUGH JOY, PAIN, AND

EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN



AMY F. DAVIS ABDALLAH

MEANING IN THE MOMENT

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PART ONE



1

Ritual Transforms and Embodies

I HAD A SABBATICAL ONCE, AND IT WAS AMAZING. It was an entire semester spent not teaching. I wrote (a lot), traveled, and had new experiences.

When it came time to teach again, I was grumpy. I love teaching, but there was something inside of me clinging desperately to the sabbatical, and I had no desire to go back to the classroom. I wanted to transition well, but transitions have always been a challenge for me.

So, I try a ritual to help my transition. I write down everything great about the sabbatical in two categories: what I get to keep and what I need to leave behind. Then I buy some candles and set them on an outdoor table. My friend and I sit there on a warm August evening by the shore. I breathe deeply and light the tall, wide sabbatical candle. I light the medium-sized white glass votives from the sabbatical flame, naming and savoring the joy of what I will keep from the sabbatical—such as learning to love aloneness and learning to write well. I place them

so that they encircle the sabbatical with their warm flames. I smile again and light the small red tea lights from the sabbatical flame; they form the outer circle. Each represents what I am leaving behind—like traveling more and having a flexible schedule.

I want to savor all of it. My heart rebels against the next step, the one where I blow out the candles that represent what I am leaving behind. I know deeply that the physical act of extinguishing is a profound letting go. I breathe deeply again, overcome my resistance, and one by one I extinguish and let go. My friend prays for me, and we both head home.

The next day—believe it or not—I could not wait to teach. The previous eight months had formed me, and this simple ritual had transformed me. I thought through what I needed, prepared a ritual, spoke my joys to the flames, and physically extinguished candles. In so doing, I emotionally let go.

Rituals transform. Rituals have transformed me, and I have watched rituals transform others. The transformative power of ritual is available to all of us.

Ritual and Mystery

Tom Faw Driver's Liberating Rites: Understanding the Transformative Power of Ritual appeals to magic as the agent of transformation in rituals.¹

I do not believe in magic.

I do, however, believe that ritual transformation employs something that is not rationally explicable and is both subjective and cultural. Our Christian culture embraces the mysteries of the trinitarian three persons and one essence, Christ's nature as fully God and fully human, baptism and the filling with the Holy Spirit, and the sacraments. These are not mysteries that detectives solve but are rather mysteries we embrace and contemplate with awe.

The mystery in ritual is at least partially because rituals communicate meaning, not information. Ronald L. Grimes calls it "big M meaning," like the "Meaning of life," not "little m meaning," as in a definition from the dictionary. Wedding rituals verbally and symbolically create unity where there were once two separate people. Genesis, Jesus, and Paul state that the two become "one flesh" (Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:5; Mark 10:8; Eph. 5:21), and Paul expounds on this point, stating, "This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church" (Eph. 5:32). Our rituals transform two into one and communicate meaning that is both present in and beyond two people. This meaning is a profound mystery, and yet we begin to grasp it even though our words can never fully express it.

Years ago we began a tradition of Ash Wednesday services at our college chapel; most students came from a Pentecostal or similar free-church background and thought Ash Wednesday was an empty ritual for Roman Catholics. The first time we did it, the campus pastor wanted to explain everything to win the students over. I strongly urged against this idea because the Ash Wednesday service explains itself through the progression, the symbols, and the ritual actions. As it turned out, the students did understand the meaning without our explanation. Some things just cannot and should not be rationally explained. At times we explain too much, acting as if we are solely rational beings. The nonrational mystery meaning is part of the beauty and transformative power of ritual.

Protestants from church backgrounds like mine prefer rationality to mystery. We celebrate ordinances, not sacraments, and are suspicious of the idea that material things have spiritual significance. We spend lots of time on sermons to spiritually feed our minds and very little time at the Lord's Table to spiritually feed our bodies. We elevate the spiritual, unseen dimensions and denigrate the physical, seen dimensions, tending more toward gnosticism than historical Christianity.

I once met a gregarious and fun Franciscan monk on the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem. He was a Filipino who grew up in New Jersey and took confession in seven languages at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. He took us to a private chapel at the back of the church and opened a low door. He pointed to pickaxes beside the *actual stone* of the hill on which Jesus died, saying, "Do you want some? Nah, you Protestants—you don't care about relics, so let's leave!" Needless to say, despite our Protestant rationalism, we were drawn to that rock.

We wanted it as Protestants because of Jesus and the Bible. Yet our tradition may be guilty of allowing the words of Scripture to eclipse the Word. Countless students of mine read "Word" in John 1:1 ("In the beginning was the Word") as denoting the Bible. The Bible is the revelation of God, yes, but it does not contain God; God is bigger than the Bible. The Word in John 1:1 refers to a person: Jesus. Many of Jesus's words are in Scripture, but even the authors admit it is only some of the story, some of the person, a reflection of the Word. Nevertheless, it is sufficient for faith (John 20:30–31).

I write this because sacramental mystery is based on Christ. Christ is the "quintessential sacrament" because Christ was matter, a body, and it was that matter that brought us redemption.³ As the seventh-century theologian John of Damascus states, "I do not worship matter, I worship the God of matter, who became matter for my sake, and deigned to inhabit matter, who worked out my salvation through matter."⁴ The fact that God was a body makes all our bodies potentially holy. God united with humanity through a body in order that humanity might unite with God for all eternity.

My curly headed son, four years old, is a hug wrapper. When he runs into my arms, he wraps his legs around my waist, puts his arms around my neck, plants warm kisses on my skin, and says, "I love you." He could just say the words as he smiles from a doorway, but oh, I understand it through his body and mine.

He *is* his body, as I am mine, and our bodies speak, think, and emote. Jesus's body did too.

It is mystery to be a unified whole here on this earth. We think repentance is a state of the heart or mind, but Scripture calls it a state of the body. The Hebrew *shuv*, often translated "repent," means to physically turn back or return, because when we repent, we turn back to God. Jesus said "Follow me" when he called his disciples to literally put their bodies in line with his. Jesus was matter throughout his life and in his resurrected body; Thomas was able to feel the holes in his hands, feet, and side (John 20:24–29). Thomas knew his Lord and God, Christ Jesus, through the matter of his body.

We also think of worship as a state of the heart or mind, but Scripture calls it a state of the body. The Greek *proskuneō*, translated "worship," literally means to prostrate oneself.⁷ We do not prostrate ourselves much in Protestant worship. We raise our hands, yes, but we seldom kneel and rarely ever fall on our faces. I have seen Orthodox Christians prostrate in unison when praying the prayer of St. Ephrem the Syrian. The kids and I do this together before they go to sleep during Lent.⁸ Sure, they giggle and play a bit, but I'm convinced that bodily prayer is forming us as worshipers more than word-only prayer.

I am not suggesting that you practice the sacraments or venerate icons (that was the context of John of Damascus's comment). I am simply suggesting that in the past, and most substantially through Christ, God has worked through matter, through created things, in a mysterious way. In Genesis 1, God calls all created things good and our bodies very good. Rituals can further the work of God as they embody change using physical symbols and actions. This work happens mysteriously. I cannot tell you what it was about the *Woman* rite of passage Crossing Over Ceremony that made a participant state, "Something changed in the air when we did that. I was a different person when I walked into work the next day, and

I never would have had the courage to follow this new career without *Woman*."

This book, then, is an invitation to ritual mystery, a call to embrace the transformative power of ritual and contemplate it with awe. It is an invitation to ritual meaning making. I think that is why I prefer the term "ritual." It evokes greater depth than "ceremony," and it connects us both to the distant past and to other cultures. This book includes real stories of transformation through ritual. While transformation may not always be rationally explicable, some common elements in ritual clearly facilitate it.

Ritual and the Past

When we think of ritual, we do not always think "mystery." Sometimes we think "boring old stuff." It is true that rituals have been used to conserve the "old stuff" of the past. Until the second half of the twentieth century, Roman Catholic liturgy conserved the past with the use of Latin, which is called a dead language because no one speaks it as their mother tongue today. Vatican II, the twentieth-century council that attempted to modernize the church, allowed the liturgy to be conducted in the living language of the people. That change, among others, seemed to bring Roman Catholic liturgy (ritual) into the present. The liturgy itself did not change, but the way it was enacted did.

This distinction points us back to form and function. In its most basic sense, a worship service's primary function is to exalt God. Yet the form in which this function is accomplished is diverse. Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant traditions exalt God in worship services, but even among Protestants, the diversity in form is huge. The function is static and central in the face of changing form. That is to say that changing a form, or changing a ritual, is sometimes necessary to preserve function.

While a historical ritual form may be used to conserve the past, that is not always the case. In 2021 people around the world watched the American presidential inauguration. Even though the inauguration ritual followed a repetitive historical pattern, it inaugurated a new day for everyone in the country, whether subjectively good or bad. It did not conserve the past. Rather, it initiated a new present.

Rituals are part of human history and are changed by that history; even as instruments of transformation, they are transformed when enacted. Or according to Grimes, "The normal drift of human history is powerful enough to erode everything, so rituals, like other human activities, are in constant need of repair." Intentional repair that strengthens and supports the function is the best kind of ritual change. A ritual's form may change even as it performs the same function. In fact, it may be different in different contexts.

Further, the power of ritual should be used not to conserve the past but to bring transformation by increasing agency.¹¹ Agency is our ability to act as image bearers in the world. Rituals can develop our agency by increasing our ability to value and use our voice, to be resilient in the face of grief or loss, and to be empowered to face challenging situations. Ritual is powerful.

I was once invited to celebrate Passover in a Jewish home. Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread are commanded in the Hebrew Bible. At this home, the first night included the biblically prescribed foods, some additions, and a retelling of the story. While I loved the apple-walnut-cinnamon mix that signified the brick-making mud, I was most interested in how the Passover story was told. *They* were not delivered from slavery in Egypt; *we* were. We do not know how early this way of retelling was adopted, but it clearly brings a historical event into the present to transform our lives and perspectives today. The people in the event are long dead, but their story is alive as we join it with ours.¹²

Ritual and the Senses

Ritual itself is not dead. Perhaps we call it dead because we have experienced rituals performed by people who sounded dead or at least bored. Maybe those enacting the ritual failed to believe in its power, and for that reason they performed it powerlessly. Maybe they believed that simply saying the right words was enough and paid little attention to personal preparation or the deep mystery meaning.

On any given Sunday, in most Episcopalian churches across the US, the same words will be spoken. But they sound different depending on who speaks them and how. Rituals are not just a bunch of words on a page. Words on a page are one dimension. The preparation beforehand, the gestures used, the visual symbols, the movements, and the rituals "wrap ideas and values in a blanket of multi-sensory stimulation." ¹³

Ritual erases the lines that separate science and subjectivity, the physical world and the spiritual world. Our rituals of healing prayer talk to illness and expect it to listen, acting "as if everything is alive and personal, . . . [because] the spiritual realm includes, yet surpasses the physical." Susan Marie Smith says that "ritual operates below the level of conscious awareness." That is, the visual symbols and actions do something to us as we participate, though we are not always aware of the transformation. Ritual also creates strategic contrast and is situational. Bread and wine are common meal elements, but when Jesus held them and spoke at the Last Supper, his situational use contrasted with their common use. Now, when we see them on an altar in a church, they have different meaning.

Visualize this: Diamond ring. Black cap with tassel. White dress with train. Solid band on the left ring finger. Blue icing bursting from a cake. Pink confetti popping out of a balloon. People dressed in all black and crying. Do you see an engagement, a graduation, a wedding, a gender reveal, and a funeral?

They say "A picture is worth a thousand words," denoting the complex nature of the visual. Even as I write these images, I visualize and connect with my experience of the events.

The research on this is mixed, but "seeing is believing" is not a baseless claim. *Brain Rules*, John Medina's *New York Times* bestseller, asserts that vision trumps all other senses. For this reason he urges presenters to use visual images more than text because it is more memorable. The Sarah Lewis writes about the incredible power of a visual image to produce a visceral response from the viewer. Consider the video of the murder of George Floyd, images from concentration camps, or footage of Queen Elizabeth II lying in state. I never knew what a virus looked like until 2020, but my kids made coronavirus models with their toys. While images may stand alone, our reaction to them is multivalent.

It is important to note that when a person lacks vision, other senses become more acute. Yes, ritual is visible, and its visual nature is directly related to its transformative power. But the visual is not the only sense stimulated in ritual. For those of us who are sometimes forced to participate in church virtually (whether due to sickness or travel), we know that seeing and hearing through a livestream can't capture the full worship experience. An Orthodox Christian smells the incense, sees the icons and ministers, hears and joins in the chanting and praying, tastes the holy bread and wine, and touches the cross or icons with their lips. Orthodox worship engages every sense. And Orthodox or not, during the lockdowns we all missed presence, people, and the bread and the cup.

That is the core, isn't it? It is not just the physical senses; overall, it is the physical presence in ritual that makes it most alive. Embodiment is transformative and mysteriously makes meaning. It captures the physical senses and more. Moreover, even the power of a visual is connected to physical presence. Rituals are often visibly recognizable by what adorns the bodies

that enact the ritual. A white-collared black shirt, a white dress, and dark puffy robes with flat caps are connected to visually recognizable traditions. The fact that the visual and other traces of these rituals remain in our minds indicate that the rituals affected us. The recurrence of graduations, weddings, and funerals, with their accompanying sensory elements, suggests that in our society they are lodged in our marrow, our lifeblood.¹⁹

In the Hebrew Bible, priests had to be careful with the blood of the animal precisely because it was the animal's life (Lev. 17:11). But I often wonder what it would have been like to live close to the tabernacle or temple. They were to enact daily sacrifices for sin in which the animal was bled out and then completely burned. I do not prefer the smell of burnt meat. But fellowship sacrifices, during which the priests were supposed to eat the meat, must have smelled delicious. Would it smell like a butcher lived next door? However it was actually enacted, it would have stirred the senses. Perhaps that was part of the point: ritual memory is physical, lodged in our senses.

Ritual Acts

Our bodies are not passive in rituals; they are active, and that increases the transforming power of rituals. In my sabbatical-ending ritual, I used physical things in a smaller, manageable system (candles on a table) to act out what was occurring in my larger, less manageable life: a transition from sabbatical to teaching. Scientists have found that as we watch someone else act, mirror neurons in our brains fire as though they are doing the same action we see. ²⁰ This comes close to what occurred for me as I blew out candles to embody letting go of cherished sabbatical elements. Blowing out the candles mysteriously and yet completely freed me to let go of my sabbatical and to transition well into teaching. The bodily acting out, the embodiment, transformed me beyond the small candles that I extinguished.

Active learning is a key concept in education these days. We do not learn primarily by listening to a lecture. We learn best through action, perhaps by giving an active response to a lecture or delivering our own lecture. Here's a family example of the limitations of verbal instruction: We told our son not to use a razor on his face like Daddy does. I am fairly certain, however, that the lesson was cemented when he *did* use it and cut his lip. I am not saying that everyone must do what our elders warn us against in order to learn, but I am suggesting that physical action sears things into our minds more quickly and permanently than listening to speech does. That is why the action of rituals undergirds the mystery of their transformative power.

Brides walk down aisles and are sometimes accompanied by a parent or parents. Both brides and grooms put a ring on the other's finger. Graduates walk (or sometimes dance) across stages and shake the president's hand. Pallbearers carry the casket to the hearse and then to the grave; all watch and deeply experience the lowering of the casket into the ground. Parents cut the gender-reveal cake and joyfully display a piece. We act.

When Grimes studies ritual, he begins with action. He takes "actions to be the living, throbbing heart of the matter," and he assumes that "objects and places facilitate rather than constitute what they do." He even prefers the term "enact" because it suggests putting into force, as in *enacting* legislation. The enactment *does* something mysteriously.

In the Crossing Over Ceremony, women act in multiple ways to express their understanding of Christian womanhood. They dance, do yoga, recite spoken word, sing, play an instrument, or describe an art project they created. That action cements their learning, and then we place around their neck a necklace bearing the program's symbol. We act and in so doing *enact* womanhood.

Leviticus 16 carefully describes the actions to be taken on the Day of Atonement. Aaron bathes, puts on sacred clothing, and gets the animals. After slaughtering the bull for his own sin offering, he makes the incense really smoky, like a shield between him and the atonement cover that lies on top of the ark in the most holy place, and sprinkles some of the bull's blood there. He then casts lots for the two goats; one goes to the Lord, and the other is the scapegoat. Aaron slaughters the Lord's goat and sprinkles its blood in the same way he did with the bull. The blood of both cleanses and consecrates the tent of meeting and the altar.

Aaron then takes the scapegoat, lays his hands on its head, and confesses all the sins of the Israelites, putting them on the goat's head (Lev. 16:21). Someone takes that goat into the wilderness and lets it go, where it will die. Aaron takes off his clothes, bathes, comes out, and sacrifices rams, one for him and one for the people. The people fast and rest on this day. In this action, "before the LORD, [all Israelites] will be clean from all [their] sins" (Lev. 16:30). Aaron and the high priests who come after him are to act—and, in so doing, *enact*—cleansing for the most holy place, the holy place, themselves, and all the people.

Ritual Names

Aaron enacts atonement as high priest. His naming to the office of high priest happens through a ritual described in detail in Leviticus 8. While everyone is gathered, Moses washes Aaron and his sons and adorns them with special clothing and headwear. Moses anoints the tabernacle and everything in it and then anoints Aaron. He slaughters a bull and burns it. Aaron and his sons lay their hands on a ram, and Moses slaughters that animal too.

A second ram is the ordination ram. Aaron and his sons lay their hands on its head, and Moses slaughters it and puts some of its blood on Aaron's and his sons' right earlobes, right thumbs, and right big toes. Moses gives them bread loaves,

which they wave before the Lord as an offering. Then Moses mixes oil and blood and sprinkles it all over Aaron and his sons. Finally, Aaron and his sons stay at the entrance of the tent of meeting for seven days to complete their ordination. Thus, Aaron is named high priest.

I was accepted into a PhD program, did classwork, passed exams, and wrote a dissertation. After this five-year process, I successfully defended my dissertation. A dissertation defense is an interesting ritual: I present, the readers (professors) ask questions, I seek to answer the questions, and then they send me and any audience out of the room while they deliberate. I walk back in, and they (hopefully) say, "Congratulations, Doctor!" After I make revisions to the dissertation, they invite me to a hooding ceremony where they endow me with a shiny and heavy doctoral hood to wear around my neck on top of my graduation robe. Days later is the graduation, where I walk across the stage and receive my diploma. It is a complex process with several rituals. And it gives me a new name.

While I was studying, I told my students that when I finished, no longer could anyone call me Amy. They would all call me Dr. Davis. There was something I relished about that new name printed on the name tag of my lanyard as I led a group to Syria right after graduation. Doctor. It means something—not only to me but to everyone around me. Sometimes, however, I do have to clarify that I am not the kind of doctor that fixes people's bodies.

High priest. Doctor. Fiancé. Husband. Wife. Reverend. Rituals name. The names create and reflect meaning. Traditionally, when a woman is married in the West, she goes from Miss Davis to Mrs. Jones. The practice may be patriarchal, but the name change signifies the transformation that occurs during the wedding ritual. In my opinion the name change is a special privilege, one I would like to extend to husbands; it seems that the transformation should give both spouses new names as they are ritually unified.

When parents choose children's names, it is often a painstaking and complex process because we believe our children's names are important. One need not read the Bible long to see that names denote character and destiny.

Ritual also names or gives voice to what is silent. That is what my sabbatical-ending ritual did for me. I was able to name what was silently occurring and act in a way that would enact my freedom to move forward.

Rites of Passage

The most transformative types of ritual are rites of passage. Arnold van Gennep coined the term at the end of the nineteenth century when he observed African tribal rituals that made boys into men.²³ Men took boys away from their home and their mother's protection in the village and brought them into the wild; van Gennep saw this as a rite of separation. In the wild the boys would be taught skills men needed to survive and care for the tribe and would prove themselves strong with other boys of the same age. Later, they would return to the village and be welcomed as men. This final rite of reincorporation usually gave them a new status with new responsibilities and a new place to live in the village. Thus, the boys had proven themselves to be men, and they and everyone in their society recognized it.

Van Gennep studied only male rites of passage, but those who came after him also studied female ones. Rites for women tended to be more individual²⁴ but still followed a three-part pattern. The first stage was one of enclosure at the girl's menarche: rather than going into the wild like the boys, she was enclosed with older women. The liminal transition (second stage) would involve enhancing skills she already had and learning stories about heroines. After the reincorporation (third stage), she would still occupy the same space but was usually eligible for marriage from that point on.²⁵

For now, I encourage you not to evaluate the differences in the rites themselves. Let's observe them in the same way we observe biblical practices in Leviticus: "These traditions are interesting. I wonder what we can learn from them." The three stages are the primary foundation for any study in rites of passage.²⁶

In its most basic sense, a rite of passage is an experience that moves a person from one phase of life to another. The three-phase pattern introduced by van Gennep is clear in two of our common cultural rites of passage: marriage and college education.

In marriage, engagement is the rite of separation from the previous, stable phase of life; the couple are no longer single but are not yet married. They enter a betwixt-and-between state, complete with multiple preparation acts for the wedding, some more amusing than others. Finally, the wedding itself completes the rite of passage by reincorporating them into a more stable phase of life, often with new names and always with a new marital status. This status is recognized by the state and has legal implications.

A traditional college education also reflects the three-part pattern. Moving away to live on a college campus is separation; proving oneself through classes, tests, and other requirements is liminal transition; and graduation reincorporates students as educated adults. Weddings and graduations bring communities together to witness the naming and celebration of the transformative rite of passage. Many Christians also see marriage as sacramental—God is acting in a special, mysterious way to unify two humans as one.

Getting a driver's license, being hired for a first or new job, moving away from one's parents, buying a home, becoming a parent, settling into an empty nest, retiring—all of these milestones tend not to be ritualized but are still rites of passage. While they may not all follow a clear three-stage pattern, they do move us from one phase to the next.

Rites of passage are meant to be traversed in community, whether they move one into adulthood or into retirement. We have incredible opportunities to mark life's transitions by ritual, but we miss most of them. Victor Turner's research on ritual revealed that a special community is formed during the liminal stage of a rite of passage. Because participants are working together toward the same goal without the direction of authority figures, a nonhierarchical community called *communitas* emerges.²⁷ When people say that the friends you make in college are friends for life, they refer to *communitas*. Turner also states that it is the liminal transition phase that makes the ritual transformative. And liminal phases exist not only in rites of passage. There are many betwixt-and-between "spaces" in our lives.²⁸

The most commonly studied rite of passage is what theorists call the adolescent rite of passage: becoming a man or woman. Take a moment to think back to when you first understood yourself to be an adult. Was your passage to maturity marked by a ritual?

My understanding of myself as a woman was gradual. My Protestant, upstate New York background taught me that a girl became a woman when her name changed to "Mrs." and "Mom." Ensuing church experiences confirmed this notion. As a single elementary school teacher in Paraguay, I was part of the *jóvenes* (youth group), and when I continued my teaching career in small-town Pennsylvania, church members thought I was still in college. I longed for marriage as a rite of passage into adulthood and still considered myself a girl. This self-understanding was encouraged by my suburban Christian subculture.

Twenty-nine and single, I taught my first undergraduate Bible class. No matter how much I identified with the sea of teenage faces in front of me, I knew then that I was not one of them. If I tried to be, I would do a disservice to them and to myself. I

consciously but silently gave myself the title "woman" that day, even though I was unmarried. While calling myself "woman" may seem simple, it was a profound naming act for me.

I gradually grew into the title even though I had long shown hallmarks of adulthood: holding a college degree, having a successful career, paying my own bills, and renting an apartment. In a series of experiences, some painful, over a number of years, I slowly understood myself as an adult woman. Alone, I walked the road into womanhood. Now I am committed to helping women walk this journey in community.

I wrote a dissertation on Christian rites of passage for women,³⁰ and this research empowered us to create *Woman*, the aforementioned rite of passage for women in their senior year of college. Before long, it was an anticipated capstone for students, a program that involved everyone from adjuncts to administrators, a selling point for incoming students.

The ritual into Christian womanhood is about developing a relationship with God, self, others, and creation. After participants commit their time and finances to the program, we begin our journey together at the initiation. There, leaders and mentors share personal stories of the time when they understood themselves as women and no longer as girls. The stories vary; some recount events like giving birth, confronting bodyshaming comments, and participating in the rite of passage, while other stories describe a more gradual change. All initiates are named and blessed and enjoy a reception with their peers and the mentors with whom they will journey.

We start with naming. While the diminutive "girl" may, in our society, be used for women, participants name themselves "woman" instead. Language is powerful, and naming is transformative. In *The Book of Womanhood*, I guide the participants in this act of naming with these words: "Neither college graduation, marriage, motherhood, nor career give you the name 'woman'; only *you* can. God has made you a woman

and given you the privilege and authority to agree with your Creator by naming yourself 'woman' and forming your identity as a woman."³¹

The initiation is semiformal, not because women must always dress up but because we dress up for important events. The women stand, move, and come together physically as a group. The sit-down reception is visual, with theme colors and individual teacups for each woman. We drink tea from teacups because painting china was a creative way women of the past were involved in hospitality and the economy.³² The women take home their teacup as a visual reminder of the women who have gone before.

A month later, after completing readings and other assignments, the women bring their teacups to candlelit café tables for the first monthly meeting. We drink tea, eat chocolate and almonds, and tell our stories of relationship with God, usually in sweatpants with little or no makeup. Participants create *communitas* as they meet more informally with one another between each meeting.

Monthly meetings proceed to other relationship topics: relationships with self, others, and creation. We recognize women's embodiment in particular when we value and discuss menstrual cycles and body image. We name and release past hurt and trauma, and we experience healing. We progress together on the journey of womanhood.

The final ritual, called the Crossing Over Ceremony, is the pinnacle of the rite of passage. The women dress in formal gowns and have individual sittings with a professional photographer. Again, we do this to mark the importance of this event and to allow women to demonstrate that they are comfortable in their own bodies, comfortable with themselves. The specially invited audience hushes as each woman is announced, her biographical statement is read, and she walks down the aisle to her seat on the stage. There is hardly a dry eye as each woman

offers a creative presentation on what it means to be a woman. They are all active in this passage and proclamation of their identity as Christian women. The leaders place a necklace, the symbol of womanhood, around their neck. Their bodies are now adorned. There is no question that these women are empowered to be their true selves in the world; the transformation is apparent. The transformative work that God does through this visual, sensory, active rite of passage is a mystery to observe and contemplate with awe.

Right-Now Ritual: Recognizing Our Bodies

We seldom take the time to recognize what our bodies do. This ritual appreciates the work of our hands. For those who do not have hands or are unable to use them, bless whatever other part of your body does a hand's work, or bless those who help. If your hands are impaired in some other way, do not focus on the impairment for now. For this ritual, choose to bless and be thankful for whatever the hands can do. The key progression is observation, naming, gratefulness, and blessing.

Recognizing Our Bodies

Stop what you are doing and take three slow, deep breaths. Pray, "Lord, help me appreciate my hands today." Next, look at your hands. Start with your palms down and become familiar with the contours of your entire hand, even what jewelry you wear or do not wear. Turn your hands palms up and observe them again. Name what they have done today, as in "Today you made the kids' lunch, comforted a friend, typed an essay, washed my face," and so on. Ask forgiveness for anything hurtful or wrong you did with your hands today. Spend a few moments being thankful for your hands and the good that they do. Say, "I know myself through my hands." Lift your hands

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to God and ask for God's blessing on your hands, saying, "May the favor of the Lord our God rest on [me]; establish the work of [my] hands for [me]—yes, establish the work of [my] hands" (Ps. 90:17). You may want to end with a prayer.

This can be repeated for various parts of the body (feet, mouth, etc.), and the body part observed may replace the word "hands" in the final verse.

With-Friends Ritual: Previously Unrecognized Rites of Passage

It is no secret that Western culture ignores many rites of passage. More than twenty years ago, The Encyclopedia of World *Problems and Human Potential* pointed out the problems that result from this lack: "The absence of rites of passage leads to a serious breakdown in the process of maturing as a person. Young people are unable to participate in society in a creative manner because societal structures no longer consider it their responsibility to intentionally establish the necessary marks of passing from one age-related social role to another, such as: child to youth, youth to adult, adult to elder."33 People may be unsure and uncertain without a recognized rite of passage. They may question whether their change of status is real or even deserved. By contrast, when they do occur, rites of passage usually result in greater agency and responsibility. Participants are freed to act constructively and creatively in their society or subculture; before the rite of passage they are limited, but after the rite of passage they have access and responsibility.

This ritual is a time of storytelling that looks back on a rite of passage and its transformation in order to strengthen the individual. The key progression is storytelling, recognition, and blessing of the story.

Previously Unrecognized Rites of Passage

Preparation

Individuals who desire to recognize an unmarked past rite of passage will choose a symbol or symbolic action to represent it. This symbol or action can be of any sort but must be meaningful to the individual. This must be chosen well before the ritual, and the individual must have thoughtfully prepared their story.

The Ritual

Leader: We come together today to acknowledge rites of passage that were previously unmarked. We hope that marking this previous transformation will result in each of us having greater freedom and ability to be the person God made us to be. *Leader gives extemporaneous opening prayer.*

Leader invites individuals to tell their stories and describe the physical symbol or symbolic action that marks the rite of passage.

Leader and People: We recognize and agree that you are different because (*insert transformation*). We bless your (*insert transformation*). Leader gives a prayer of blessing.

At-Church Ritual: Consecrating Our Bodies

In early Christianity newly baptized bodies were anointed with oil to signify the filling with the Holy Spirit. For second- and third-century writers, this anointing was for the entire body,³⁴ but current traditions anoint only certain body parts. Coptic Orthodox Christians anoint thirty-six parts. Greeks and Antiochians anoint only six: forehead, breast, back, ears, hands, and feet. Roman Catholics and Protestants anoint only the forehead. This practice will be adapted here to recognize embodiment. The key progression is declaration of intention, anointing, and prayer of thanksgiving and blessing.

Consecrating Our Bodies

Preparation

The participants must not do this under constraint; each must spend time ensuring that this bodily consecration is truly what they want to do. Preparation must include prayer and meditation. Participants shall become familiar with their parts in the service below. Participants may also prepare the anointing oil and find, purchase, or make a symbol of embodiment that is meaningful to them. This could be as simple as a framed full-body photo of the individual. It could also be more of a symbol that is recognizable to the group. If embodiment is a theme for the group or church, it is best to choose something that will be appropriate for all and has a classic feel so that it may be used for years.

If foot washing will be practiced, the leader should prepare basins, pitchers, and towels.

The Ritual

Leader: Do you come freely and without constraint to consecrate yourself, your body, for service to the Lord?

Participant: I do.

Leader: Do you agree that God created bodies good?

Participant: I do.

Leader: Do you believe that God became matter and worked

through matter for our salvation?

Participant: I do.

At this point, foot washing may be practiced. This paraphrase of John 13:1–11 may be used: At the Last Supper, Peter did not want Jesus to wash his feet. Jesus said, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." Peter replied, "Then wash my entire body." Jesus answered, "If you have bathed, you only need to wash your feet; your whole body is clean. Your whole body is clean."

Leader: Please come to have your body anointed to do the work of the Lord. *Leader anoints the following body parts by forming a cross on them with oil and stating the following over each (using phrases from James 1:19):*

Ritual Transforms and Embodies

Forehead: From ancient times God's people bound God's word to their forehead. May God's Word dwell in you richly and guide all you do.

Ears: May your ears be quick to listen to the voice of God and the voice of those in need.

Mouth: May your mouth be slow to speak, may your words bring life to others, may your kisses bring joy, and may you eat and drink that which brings health to your body.

Heart: May your heart be slow to become angry. May it never be hardened like Pharaoh's, and may it always be open toward God and toward others.

Back: May your back be strong to hold you upright and center you in following Christ.

Hands: As with Jesus, may what your hands touch be healed and loved. May what you do with these hands be beautiful and bring about the kingdom of God.

Feet: May your feet be "fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace" (Eph. 6:15), and may God guide your feet to their right places.

Participant: I wholeheartedly receive these blessings for my body, and I in turn bless my body as I walk in service to the Lord.

After all who so desire have been blessed, leader prays a prayer of consecration and blessing for all.