

RITUAL
IN FAMILY LIVING

A CONTEMPORARY STUDY

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AND

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Family Ritual in Autobiographies

THE EXPLORATORY stage in our study of family ritual involved an examination of a hundred published autobiographies, to see to what extent the authors considered it pertinent to include references to family behavior patterns in their own experience which fell within the confines of our concept. Here were persons, presumably of some competence and prominence, who were not sociologists or professional students of the family, who were not prompted by any questionnaire or stimulated by interactive interviews to recall references to any particular features of family living. Would such persons write of what we have described as rituals?

A careful reading of these autobiographies easily led to the conclusion that a very significant part of family life has been almost wholly neglected by students of the modern family. For, although no thorough analysis of current family rituals has appeared, those autobiographers who earnestly tried to reproduce their early lives in book form described a large part of

their family activities and behavior in terms of family rituals. It was, in fact, their organization of those regularly repeated procedures that framed the canvas revealing each family, and within which certain single events and crises came to have specific meaning in so far as they invaded the confines of a unique framework of usual acts and usual behavior. These rituals, arising out of some simple or random bits of family interaction, started to set, because they were successful or satisfying to members, and through repetition they "jelled" into very definite forms, expressing in terms of overt behavior how a particular family for a time was expected to react and did react under certain circumstances. Since these rituals, in some autobiographies, ruled over most of the normal, intimate aspects of day-to-day family life, they became very significant in describing both the nature of family interaction and some ways in which its culture was passed along to the children. If the life stories of these writers are at all representative of family life processes in general, they definitely suggest the value of giving current family ritual more careful consideration. As an exploratory beginning of such consideration, the autobiographers' family rituals are analyzed in this chapter.

The Source Material

The hundred published autobiographies examined for the material they contained on family ritual were chosen at random from those writers who included the period of their childhood. Seventy-three describe procedures which were unequivocally classifiable as family rituals, according to the definition used as the basis for this study. This ratio of 73 to 100, however, is misleading in one respect. Most of the autobiographies included material suggestive of some family ritual. However, none was so accepted for this study without this requirement: that the author actually illustrated the details of a prescribed procedure and one that was, for a certain period, a repetitive procedure. This means that many more rituals were apparent than are indicated numerically or are used as case material for this study.

Of the authors, fifty-two were men and twenty-one women.

The publication of their life histories extended from 1856 to 1946, and the percentages by years are as follows:

YEARS	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL
1856-1900	8.6
1900-1909	5.3
1910-1919	5.3
1920-1929	14.3
1930-1939	45.2
1940-1946	21.3

More significant to this study is the fact that the case histories analyzed represented descriptions of childhood at home during a fairly well-defined era in modern family history. Over 80 per cent of the authors described rituals which were a part of family life during the years of 1880-1917. This is the period during which forces for secularization, mobility, urbanization, and individuation were gathering and showing their effects upon the family, but they had not yet reached the tornado-like velocity of the post World War I era. In the interests of examining rituals as products of their specific social setting, these rituals of 1880-1917 will be compared in a later study to a group of rituals described by present-day university students whose family life represents entirely the era after World War I and largely during the depression and World War II. However, this chapter attempts only to describe the family rituals of one specific era and to indicate some of their influences upon the families and individuals participating.

Kinds of Rituals Described

The occasions within the family life that stimulated ritualistic procedures were of very wide range, as was the variation in the numbers of authors who mentioned each kind. The types of ritual and the numbers of authors describing them were as follows:

1. Rituals surrounding formal schooling at home, or the preparation of home work—9

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2. Rituals concerning lessons, or participation, in dancing or music—7
3. Reading rituals (for purposes other than formal secular or religious education—13 (Reading aloud was one part of many other kinds of family rites such as illness, bedtime, Sunday, etc.))
4. Summer vacation rituals—10
5. Rituals concerning allowances, money expenditures, and family pet economies—3
6. Sunday rituals—23
7. Religious rituals—17
8. Rituals for keeping time—2
9. Holiday and anniversary rituals—8
10. Rituals of retiring and arising—9
11. Mealtime rituals—11
12. Family recreation rituals—25
13. Bath and bathroom rituals—5
14. Rituals during illness—7
15. Rituals concerning family work activities—3
16. Disciplinary rituals—3
17. Family council—1
18. Homecoming rituals—4
19. Status-defining rituals—1 (Status definition was prominent in many rites. This one alone, though, was an example of a family rite of passage.)
20. Family moving-day ritual—1

Total—171

The remainder of this chapter is based upon an analysis of these rituals.

Attributes of Ritual

There is no attempt here to suggest ritualistic determinism. The hypothesis developed is that family ritual is an important conditioning factor, but only one factor. With this moderate point of view, and as a preface to subsequent evaluation of specific rituals, it is pertinent to examine certain attributes of all rituals indicated in the material which seem to give them special power.

1. First, they have the attribute of frequent, exact repetition. This means that even at the physiological level they carve deep-ridged pathways of reaction, and form patterns which are held to effortlessly and without much thought. They become integrated parts of family situation and individual personality because of their continuous directioning. This influence is seen in the materials studied when authors attempt to recall their early family life. They seem to recall most easily, and remember as the basic reality of their home life, those things which were habitual to it, even though they may think of them as one certain occasion. Frank Kendon, with considerable insight, realized this when he wrote: "I can recall the mixed warmth and cold of Christmas morning, when we children would wake before daylight to scramble out of bed for our filled stockings; but as soon as I begin to remember the actions and the conversations across the ghostly dark, I know I am not recalling an occasion, but a sketchy kind of knowledge of several occasions: not what we did then, but what we used to do."¹ Another aspect of the importance of repetition is that it is not only imposed but desired, and especially by small children. Arnold Gesell has noted that at about the age of two and one-half years a child has a very strong ritualistic sense of having everything at home in its usual place and done in its usual way. He may be very iron-willed about his demands and insist that each family member perform his ritualistic role precisely.² No doubt the rhythmic repetition of intimate family acts spells both confidence in right performance and predictability to a small individual whose experience is very limited and whose intellectual immaturity makes him unable to grasp universal permanences. Thus the reaction pathways are cut still deeper by insistence upon repetition.

2. A second attribute of the ritual is its social nature. It is not a performance in which one is alone. Henke has said: "The

¹ Frank Kendon, *The Small Years*, Cambridge University Press, 1930, pp. 39-40.

² Arnold Gesell, Frances L. Ilg, et al., *The Child From Five to Ten*, New York, Harper & Brothers, 1946, p. 347.

ceremony is always a social reaction . . . the various ceremonies are overt reactions out of a matrix which is nothing more or less than the social consciousness."³ When this is translated into terms of family ritual, it means that they are acts which compel coördinated participation of people already emotionally interdependent. Many performances though related to family life are organized in an individualistic manner; rituals are not. Therefore, with special significance to children, a family rite is a dependable occasion of family social consciousness, when at least several members act with mutual recognition of their related roles. A feeling of belonging to a family and of not just living in it might well correlate with the frequency and intensity of these rites which are expressions of family social consciousness.

3. A third important attribute of the ritual is its emotional coloring, and this is closely related to its repetitious and social nature. From the repetition one comes to feel, without thought, that one's way of doing a thing is *the* way. When a different system calls one's own into consciousness, other emotions rise. Frank Kendon, again, has noted this in his own experience. Describing early visits to his grandparents' home, he writes:

I learned with surprise that all people do not eat milk and porridge in the same way. For granny taught me to dig a small pond, I called it, in the middle of my porridge, and to pour my cold milk into that. It was not the family way at home; there we let the milk fill the edges of the plate and mount, to some extent, the rounded plateau. But if granny's method was revolutionary, it was all the more exciting to try. . . . While I stayed with granny I did as granny did, and with new delight every morning; but I returned to family methods when I came home again, and did not change until, in due time, I was allowed to refuse porridge altogether. . . .

Their customs were then as different from ours as the customs of people in foreign countries are to-day. In our own family, father and mother sat side by side behind the tea-tray at the top of the table; in theirs, grandfather sat at one end and grandmother with her tea-urn at the other end of a very long table. It was with astonish-

³ Frederick Goodrich Henke, *A Study in the Psychology of Ritualism*, University of Chicago Press, 1910, pp. 8-9.

ment that we saw how differently grandfather drank his tea or ate his cake; we, in our manners, lifted the cup from the saucer, and left the saucer on the table; but grandfather lifted both together, and while he drank held the saucer in his left hand under the cup in his right. In our system, too, there were two distinct stages of food at tea—the prose or bread-and-butter stage, and the poetical or cake, bun and biscuit stage. We children ate our bread-and-butter dutifully so that we might eat our cake with delight. But grandfather would make a barbarous sandwich of a slice of cake between two slices of bread-and-butter, and eating this, would thus enjoy both kinds of provender at one bite.⁴

The emotional attitudes called forth by this sudden recognition of differences may be attitudes of antagonism or protectiveness toward one's own ways. Each has its significance, and each was found in the life histories. But either reaction seemed to be linked with the specific family-social setting of the ritual. A rite, in its repetition, became not just a kind of behavior to the participators, but incorporated into itself all the sounds, sights, temperatures, touch sensations, and human relationships that always surrounded it. The combination produced a whole situation which was pleasing or unpleasant, and deeply so since it related to family social-consciousness. Augustus Hare describes his reaction, on this basis, to one ritual:

Of all the miserable days in the year, Christmas was the worst. I regarded it with loathing unutterable. The presents of the quintessence of rubbish which I had to receive from my aunts with outward grace and gratitude. The finding all my usual avocations and interests cleared away. The having to sit for hours and hours pretending to be deeply interested in the six huge volumes of Foxe's "Book of Martyrs," one of which was always doled out for my mental sustenance. The being compelled—usually with agonizing chilblains—to walk twice to church, eight miles through the snow or piercing marsh winds, and sit for hours in mute anguish of congelation, with one of Uncle Julius's interminable sermons in the afternoon. . . . Then, far the worst of all, the Rectory and its sneerings and snubbings in the evening. My mother took little or no notice of all this—her thoughts, her heart, were far away. To her Christmas was simply

⁴ Kendon, *op. cit.*, pp. 32 and 100.

“the festival of the birth of Christ.” Her whole spiritual being was absorbed in it: earth did not signify: she did not and could not understand why it was not always the same with her little boy.⁵

Ray Stannard Baker presents a different reaction:

Sunday morning “prayers” were an institution in our Presbyterian household. I can hear my father talking with God; I can somehow *see*, as though I now stood aside with no real right to possession, I can see the little boy who was myself kneeling there on the carpet with his nose buried in the queer musty-smelling upholstery of the living-room chair, listening intently to what Father said to God. All the things I remember!—my father’s broad back as he also knelt by his chair, his stiff white hair, his great beetling eyebrows with the eyelids under them trembling and sometimes partly opening, as seen by the little boy through the cracks between his fingers; the thin ankles and worn shoes of Aunt Amanda, and my mother’s beautiful head with her delicate fingers thrust up into her soft hair, and the row of other little boys who were my brothers, kneeling more or less restlessly, each by his chair. I can see the house-plants in the warm window and our old cat curled in the Sunday morning sunshine on the sill just outside, and the rows of battered books in the cases, and the picture of Beatrice Cenci, beautiful but sad, in its golden frame, just above the stove. It was wrong, of course, to look through one’s fingers when Father was talking with God, but I had already learned that one often did what he disapproved because it was so interesting or so delightful.⁶

A ritual setting such as this is apt to call forth fierce protectiveness, for deviation from any of its principles might threaten the whole structure that creates such deep physical and psychological well-being.⁷

⁵ Augustus Hare, *The Story of My Life*, New York, Dodd, Mead & Company, 1896, pp. 190-91.

⁶ Ray Stannard Baker, *Native American*, New York, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1941, pp. 31-32.

⁷ For an excellent example, in literature, of the result of disillusion with an emotionally revered family ritual, see Joe Sinclair, *Wasteland*, New York, Harper & Brothers, 1946. In this novel, a Jewish boy whose most satisfying family experience had been the celebration of the Passover, cut himself off from it when he saw his family’s lack of sympathy for it. Years later it took a skilful psychiatrist to show him that this crisis had separated him from Jewry, his family, and his own individual heritage.

Repetition, a social nature, and emotional coloring, then, are three attributes of ritual which, no matter what the specific content, impress rituals deeply upon groups and individuals participating in them.

Family Ritual as an Instrument in Culture Transmission

At the present time, it is believed that one of the most important remaining functions of the family is the transmission of the culture to successive generations. In a civilization as complex as ours this function must be highly selective in its performance. It has become, then, most important to discover exactly how culture is transmitted in the family and upon what bases selectivity rests. Ralph Linton has classified the content of culture into three categories: Universals, Specialties, and Alternatives. This last class of culture content has especial significance in its transference in the modern family. For, though Universals are common to all "sane, adult members of one culture group,"

there are in every culture a considerable number of traits (Alternatives) which are shared by certain individuals but which are not common to all members of the society . . . the elements . . . varying from the special and quite atypical ideas and habits of a particular family to such things as different schools of painting or sculpture. Aside from the nature of the participation in them, all these Alternatives have this in common: they represent different reactions to the same situations or different techniques for achieving the same ends. The cultures of small societies living under primitive conditions usually include only a moderate number of such Alternatives, while in such a culture as our own they are very plentiful. . . . Certain elements are transmitted in family lines. The members of one family may be taught to say a particular form of grace at meals . . . while other families transmit a grace of a different sort. . . . Most of the descriptions of cultures which are now extant are heavily weighted on the side of Universals and Specialties. This is due partly to the difficulty of obtaining information about the Alternatives, partly to a quite natural desire to make the description as coherent as possible. The only Alternatives which will be noted will usually be those which have large numbers of adherents. As a result, the participation of the average individual in the culture of his society is

made to appear much more complete than it actually is, and the differences between different groups of individuals are minimized. Any one who has come to know a "primitive society" well can testify that its members do not show the dead level of cultural conformity which these reports suggest.⁸

If this be true, how much more misleading are reports of contemporary civilized groups if the Alternatives which are so much more numerous here are not thoroughly considered. Family rituals, as found in autobiographies, seem to be a fruitful field for investigating some of these Alternatives as they are selected and passed on to children. Four different aspects of such transmission are discussed in the following paragraphs: (1) A ritual was a family's specific conclusion, from its own experience, of the best way to meet a certain situation. Thus there was passed on to children, through ritual, a selected way of doing a thing—an overt behavior pattern. (2) The behavior pattern of a ritual was an expression of certain attitudes, largely parental attitudes. The behavior, then, became a concrete means of attitude communication between parents and children. (3) A ritual was a behavior pattern with a *purpose*. The whole ritual scheme of a family, therefore, objectified into behavior, and was one means of transmitting the family direction, or goals. (4) The material content of rituals, family-selected, became cultural tools for social participation of the children who inherited them. Though these four aspects are not wholly disparate, they will be treated separately here and, at the sacrifice of "the quite natural desire to make the description as coherent as possible," as many differences as material and space permit will be presented.

1. The autobiographers clearly showed rituals as selective transmitters of behavior patterns on the basis of race, creed, social class, economic status, educational level, urban or rural life, and other individual differences. Traditional Jewish rituals in the home, for instance, were mentioned by three authors. In one home they were preserved faithfully and passed down

⁸ Ralph Linton, *The Study of Man*, New York, D. Appleton-Century Company, 1936, pp. 273-79.

as an honorable heritage. In a second home, they were abandoned for the family, but taught to the children so that they might observe certain forms in the presence of respected orthodox Jewish guests. The third author was deprived of all knowledge of such ritual at home, and was repelled by it in his grandparents' home, since it was so different from his family's adopted Anglo-Saxon rites. Walter Damrosch and his wife preserved the old-country traditional Christmas ritual with a determination to pass it on intact to their children. Many of the different forms surrounding Christmas rites varied according to traditional ethnic practices. The opening of gifts on Christmas Eve, as one example, was a procedure in many families of German descent, while Christmas-morning present-opening was more characteristic of English-descended families. Lest this seem insignificant, the reader may undeceive himself by discussing this difference with acquaintances. If he is one who does the opening on Christmas Eve, he may be surprised at the ferocity with which he is accused of "cheating" by a confirmed Christmas-morning opener. The whole family behavior on Sunday differed markedly on the basis of the sect, or individual family creed. Other, more intimate, rituals transmitted as obligatory patterns of life maintain:

that small children do not eat at table with parents; that they are not only present at table but help with serving; that the whole family is waited upon by servants; that the servant sits at table with the family except when company comes; that meals are strictly utilitarian until Sunday guests make dinner an elaborate and proper social occasion; that children participate in guest situations only as silent, well-behaved onlookers; that children always entertain guests by showing off their talents.⁹

Ritualistic behavior passed on to children the practices:

that money is earned by the father, owned by him, and doled out at his pleasure to wife and children, who have no real rights as con-

⁹ For a discussion of the role of the family dinner table in culture transmission, see James H. S. Bossard, *The Sociology of Child Development*, New York, Harper & Brothers, 1948, chapter VIII.

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cerns family income; that it is earned by father who hands it over to mother to keep the household running; that money is to be enjoyed and spent freely by the whole family when it is obtainable, and is unimportant when it is scarce; that the whole family participates in paying financial obligations to others first, and then lives carefully on what is left; that one never makes a purchase without first comparing all advertisements to buy at the lowest price; that one buys only during bargain sales.

Through rituals, authors came to know:

that the bathroom is a place where one considerably takes turns, and calls out frankly in cases of emergency; that it is a place into which one sneaks surreptitiously and from which it is a profound shame to be seen emerging.

Rituals defined that:

family recreation means games, reading aloud, plays or concerts at home; or necessitates "going out": visits to friends, theatres, circuses or musicals.

They set as the one right pattern of life for some children:

that a family must go away from home for a summer vacation each year; that Saturdays are "fun" days; that certain holidays are celebrated and others ignored; that one takes a bath and changes underclothes at certain set intervals, daily, weekly; that one has a "best" suit of clothing reserved for special occasions; that one "dresses" for dinner each night; that a particular hour of the day is proper for rising, eating, retiring.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of the elements of obligatory family behavior passed on to the autobiographers through ritual, or of the differences from family to family. But these few examples may be sufficient to imply the importance of ritual in such a process.

2. Every ritual found in the case material conveyed to the reader some transferable parental attitude. The variety cannot

even be intimated here. But a few of the most common were these:

(a) Writers commented on their own attitudes toward illness in terms of the procedures which surrounded such occasions in their homes. Frazier Hunt writes:

It was always a joy to be just a little sick when Auntie [who was "Mother" to him] was around to take care of you. Not that I particularly liked to soak my feet in a mustard bath or to have my throat rubbed with goose grease and wrapped in a red flannel rag, but I did like the outpouring of affection and concern. Toward evening Auntie'd come into the bedroom with a pan of warm water, a washcloth, and a towel, and ever so gently she'd bathe my face and hands and comb my hair. Then she'd disappear and in a few minutes return with a tray and a white napkin over it, and there'd be a poached egg, milk toast, and a cup of sassafras tea.¹⁰

Corra Harris concludes a description of her family's rites during illness by saying: "I always felt blessed and happy at such times."¹¹ In contrast to these cheerful and philosophical attitudes toward indisposition, Hugh Faussett describes his father's "morbid" ritual. Hugh's mother had died, and the child himself was of weak constitution. His father:

. . . could indulge his anxiety only by insisting that I should be swaddled in flannel, should be surfeited with milk, and never be exposed without a thick coat to the dangers of a cold wind. This fear of the elements was to become more and more pronounced . . . until he shrank from every draught as the sure precursor of a chill and refused, even in mild weather, to have any windows open in the room in which he sat. With characteristic thoroughness he would have rooms "aired" at regular intervals when no one was occupying them, and then once again seal them against the cold currents which he feared.¹²

(b) Living as they did at a time when much of early formal education was received at home, nine autobiographers de-

¹⁰ Frazier Hunt, *One American*, New York, Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1938, p. 17.

¹¹ Corra Harris, *My Book and Heart*, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1924, pp. 7-8.

¹² Hugh Faussett, *A Modern Prelude*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1936, pp. 35-36.

scribed rituals surrounding it. Two authors whose parents made them learn their lessons while standing, and who stood beside them while they studied, mentioned their great awe of “learning,” but felt oppressed by the responsibility. Others considered the education process as a grand and challenging game. These people were accustomed, when children, to having a whole large family gather around a table together each evening for a certain period, and engage in a kind of family-learning competition.

(c) Discipline, through regularity of practices, became a reasonable, constructive technique, such as a lecture from Father to explain the costs of vice; an amusing distraction from sin, such as the forcing of battling brothers to laugh together and so forget wrath; and a vengeful device, such as the hanging up of children by a roller towel, leaving them uncomfortable and helpless, with feet dangling.

(d) Through Sunday observances and family religious rites, the religion they symbolized came to be regarded as humane, valuable, and otherworldly; and also as fearful, repressive, and inescapable.

(e) Interesting examples of the communication of contrasting attitudes toward nudity and intimate functions of the body appeared in the rituals. The Milnes, at one time, had a bathroom with two tubs in it, and the rite was for Ken and Alan to “toss” for the larger tub, then play a game of “catch” with the soap, while keeping a sponge in place between the tub and the backs of their necks. A second author, however, describes his daily visits to the bathroom as a fearsome and secret rite between him and his nurse alone. So obligatory were the selected personnel and the furtiveness that when once another servant offered to substitute, the boy resisted to the point of humiliating accident.

(f) Even attitudes toward how one should greet a new day—eagerly, cheerfully, energetically; or morosely and reluctantly with as much procrastinating as possible—were communicated to the autobiographers by the habitual ways in which their

parents awakened them, and the procedures surrounding their daily rising.

Small though this sample of attitudes be, even this list is significant in terms of individual differences. A psychiatrist could perhaps draw a fairly lifelike sketch solely on the basis of how a man feels about health, education, discipline, religion, the body and its functions, and how he behaves when he gets up in the morning.

3. One of the analytic steps in this study was to take the entire ritual structure of each family out of its context, strip it of any qualitative or attitudinal comments from the author, and let it stand alone as an individual-family framework of customary behavior in many recurring situations. This step proved to be very rewarding in that these stark frameworks let in light upon the directioning of family life with undoubtedly more clarity and veracity than the writers (beset by incomplete memory, inhibitions, and exhibitionism) could attain were they asked specifically to describe their family's goals and purposes.¹³ As an example, a comparison of two of these excerpts will have to suffice. These two were selected on the basis of differences in ritual structure. But it is of interest to note that both families were religious, well-to-do, and well educated.

(a) The Carter family¹⁴ enjoyed these rituals:

(1) daily—a cold bath; a breakfast for which every member of the family *had* to be on time; grace before the meal; family prayers after breakfast with the servants present and a very set routine; every-evening family gatherings with Father or Mother telling stories

¹³ The authors suggest that students collecting personal-history documents by the method of presenting topical outlines to the subjects would find it profitable to include the topic of family rituals whenever part of their research is family goals, values, ambitions, etc. For here some of them will show up in terms of customary behavior and may be a helpful and enlightening supplement to what the subject *thinks* are his family goals, etc.

¹⁴ John Franklin Carter, *The Rectory Family*, New York, Coward-McCann, Inc., 1937.

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or reading aloud, a musical program by the children or games played with the whole family; bedtime for the children at nine o'clock, with individual and simple prayers before bed.

(2) Sunday—church; family prayers postponed till evening; a day of not doing things they did on weekdays; a chafing-dish supper, often with friends, prepared by Mother since servants were dismissed early; family prayers without the servants.

(3) holidays—"gave up" something for lent; "gorged" on Thanksgiving; had tree, presents, filled stockings, and carols on Christmas; fireworks on Fourth of July, which was a day restricted to family alone, on other holidays guests were invited.

(4) vacation—visit away from home inevitable for at least a month each summer, though their home town was a summer resort.

(5) medical—phosphate which it was a deadly sin not to drink before it stopped fizzing; castor oil with orange juice; "the basin"; "the croup kettle"; one trip to Boston to the hospital to see each new baby in the family; trips to Boston at regular intervals to visit dentist.

(6) discipline—recitation by quarreling brothers of a Bible verse which always made them laugh and make up; mouthwashing with soap; a lecture in Father's study; confinement for meditation and memorization of hymns.

(7) play—children teased Mother by calling her "Allie"; Mother teased Father by tickling; Father drove children out of his and Mother's bedroom at night by starting to take off his trousers.

(b) In contrast to the Carter family, the Hare family had these rituals:¹⁵

(1) daily—breakfast at 8 with Mother in dining room with doors open on to garden terrace; lessons with Mother or other relative after breakfast, a time of screaming, crying, and hearty bangs over the knuckles; at 12 a walk with Mother which was always in the nature of a lesson in botany, or a walk to a girls' school where Mother sat in the courtyard overhung with laburnums and taught the children; at 1, dinner, always roast mutton and rice pudding until, before the child was 6, the practice was instituted of elaborating on the delicious puddings to follow, only to have them snatched away just as the child was prepared to eat his, and he was then told to take them to some poor person in the village; after lunch the child read aloud, Josephus and Froissart's *Chronicles*; at 3 a drive in the carriage with Mother to visit distant cottages, often ending at the Rectory; at 5

¹⁵ Hare, *op. cit.*

a half hour for the child to "amuse himself," during which he usually "heard the cat's lessons"; at 5:30 tea with his nurse in the servants' hall; evenings, Mother read aloud to old parents, at which time, if books were beyond child's comprehension, he was permitted to play with some ivory fish.

(2) religious—fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays, on which day there was no butter or pudding.

(3) holiday—Christmas: inappropriate presents from family with necessary show of gratitude from child; usual pastimes cleared away; required to sit for hours reading Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*; two 8-mile walks to church; evening visit to the Rectory.

(4) allowance—no regular time or amount set, but a periodic rapid calculation by Mother as to what child needed and an allotment of just that much and no more.

These total ritual structures in their comparison speak amply for themselves of the ways in which family selective culture of the most subjective sort can insinuate itself into the lives of children through rituals. Seen also in the ritual structures of families studied were, among others, these prime motives: the guiding of a talented member into a chosen career, social climbing; social respectability; worldly sophistication; and scrupulous unconventionality.

4. The material content of family rites varied 100 per cent in the autobiographers' case histories. But certain generalized similarities and differences were discernible, from family to family, in the tools which these rites offered to children.

(a) In the case of the many rituals which involved reading aloud, some families used only religious books; others only the classics, or histories; some, light novels of an admittedly "trashy" kind. Several families read all types of literature and also current newspapers and periodicals. In the case of an isolated farm family, reading was strictly of the last-mentioned kind, as being the family's only contact with the living outside world. Some authors mentioned no reading rites at all. Some wrote their own family literature.

(b) Music formed a large part of the content of rituals. For some families music meant family concerts; to others it was a program at a concert hall; and to still others, snatches of

songs upon rising and retiring. Families specialized in learning one instrument, or in having each member play a different one. The kinds of composition made familiar through ritual varied from the ponderous classics and opera, through sentimental melodies and folk songs, to collections of bawdy sea ballads.

(c) Family games offered to children a significantly selected list of accomplishments. There were, for instance, in different families a noticeable emphasis upon: "gentlemen's" sports; Bible bees; card games; the displaying of individual artistic talents. Several families tended strictly to out-of-door games of a simple nature, the walk being the thing. One family played a game of languages; they spoke Roumanian one day, German the next, and Greek the third day. A few families played dinner-table question-and-answer games with rewards for correctness; one restricting questions to the subject of opera; the others including a wide range of cultural subjects and current events.

(d) The actual roles which children took in rituals became tools for useful action. For many children—and most of these were farm-living and/or from modest-income families—these consisted of knowing how to work, in the house or on the farm. In a second group of families, the children learned how to conform and how to study. These were usually small but ambitious families. And in a third group, children learned how to express themselves individually, while at the same time participating socially. Children given these tools were ordinarily from larger families, but with comfortable incomes and social standing.

(e) Finally, the range of social tools found in the ritual of any one family must be considered. For comparison's sake, two extremes are presented. Gertrude Lawrence, the incomparable actress, described four childhood rituals: two were concerned with how to be respectable, though devastatingly poor; and the other two were leisure-time rituals which featured the child as an infant phenomenon of an actress. To read her later life, surprisingly enough, is to read almost exactly what one might guess as a snap judgment solely on the basis of her hav-

ing early acquired such tools.¹⁶ As a contrast, John Carter, whose whole family ritual structure was briefed a few pages earlier, writes this:

If anything, our home was too happy and too comfortable. Its outlook was frankly romantic—or perhaps truly realistic—for it really preferred good food, comfortable beds, good literature, good conversation and good music to the demands of the dusty world. . . . It was hard to leave such a sanctuary for the \$30-a-week jobs and the hall bedrooms of city boarding houses, and the bitter struggle for riches and existence in the 1920's. We were, if anything, the heirs of an imperial tradition and were admirably equipped to serve as government officials or colonial administrators or something Kiplingesque and comfortably self-sacrificing, rather than to go out in a competitive industrial society to earn a living.¹⁷

Family Ritual and Family Interaction

These rituals of autobiographers were not just family-engineered canals through which culture flowed from one generation to the next; they were also dynamic processes of family interaction, and as such affected the groups themselves. The kinds of marks made varied with the kinds of rituals instituted. For brevity's sake, sharply contrasting illustrations will be selected to suggest the possibilities of family ritual as concerns family interaction.

1. Some rituals stimulated healthy family interaction. The mere formalizing of a time and a place for certain family members to be together for a purpose gave rise to increased family interplay and, in turn, to the enrichment of their rites. Enforced indoor confinement on Sundays resulted in regular reading aloud, family spelling bees, and question-and-answer games with rewards for the quickest. Pre-bedtime quiet periods around the dining-room table led to family magazines being written, concerts and plays organized, and displays of individual talents for the pleasure of all. One mother, with purposeful intent, insisted that her children report home from

¹⁶ Gertrude Lawrence, *A Star Danced*, New York, Doubleday, Doran and Company, Inc., 1945.

¹⁷ Carter, *op. cit.*, pp. 5-6.

school before going away again. Each day she prepared a snack for them when they reported. This resulted in their always being lured to their playroom attic, and remaining at home together. The study arranged for the children of one family as an inviolable realm of their own led to a children's club being formed which, in its description, sounds like a blessing upon family interaction.

The set of rules drawn up was to be as binding as the Decalogue. Like the Decalogue they were ten in number and chiefly negative. "Thou shalt not" was the tone, but they did not interfere with the liberty of the decently behaved.

Although Mother had nothing whatever to do with the affair, she must have been very glad of these rules, for they enabled the household to run smoothly without her having to harry, scold, or punish. Thus, in addition to regulations about work in the study, they forbade being late to breakfast (i.e., coming down after grace was said), going upstairs with boots on, omitting to brush your teeth, not hanging up coat and cap, and suchlike tiresome points for Mother to watch.

You may wonder how the club managed to enforce its rules. . . . Tom's plan was that we should be fined a penny, twopence, etc., up to a sixpence, according to a definite scale of charges every time we broke a rule. He bought an account-book, assigned a page to each of us, and reckoned up how much each owed at the end of the week.

Still you may wonder how the payment of the fines was enforced. It was quite simple—no payment, no entry to the study. Since the study was the heart of our home, to be shut out of it was misery. . . .

Tom soon found what he had no doubt hoped—that we had quite a nice little sum of money. He then unfolded his larger plan: the club was to be a real library. The shelves that had been decorated with childish fancies were cleared and made ready for books, and the first outlay was to be an additional bookcase that Charles had seen in Upper Street second hand. . . .

Imagine our excitement when we found that soon after the bookcase had been bought we had enough money to buy a *new* book. The number of books suggested, the meetings we held, the time spent in discussing the various possibilities—it all seems beyond belief today, when books are so cheap. . . . Surely no book was ever read and re-read and talked over as that first new volume, although we went on to buy many more. . . .

The outcome of our Library idea was an increased pride in the room itself. We took it in turn week by week to dust and tidy the study before breakfast. Since Tom didn't go to school he had time after breakfast to make a tour of inspection, and if he found any part undusted, or a book lying about, he charged the weekly cleaner any fine he thought right, "not exceeding sixpence." We never disputed his authority, for he took his own turn quite fairly and paid up his own fines. However, he had the privilege of being allowed to pay one of us to do his cleaning.

For small misdemeanours, such as doing sums aloud, shaking the table, or spilling ink, Tom executed summary justice by means of a big, round, black ruler, that always lay on the table like the mace in Parliament. "Hold out your hand," he would say very quietly, and down would come the blow, fairly softly if you were quick in holding out your hand. . . .

After a while we were in sufficient funds to take in some magazines. *Sunshine* and *Little Folks* for the younger ones, and *Cassell's Family Magazine* for us all. . . . *Cassell's Magazine* provided stronger meat, far more substantial than we get in the average magazine to-day. It had to last us a month, and I think every word of it found some reader in the family. When we had all read the portion of the serial story, and very definitely not before, we discussed endlessly at tea-time how the characters would turn out and who would marry whom.¹⁸

Such were the stimulating effects of their rituals upon family interaction in some autobiographers' homes.

2. Another type of ritual created antagonism or estrangement between family members. In all cases, this occurred when a ritual was imposed relentlessly by adults upon unwilling children. For example: a father who endlessly perpetuated his dead wife's memory by keeping all the rooms and all her belongings just as she had left them, guarding them against sun and wear, evoked from his son the remark that his father had denied his children the freedom essential to healthy growth.¹⁹ A. A. Milne describes an infallible family rite of passage which caused tension: the hair cutting. All three boys had to wear Lord Fauntleroy hairdos until each one was "too big," and then the

¹⁸ M. Vivian Hughes, *A London Child of the Seventies*, London, Oxford University Press, 1934, pp. 155-60.

¹⁹ Fausset, *op. cit.*, pp. 29-36.

cutting ceremony took place. Alan and Ken were the two youngest, and after their older brother had acquired tonsorial manhood they clung together in their shame, but at least had comforting companionship. Then, Ken became "too big" sixteen months ahead of Alan. The author comments:

With the loss of Ken's hair something had gone out of our lives: our love of adventure, our habit of getting up early, even our desire to be alone together. . . . If I were a psychoanalytic critic, and if I thought that this Edwardian writer Milne were worth one of my portentous volumes, I should ascribe everything which he had done and failed to do, his personality as revealed in his books and hidden in himself, to the consciousness implanted in him as a child that he was battling against the wrong make-up.²⁰

Finally, Norah James, ever an individualist, tells of how she escaped the threatened imposed ritual of "coming out" by insisting that if she were presented at Court she would make a scene in the throne room and disgrace the family.²¹

3. The relative position of family members was crystallized in many family rituals; for status, roles, and dominance relationships were clearly and repeatedly defined. One such rite was the nightly putting to bed of the current baby:

The procession started in the kitchen, the baby having been undressed, dried and swathed in night clothes and blankets by the kitchen stove. My mother bore her youngest. She was preceded by my oldest sister who, as attendant acolyte, and by reason of her age entrusted before the others of us, carried a lamp, lighted in winter, in summer ready for lighting. I followed my mother with a large pan, which contained the baby's bottles, his milk, and a small tin cup for heating the same over the lamp in question. My sister, two years my junior, grasped in one hand a creosote burner and in the other a tiny bottle of creosote against the croup, which might make its insidious appearance without the slightest warning. My brother brought up the rear of the line with an armful of extra blankets and diapers. We stopped for a moment in the library for my father to

²⁰ A. A. Milne, *Autobiography*, New York, E. P. Dutton & Company, Inc., 1939, pp. 84 and 27.

²¹ Norah James, *I Lived in a Democracy*, New York, Longmans, Green and Company, 1939, pp. 47-48.

look with pride and approbation upon the baby and then went our way up the long, curving stairs. We did not think it strange that my father took no part in the evening rite. Early we took it for granted that he . . . was supposed to be manually ineffective so far as life indoors was concerned.

As the years went on, the procession changed character, my brother being released as soon as a younger sister was old enough to take his place. In those days the work of women and the work of men were in more distinct categories than they are today. Only I continued with my chores in the stable, my mother consenting on the ground that I was of less service in the house.²²

Through this ritual, many things were indicated wordlessly to the children. Father was the head of the household but was not to be involved domestically. Mother was the organizer who made this possible. The children were valuable members in this plan, but each according to age, sex, and talents. They were also cherished in themselves, the latest baby being a subject of pride and careful attention. Compare this with the dinner and Sunday bedtime rites in the Day household. Father here too was the head of the house, but he was domestically meddlesome; and Mother was no organizer. The dinner-table rite was an exchange between Father and the cook, who would be summoned to the table by a thud from Father's foot after he had tasted the main course. A routine series of conversations then took place between them, while Mother and the children learned their negative roles in these occasions. However, Mother and children came into their own in another rite:

When we boys were little, we used to go to Mother's room Sunday evenings, on our way upstairs to bed, and sit in a circle around her, while she told us a story from the Bible or talked to us about how good we ought to be and how much we ought to love God. She loved God herself as much as she dared to, and she deeply loved us, and she was especially tender and dear on those Sunday evenings. One of my brothers told me years afterward how much they had meant to him in those days, and how he had cherished the memory of them all his life.²³

²² Mary Ellen Chase, *A Goodly Heritage*, New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1932, pp. 49-50.

²³ Clarence Day, *Life With Father*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1936, p. 131.

Some authors commented directly on their own status as they saw it through overt ritualistic family behavior. In one case, a thoroughly ritualized household had no single rite appropriate to the interest, intellect, and energies of a small boy. They were all grown-up rituals, and the boy saw that a child had no place in that household, that he must learn his lessons and grow up quickly. In another, all rites, even very repressive rites of religious observance, were ingeniously turned by the parents to afford interest to youngsters and communication between them and their parents. In one family, each whole day was ritualized so that servants could keep children and parents separated except at appropriate intervals. Again, a ritual between a mother and her eldest daughter, which was to be extended to include the younger girl when she reached the proper age but never was so extended, became to her a new evidence of maternal favoritism.

As to more specific roles, here are some that were clearly defined through rituals: it was always Father (or Mother) who applied the strap or the mustard plaster; Father who did the carving; Sister who read aloud because she did it so well; Brother who played the piano for the family song fests; Grandmother who told stories Sunday afternoons; the baby who performed feats of elocution because he was the "cutest"; Mother (or Father) who presided over lessons because she (or he) was most intelligent; and Mother (or Father) who led the games, because she (or he) was most inventive and full of fun. Dr. Cavan has suggested that ingrained family patterns, of which family rituals are one part, conflicting in marital partners may cause confusion for their children.²⁴ One can easily believe that so simple a matter as the rigidifying of ritualistic roles, though they clarify relationships in the parental family, may cause considerable marital misunderstanding in the next generation when the conception of roles varies.

4. In some cases ritualistic behavior defined the family's favorite technique for influencing and managing its members. A

²⁴ Ruth S. Cavan, *The Family*, New York, Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1942, pp. 234-241.

certain technique became ritualized chiefly because it was successful and always produced the same result. These techniques varied from categorical insistence, through jolly teasing, to subtle or hypocritical cajoling. And in becoming a set procedure, they colored the manner of family interaction. Prerecreation rituals at the Days' home, and bedtime ritual at the Carters' demonstrate such coloring:

Mr. and Mrs. Day always enjoyed themselves when they went out together to a dance or a dinner. But Mr. Day never wanted to go. If Mrs. Day asked him whether to accept an invitation he would always tell her to go if she wanted but he was going to stay home. Since she could not go alone, she got the habit of accepting invitations and not telling him about them until the day of the event. Then there was always a scene. Mr. Day fumed and ranted all the time he was getting ready, and by the time he was ready to get into the carriage Mrs. Day was worn out. As soon as he arrived at the destination, however, he always cheered up and they both had a wonderful time. . . .

Mr. Day did not like to give a party in his own home. He wanted nobody but old friends to dine with him there. Mrs. Day liked to entertain and even better to be entertained. She knew that the best way to get invitations was to invite a lot of different kinds of people to her home. So she always planned to have a few "old friends" whenever she planned a dinner party. Then when Mr. Day asked who was coming, she would say, "Why, the Bakers, and I hope a few others."²⁵

At the Carters', the tone was different. The children were allowed to go to bed in their parents' room when their mother went upstairs and to stay there until their father was ready to retire:

Usually we were most unwilling to abandon such a warm, pleasant place and endeavored to lure Father into conversation. He would put up with a little of this and then, if he felt it necessary to force the issue, would start to remove his trousers, revealing his long woolen underwear. Mother would cry out in shocked protest, "Frank! Frank!" but it was his one unanswerable argument and we were hurried off to our beds lest we should witness the unspeakable immodesty of Father clad in his jaegers.

²⁵ Day, *op. cit.*, pp. 199-205.

Ours was, in fact, a teasing household. Mother was a terrible tease and a born mimic. . . . We were helpless against her for years until we discovered that we could reduce her to confusion by calling her "Allie!" Her name was Alice, but that was long before the day when children were allowed to call parents by their given names, and "Allie" was as near as we dared come to it. We never did discover any way to tease Father, but Mother could. Generally she could tame him by calling him the old name of courtship, "Lily-of-the-valley." If all else failed, Mother would tickle him, but when he began to remove his clothes he held the whip-hand in an age when men wore bathing suits to their knees and elbows, and women's dresses reached the ground.²⁶

5. Rituals grown up around simple household rules facilitated discipline and the smooth functioning of home life. Rules which, in themselves, are irksome to children—a quiet period between tea and bedtime; reporting home immediately after school; no weekday games on Sunday; chores for each family member; practicing music; doing homework; rocking the baby; going to bed promptly without complaining; and countless other universal family laws—were made pleasant in their performance when hidden in the structure of cherished family rites. Rituals already cited illustrate this influence amply.

6. Certain kinds of rituals were opportunities for the whole family, united and at its best, to display itself and experience the satisfying emotion of family pride. Rites surrounding the entertaining of guests were of this sort. But most frequently mentioned by the authors in this respect was the walk to and from church and the Sunday afternoon ride. Many recalled the awe-inspiring sense of family superiority, virtue, and comeliness as they paraded before the neighbors after a morning of worship, dressed in their clean best, and behaving appropriately. But let one author speak for them all:

This drive partook of the nature of a function rather than of a pastime. In the first place, my father was insistent that every member of the family, unless in disgrace because of some misbehavior, should accompany him; in the second place, we wore our Sunday clothes and our most dignified manners; in the third place, we were

²⁶ Carter, *op. cit.*, pp. 132-33.

bound to meet other equipages. . . . My father sat up very straight in the driver's seat, the reins in his left hand, in his right the whip which he held high across the reins, making it inscribe an acute angle in relation to them. With his whip hand he raised his hat gravely to the occupants of the carriages past which we rolled. . . . At such moments I am sure he was guilty of the sin of pride in all its manifold ramifications—pride in his family, in his superior turnout, even in himself as a fine figure of a man. . . . As for us, our family sense as we swept by our neighbors was overwhelming. . . .

The horses were always specially groomed for this occasion, not infrequently by my father himself. They stepped high and held their heads erect, they, too, seemingly influenced by the unique character of the situation. When we talked at all (for we were too much impressed by ourselves, by the family solidarity we represented, to chat easily) we commented upon one or the other of them, upon Lady's unfortunate spavin or Ginger's capricious unwillingness to pull her half of the load. All in all, both they and we tacitly agreed that the Sunday drive was an event not lightly to be entered upon.²⁷

It is a misfortune that the low, enveloping hood of a modern automobile and the distance that it goes in a short time should subtract so much from this obvious satisfaction in family display to neighbors. But the survival of this sort of rite can be seen any Sunday as families parade to church, even if their parade is only from their parked car into the church and up the aisle to their family pew, while the congregation watches them, nods, and comments.

The family's rituals are not considered to be the sole causes and determiners of these six results to family interaction. A member's status, for instance, or a family technique, is the result of many things. But once set within the rigid framework of a family ritual it tends to become clear, imposes itself by its impressiveness and infallible repetition, and, in circular fashion, it also tends to be strengthened in its rigidity.

Summary

An analysis of the family rituals of one hundred autobiographers has suggested certain properties and effects of such

²⁷ Chase, *op. cit.*, pp. 53-54.

rituals that make them seem an important subject for research in family life.

1. Although family rituals alone do not *create* all the subjective aspects of family life, such as attitudes, values, goals, and ambitions; rituals, because they are overt behavior forms, are *symptoms* of these aspects, and thus convey them in concrete manner from parent to child.

2. Family rituals, because they are a crystallized judgment from family experience, define *the* way to do things under all sorts of circumstances, and particularly in respect to the common occurrences of daily family life. These action patterns are distinctively family-selected patterns.

3. Family rituals accumulate a material content which becomes, for children, a series of tools and techniques for social participation.

4. Family rituals are not only vessels to pass attitudes, behavior patterns, and social tools from one generation to the next. They are also processes of family interaction and as such: (a) stimulate family relations; (b) create family antagonisms; (c) reveal family roles and statuses; (d) set family techniques; (e) facilitate household functioning; (f) present opportunities for satisfaction in family display and pride.

5. Finally, although ritual is by no means the only medium which produces any of the above effects upon child and family, it is believed that family ritual is a particularly vital medium. It is made so because of its special attributes of: (a) a social nature which necessitates family participation; (b) deep emotional coloring, including feelings of obligation in performance; and above all (c) an exact, frequent, and usually unconscious repetition.