

# The Missing Ritual

**Barry W. Mayhew, Ph.D.**

Since the beginning of recorded history and likely long before, humans have given special recognition to important events that occur, often quite predictably, throughout the various stages of the life cycle. There is a high level of consistency between cultures with respect to which events are considered sufficiently significant to warrant a ritual, although the ritual itself usually varies between cultures. In addition to giving recognition to certain events, participating in a ritual often evokes certain emotions that reinforce and add a higher level of meaning to the event, thereby enhancing the overall experience. Most rituals evoke feelings of joy and happiness. The exception might be a funeral, which, for family members and close friends, is often a time of grief and sadness.

Following the stages in the normal life cycle, there is a fairly predictable series of rituals one is likely to experience. A typical life cycle is likely to include some, if not all, of the following events and their associated rituals.

**BIRTH:** Baptism is a ritual commonly performed shortly after the birth of a child.

**CONFIRMATION:** This ritual is often performed at a time when a youth is considered mature enough to make the decision whether he/she will remain faithful to God and the church. Young men of the Jewish faith are expected to have a **BAR MITZVAH**; a ritual held on the Saturday following a boy's 13<sup>th</sup> birthday which recognizes his passage into manhood.

**HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION:** This achievement is recognized in many cultures and may involve a fairly elaborate ritual. Usually a cap and gown are worn by the graduate who is also the recipient of a diploma. A closely associated ritual is a formal dance called the Prom.

**COLLEGE GRADUATION:** While similar in many respects to a high school graduation, the convocation ceremony involves more elaborate trappings with faculty members decked out in their academic robes and hats. For me, these events evoke thoughts of a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta and I expect the Chancellor to burst into song at any moment. Graduates and guests are usually subjected to a lengthy recital of non-melodious organ music prior to the traditional "bonk" on the graduates' heads from the Chancellor.

While pursuing an undergraduate degree, some students elect to join a fraternity or a sorority. Acceptance into these clubs usually involves a ritual.

Then, of course, we have **MARRIAGE**; an event usually involving a very elaborate ritual often costing thousands of dollars and involving hundreds of celebrants. So involved may be the marriage ritual that marriage consultants are often involved in the planning process. Not infrequently, the friends of the groom will host what is referred to as a "stag party," which is intended to celebrate the groom's last days of bachelorhood.

During adulthood many people join organizations for which membership necessitates participating in a ritual. Classic examples are the Masonic and Oddfellows lodges, but there are many other fraternal organizations and clubs that employ rituals as new members are admitted.

With the possible exception of marriage, DEATH is probably the event that involves the most elaborate rituals. In fact, one could argue that death has spawned a whole industry that provides employment for clergy, funeral directors, casket manufacturers and greeting card publishers, to name the most obvious beneficiaries. For Roman Catholics, when death is imminent, the “last rites” ritual is often performed by a priest. But it is the funeral service that involves one of our society’s most intricate and complex rituals.

Rituals are also found in the gastronomic and eonophilic worlds. Examples include the elaborate Japanese Tea Ceremony and wine tasting festivals and competitions.

The royal families of Europe and the UK are also steeped in ritual. Important events such as christenings, investitures, marriage and funerals all involve elaborate rituals.

And we should not overlook the world of politics. Anyone who witnessed the inauguration of America’s 44<sup>th</sup> President will be familiar with political rituals.

A final example to which I will refer is the judicial system wherein judges, prosecutors and defense attorneys are required to be dressed in prescribed gowns and robes.

On the darker side, many of us were first made aware of the rituals associated with becoming a member of the Mafia by the courtroom testimony of Mafiosi Joseph Valachi during the 1963 McClellan Senate Committee hearings. Among other things, membership required taking an oath of “omerta” (silence). Although not openly discussed, it is rumored that a ritual is involved when one becomes a full patch member of the Hell’s Angels’ motorcycle club.

But just a minute, there is one very significant event for which no ritual has been established; at least not in our western culture. Approximately 50 percent of adult Americans,

Canadians and Western Europeans participate in this event, yet strangely no one has capitalized on this outstanding marketing opportunity. To what am I referring? DIVORCE of course.

Each year, millions of people in our western culture decide they no longer wish to spend their remaining time with the person to whom they once declared their undying love and devotion. Is this event one that evokes joy or sadness? The answer is it might be either emotion or both. For some, to regain their freedom is clearly a joyous event, but for others a feeling of sadness may occur. The intensity of these emotions will likely depend upon the circumstances behind the decision to terminate the relationship.

The relevant factor, however, is that divorce is an event that has become commonplace in our society and in most cases would be considered a significant event. Why then have we not designed a ritual to formally recognize this event? Frankly, I don’t have a simple answer to that question but the event provides a wonderful opportunity for a creative entrepreneur. This new industry could include a whole new line of greeting cards (both the serious and the humorous kinds), special discounts for people who have been divorced within the past 30 or 60 days, vacation packages exclusively for those who have recently been divorced, a divorced person’s exclusive clothing line and perhaps even elaborate ceremonies requiring the services of a divorce consultant or a divorce coach.

As someone who has been a marketing specialist for many years, I think I could do a pretty decent job as the CEO, or at least the VP Marketing, of a company providing a myriad of personal services for the recently divorced. All I am lacking is the capital investment required for start-up and to take the company public on the New York stock exchange. I am anxiously awaiting a call from a venture capital group to turn this dream into a reality.

*Barry Mayhew, Ph.D. is an urban geographer by academic training but spent most of his professional life as a corporate executive and laterally as a management consultant. He has more than 20 publications in an eclectic array of magazines and professional journals. He is retired and lives in Victoria, British Columbia.*