Ideas of Order:
Science and Ceremony in Ordinary Life
by DANIEL HESSEY

Science and Sensoria

It was her voice that made
The sky acutest at its vanishing.
She measured to the hour its solitude.
She was the single artificer of the world
In which she sang.

Wallace Stevens¹

A major impact of scientific materialism upon the study of the mind is that it alienates us from our firsthand experience of our own minds, which it equates with “common sense” or “folk psychology.” This dismissal of subjective experience is based on the premise that it is often, if not always, misleading. Scientific materialists tell us we should rather rely solely on scientists’ observations of other people’s brains and behavior, as if they had no firsthand experiences of their own minds. Scientists have thus been appointed a role comparable to the priests of medieval Christendom, who were deemed the necessary intermediaries between the general public and ultimate reality.

B. Alan Wallace²

In my family, it was taken for granted that reality was to be known through science, and that science was the path to humanity’s success. A number of my family members were accomplished scientists, and the rest of us were their acolytes. The double blind experiment, the precision of mathematics, the reproducible result—all these were the
gold standard of how to know the real. Science’s putative objectivity was in contrast to the anxiety, emotion, and inchoate complexity of family life; it promised a refuge of clarity in a world of sadness and a family lineage of confusion. My parents believed that mind was itself an emerging scientific frontier, and that the scientific method would eventually be able to quantify, analyze, and untangle emotion and relationship. Our family had been Christian in previous generations, but in my grandfather’s era religion had been abandoned for science; religion and its ritual were now regarded as superstition driven by ignorance and fear, a cult of naïve wishful thinking. Despite this, our family engaged in a treasured ceremonial ritual of our own design.

On summer weekends, our family would get up early and pile in our Studebaker to drive two hours to Jones Beach on the shore of Long Island, in New York. My mother loved the beach and had developed a playful name for the place where sand, sea, and sky met: “Great and Mighty.” For her, this was not a religious approbation, but an appreciation. We would almost chant it as we drove east into the rising sun, invoking the vastness and vividness of the unnameable experience we were about to enjoy: the warm air, our feet grinding the hot infinity of sand as we gazed at the gently arched horizon, the hazy asymptote where the receding sea met the bell-like vastness of the clouded sky, accompanied by the percussion of the following waves raking gravelly sand. The beach was a unique vantage from which we could feel our bipedal lives in the context of the unimaginable vastness of the natural world. For us, “Great and Mighty” was an entity; approaching the beach on a summer Sunday morning, we invoked its name, calling this wordless experience into presence. Although we never acknowledged it as such, this was a ceremony of sacredness, a vital preparation for the salty bright day to come.

Interestingly, as much as we respected it, science was in a sense disempowering to us. Though we constantly acknowledged its genius and efficacy—telescopes and microscopes, penicillin, DNA, atomic bombs, landing on the moon—it was clear that as non-scientists, our quotidian worlds were pathetic somehow, based on second-class, homegrown knowing. Having deified the disembodied objective observer, “Science,” our subjective worlds were proportionately devalued.

This article is a contemplation on how ceremony and ritual re-value the magic and depth of subjective experience, not as a form of consolation or as a validation of wishful thinking, but as a necessary and sacred foundation on which objective and rational ways of knowing
our world must rest. Resting on ritual ways of knowing, rationality takes its proper place in the pantheon of experience and supports good human society and a healthy world; left to its own devices, rationality becomes a rapacious mechanism that consumes our world, destroys its ecological integrity, and justifies cruelty and selfishness that beggars the imagination.

What does it mean for rationality to rest on ceremony? After the enlightenment, rationality was vaunted as the tool that could demystify religion, enabling man to understand the mechanics of the universe free of the darkness of superstition. As powerful as rational knowing is, it is by definition reductive. It measures the world in terms that it can engage: as entities, interactions, systems, and quantifiable processes. Without delimiting the scope of its knowing, it can’t know; because it must stand apart from its object, the analytical mind can’t know globally. Objective knowing cannot encompass the whole of emergent reality. For instance, trying to model the weather can overwhelm the tools of measurement and computation. Per Nyberg, director of business development of the Cray Supercomputer company states:

Meteorology continues to push the limits of supercomputing. Scientific objectives have always outpaced the available computational infrastructure. The largest operational centers will soon be surpassing a petaflop (quadrillion floating point operations per second) of peak performance. Weather forecasting centers are faced with increasingly complex and energy-intensive infrastructure that is increasingly complex and energy demanding.³

The weather—much less the world—is of a scale of emergent interdependence that can never be conceptually or computationally encompassed, no matter how many petaflops of computational power are employed to that end.

As effective as science and technology are in helping us understand local systems, today it seems that the lust for the power of objective knowledge has resulted in ecological, political and social crises of a scale that were unimaginable in the past. Humankind is literally fouling its own nest, and it seems technology is more effective in amplifying this pollution than in ameliorating it. How we feel about ourselves and about the world determines how we use technology. In this regard, science and technology has not been effective in bringing sanity and sacredness to the political and social arenas.
Technology is a powerful lever, magnifying humankind’s power and place in the natural world. How can humankind wield that tool with wisdom, kindness, and care? Ceremony enacts decidedly meta-rational ways of knowing; can these non-conceptual ways of knowing provide a basis for the sane and healthy use of technology and rationality? For thousands of years, humankind understood ceremony in this way. Can we now, as modern people, use ceremony as sacred platform to support the sane use of rationality?

Sacred Ceremony

To a large degree, much of the genius of humanity in history and pre-history was dedicated to ceremony. Today, the place of traditional ceremonial culture in modern life—whether it be a Hopi Kachina ceremony, a mass held in the Sistine Chapel, a Buddhist puja, or a Shinto offering ceremony—has been subtly relegated to a cultural museum. Modernity appreciates the beauty, precision, and evocative qualities of ceremonial art, but patronizes those who still believe in the efficacy of ceremony itself. Today, sacred ceremony is understood to be receding in the wake of human progress. I would suggest that perhaps such an attitude is too proud. By looking freshly at ceremony, we may begin to appreciate the wisdom of past millennia of human culture as an essential counterpart to our contemporary technological genius.

Sacred ceremony is a local celebration of global interdependence. It celebrates the co-emergent phenomenon of consciousness and the worlds it knows in the present moment. Thus, ritual and beauty are an expression of sacred outlook—the view that every element of mind and society is inextricably woven into the integrity and health of the whole. Traditional wisdom lineages foster sacred outlook using magical and ceremonial means, using decorum, offerings, invocations, and symbolic language to evoke direct experience of what is already present, but unnoticed by ordinary consciousness.

My bounty is as boundless as the sea,
My love as deep; the more I give to thee,
The more I have, for both are infinite.

William Shakespeare

From this perspective, sacred ritual and ceremony entrain a lower-level objectifying way of knowing into a higher-level emergent process. This is not necessarily a mystical experience. In our lives there
are times when we relax into what might be called a global “nowness.” When we fall in love, looking into our lover’s eyes seems to encompass the whole world; when we hold a new baby the first time, the smell of milk on her breath transports us into presence; when we sit at the deathbed of a loved one, the light in the room as their last breath does not come is eternal. These human moments are precious and memorable, and indeed, we often aspire to live our lives in the service of what they show. Ritual is sacred technology that empowers us to open to Shakespeare’s boundlessness as a way of life. The heart of understanding ceremony is seeing how, unmediated by hesitation or objectification, the magic and vividness of the present moment carries wisdom into our lives. The “emergent process of nowness” is our doorway to sacredness, non-aggression, and global knowing. Sitting on that sacred, present knowing as if it were a throne, we can wield the scepter of technology with benevolence.

This emergent process can be dubbed “god” as an afterthought, but this is not necessary; its principle value is as the felt-sense of the co-emergence of knowing and known, even to the level of relaxation into the basis of imminence, which, according to Buddhist philosophy, cannot be reified as a thing or a non-thing. Sacred ritual and ceremony rescue us from having to rely on concept to understand what we are doing at the deepest level. Rather than explaining our existence, a ceremony enacts it, using symbol, process, and gesture. In ritual, we can see and experience what is invoked in this very present moment. Indeed, when we perform a heartfelt ceremony or ritual, we cannot distinguish the symbolism—the chant, the gesture, the shrine—from what it symbolizes.

In Chinese culture, “heaven” represents the sacred, the ungraspable brilliance of the present moment; “Earth” is the vast inconceivable net of interdependence that joins the beings and things of this world. In fact, ritual is always how we join heaven—non-conceptual nowness—and earth—what we are doing in the world—in our lives. Even pouring ourselves a glass of water can be a simple ritual of dignity and delight, demonstrating the coincidence of water, glass, and hand dancing in nowness. Ritual is a language that invokes, awakens, and reminds us of our humanity in everything we do.

Of course, if we absentmindedly go through the motions of pouring our glass of water without acknowledging the sacredness, we don’t find much magic; but if we allow the longing for sacredness to bring us to present time, it is as if electricity goes through the ritual, and,
to our surprise, Heaven and Earth are joined. When I was very sick a number of years ago, Lama Pegyal, a wise Tibetan Lama, gave me essential advice about how to perform supplications to Guru Rinpoche, the great 8th century teacher who brought Buddhism to Tibet. When he performed the ceremony to aid in my recovery, he did so with great tenderness and respect, as if Guru Rinpoche were literally present. He told me, “We Tibetans believe that the deities are real.”

Modern people cannot see electrons, but we have no problem believing in them, or working with electricity. According to modern physics, an electron is not a thing in the conventional sense: “The electron has no known substructure. Hence, it is defined or assumed to be a point particle with a point charge and no spatial extent.” What is a thing that takes up no space?

The symbolic languages of ritual are similar; although one might visualize a deity, by doing so one is not reifying that a deity as corporeal or “real” in the ordinary sense of the word. In practice, ceremony is making a personal, intuitive relationship with a principle of how reality works. Ceremony makes it possible to communicate with strata of knowing that cannot be objectified conventionally, and to see that reality as the foundation of our conventional knowing.

How we perform a ceremony is essential to its power. When we trust in our inherited traditions—our cultural ways of connecting heaven and earth—a ceremony becomes vibrant and alive. Thus ritual and ceremony help us find our place in the world, understanding that ecology, society, and all its members are inextricably bound into the health of the whole.

It is an interesting exercise to track a few hours of one’s day, and to notice the rituals and ceremonies that one performs. Where do they come from, and what do they invoke? While it is possible to frame one’s actions in strictly utilitarian ways, ordinary activities don’t necessarily feel functional—they are constantly calling forth deeply felt relationships between oneself and the depth of the world. With sacred ritual, that relation is a sacred bond of nowness, but other rituals enact alienation, depression, ambition, and aggression.

From this perspective we can see that society is pervaded by ritual. It is hard to imagine communicative interchange that cannot be framed as ritual or ceremony, from making a phone call, to shaking hands, to going on a date, to making an insulting gesture to a rude driver. In societies like feudal China and Japan, formal ritual attended every part of life; in Chicago or LA, gang members make mudras (hand gestures)
and tattoo themselves to identify their clan, and on Wall Street bankers wear bespoke clothing, eat at fancy restaurants, and go to charity balls to confirm their places in the world. Ritual is equally important in all these contexts. Like birds singing at dawn, social ritual can be used to prove our place in the world by reiterating our status and role.

Mind, Language, and Ritual

Conventional mind performs a largely unnoticed process of reifying objects of consciousness by naming them. The separation between the knowing consciousnesses and the phenomena they know through sensoria is taken for granted by most of us. Emotionally, this division between knower and known is felt to be axiomatic to personhood, and when this imputed duality is brought into question both great fear and great inspiration can arise.

All language is a form of ceremony, because it stands in place of a larger and more direct way of knowing. When a person says, “I am home,” it is a radically reductionist statement that cannot even hint at the panoply of perceptions, causes, and conditions to which the nouns “I” and “home” refer; the copula “am” denotes existence through time, which itself is characterized by constant change. In this, “I am home” is less a statement of fact than an invocation of ourselves and our place in the world.

Equally, all ceremony is language, for it is a way to communicate with unnameable spheres of experience. As we know more directly—in the present moment—denotative language becomes less useful, and thus we resort to a more dynamic language, which uses all the tropes we associate with ritual, including symbols, music, gestures, poetry, and costume. Thus the spectrum of ceremony and language falls on a continuum, beginning in the un-languaged, unconditional present and extending to denotative naming that objectifies and structures relative experience. Every part of this spectrum of linguistic ceremony is important and valid to us in its own place. The central question of language is not whether its various strata have valid uses, but whether they are driven by fear or confidence, whether they are utilized to distance us from direct experience or open us to it.
Ceremonies of Fear

A Superbowl party is a classic American ceremony, complete with liturgies, costumes, offerings, and chants, all of which help us enact some of the values of American culture. Competition, violence, the balance of teamwork and individualism, the roles of the hero and the goat, and great strength, ability, and speed are all presented in a passion-play that allows people in stadiums, living rooms, and sports bars to identify with a particular version of their world. The game itself is a highly choreographed play that provides the basis for a vivid internal experience in fans. The fans chant mantras, wear ceremonial costumes, and become intoxicated with the energy and meaning of what they see—tiny figures on the field, or moving pixels on the screen. By participating in this way, fans passionately identify with their team and the game itself, which in turn demonstrates certain values: the drama of competition, the hope of success and the fear of failure, the necessity of violence and playing with pain, and the glory of triumphing over others in conflict.

This is a practice, a ceremony through which a large part of the nation understands and identifies with its values. These values and their metaphors are then brought into the workplace and the boardroom, to families and to the interior dialogue of individuals, as rarely questioned principles of how to succeed in the “real world.” In this light, the “real world” is seen as a game, a field of competition.

Typical football coaches’ slogans summarize the game’s values:

- Winning isn’t everything, it’s the only thing.
- Pride + Dedication = Glory.
- If you can’t run with the big dogs, stay on the porch!

As much as these ceremonies evoke a shared sense of belonging and cultural identity, they also can be seen as rituals of dissociation from open-hearted and embodied awake presence, the magic of how we find ourselves in the world of interdependence. It is possible that rather than opening us to who we are, they distract us from our immediate perception, glorifying idealized invincibility rather than present vulnerability and openness to our lives.

Thus we can view our world as being pervaded by ceremonies, some based on fear and doubt about our basic nature and our place in the world, and some based on openness to the unconditional basis of experience. If we are using ceremonies to distance ourselves from the sacred, we might well ask, “What are we afraid of?”
Fear and Fearlessness

A culture and its ceremonies can be mutually reinforcing. A ceremony of fear reiterates and reinforces the tropes of doubt about basic goodness, and a culture of fear celebrates itself with its ceremonies. This claustrophobic cycle can be very powerful and destructive. Interestingly, what we are calling sacred ceremony functions differently, opening us up to vastness and sacredness, rather than confirming our ideas.

What is the basis of our fear? All beings have a need to locate themselves in their worlds, and they experience disorientation and fear when unable to do so. What is this world we experience? The Buddha introduced a radical understanding of our seemingly dualistic world:

Phenomena are [nothing but] dependent origination,
While this very [dependent origination] is empty of a nature of its own,
Free from being one or different,
Devoid of being real or delusive,
And just like illusions, the moon in water, and so on.

Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Thayé

In this view, this-and-that are mutually interdependent, arising in the realm of mind. Without a that, there can be no this and the imputed boundary of that and this is a constantly improvised, permeable, and dreamlike creation. That and this are place-keepers for this constant negotiation: “my” breath starts out as mine, and then becomes other; “my” idea comes from what I learned elsewhere, and then, spoken, loses its provenance as it is appropriated by others; “my” table is in “my” house, until I move away; “my” husband is mine for a while, and then not. The background of this dynamic is vastness, the not-two, where no ongoing observer can be found, but where the energy and power of phenomenal display is brilliantly pervasive.

According to the Shambhala teachings, the fundamental source of anxiety is fear of this egoless vastness. In Buddhist thought, ego’s grasping is a strategy to emotionally and conceptually define and pin down this and that and their interface. Ceremonies of fear use the energies of passion, aggression, ignorance, pride, and jealousy to this end, in hopes of ameliorating the groundlessness of existence. However, because this boundary is in essence dreamlike, the attempt to solidify it itself generates tremendous anxiety, uncertainty, and turbulence.
Our relation to vastness can likened to an infinite mirror of nowness reflecting the vividness of the present moment without boundary:

*From the great cosmic mirror
Without beginning and without end,
Human society became manifest.
At that time liberation and confusion arose.
When fear and doubt occurred
Toward the confidence which is primordially free,
Countless multitudes of cowards arose.
When the confidence which is primordially free
Was followed and delighted in,
Countless multitudes of warriors arose.*

This verse, taken from a text quoted in *Shambhala the Path of the Warrior* by Chögyam Trungpa, presents a succinct view of the unconditional ground of ceremony, and the roots of how ritual can be used as an invocation of confusion or wisdom. The root of both fear-based and wisdom-based ceremony is sentient beings’ desire to locate themselves in time and space, in the ungraspable present moment in the infinite universe. This is what is meant by the “cosmic mirror”—the eternal present moment, brilliantly accommodating everything, perfectly and without distortion. The razor-like present, infinitesimally brilliant between the non-existent past and the imaginary future, is too immediate to accommodate our histories, our hopes and fears, and even, on meditative inspection, our process of dividing experience of *this* and *that*, *self* and *other*, *perceiver* and *perceived*.

When people doubt this unconditional basis of their experience, they enact ceremonies of fear to help reify themselves and their worlds. When they “follow and delight” in present vastness, they practice ceremonies that express that bravery and confidence an open them to sacredness. In this light, we might view ceremony as a way of negotiating the quandary of individuality.

As Buddhist thinkers have pointed out, we, as sentient beings, simultaneously feel separate and in relationship. When we look, we realize that don’t know where our “self” comes from, or, for that matter, what its characteristics are. We provisionally name it, attach qualities to it, but, in the end, we can’t find it. Nonetheless, we infer a faceless captain of the good ship, “Me,” a captain that seems to navigate our days, surveying our sensoria, naming, patterning, building stories and destinations.
Lhasang: A Ceremony of Wakefulness

Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea  
Of this invention, this invented world,  
The inconceivable idea of the sun.  
You must become an ignorant man again  
And see the sun again with an ignorant eye  
And see it clearly in the idea of it.

Wallace Stevens

Ceremonies can soothe the panic of groundlessness in a genuine way; rather than distracting us or reinforcing our imaginary boundaries, they can help us tune into the brilliant, awake world of dreamlike interdependence, or even feel the non-dual ground of that interdependence. Such ceremonies are vehicles that carry us from anxiety to appreciation. Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche comments:

When we do a lhasang to bring down the magic energy of enlightenment and drala, the smoke of the lhasang is said to purify those obstacles that are actually on us. It gets into our pores and allows us to have a fresh start. A lhasang is considered to be very important, because it immediately raises our windhorse [primordial confidence in basic goodness]. It connects us with the dralas, the enlightened beings. It is said that how we lead our life affects our personal drala. We can weaken our personal drala, or we can increase our personal drala, purely by how we lead our life.

Lhasang and drala are Tibetan words used in the Shambhala tradition. A lhasang—literally “divine purification” is a traditional Tibetan smoke offering ceremony. Examples of smoke offerings can be found in many traditional and indigenous cultures throughout the world. Australian aborigines perform smoking ceremonies to cleanse important
events and ward of bad spirits. Native Americans use the smoke of pipe ceremonies to connect the physical and spiritual worlds.

Ed McGaa (Eagle Man), an Ogalala Sioux and author of *Mother Earth Spirituality: Native American Paths to Healing Ourselves and Our World*, says that most pipe ceremonies have the same intention: to call upon and thank the six energies:

All of our Sioux ceremonies beseech to the four directions, the earth and sky, and ultimately the Great Spirit. We see our Creator through nature, and we try to emulate what the Creator has made. This has worked out well, as you can see from the track record of Native American people. The old time Indians were honest, ethical people, and they had an unblemished environmental record.¹⁰

In the Tibetan lhasang ceremony, juniper is offered to a fire, along with other substances such as grains, yogurt, or beer. Chanting an invocation liturgy, the participants circumambulate the fire and visualize that awake energy—*drała*—descending the smoke and joining the human convocation. As Sakyong Mipham writes,

Drala means “above the enemy”…. Drala gathers in people, spaces, and situations that reflect gentleness, discipline, harmony, and appreciation; speed, chaos, and carelessness repel it. As the link between our own vastness and the vastness of the universe, drala is the blessing energy of reality—magic. When we have the courage to cultivate wisdom and compassion, drala connects the power of our being with the power of things as they are, because we are rising above the enemy of negativity.¹¹

On the one hand, such a ceremony can be dismissed as imaginary mumbo-jumbo, superstition. In our culture, it is easy to dismiss magical practice: “There is no incorporeal being Gesar who rides the smoke down
to earth, and these offerings are not enjoyed by dralas—they are just burned and evaporated. This is all just a puppet show, completely made up!” However, we could say something similar about our own fabrication of “me”: “There is actually no ongoing identity called “me” having a life—it is just an illusion of continuity, and nonetheless I spend my days making offerings to this ephemeral “me”, constantly hoping to make it happy!”

One of the Buddhist teaching’s main tenets is that identity—“me”—is illusory and unfindable, and yet much of how we feel and what we do is based on the struggle to define and maintain ourselves as solid, ongoing entities. By contrast, the present awareness of the interdependence of consciousness and phenomena, the felt sense of presence and vividness, relaxes the fraught struggle to maintain our identity and allows us to feel the vastness and sacredness that underlies our anxiety.

From that point of view, ceremony provides a powerful language of interdependence that can be used to invoke the present awareness of how things are beyond the struggle to maintain one’s illusory individuality. By performing such a ceremony, one trains one’s mind and sense perceptions to see beyond the anxiety of individuality into the vastness and sacredness of the world.

Distributed Empowerment: Awakening to Sacredness through Ceremony

Ceremony helps us understand that sacredness and daily life are not opposite poles, but a continuum. As ordinary people, we tend to think that Heaven, God, sacredness, enlightenment, and unconditional truth are the opposites of the ordinary world we inhabit in our daily lives. We might long for these ultimates, but the best we feel we can hope for is to hear ancient rumors about their potency. The path to experiencing them would seemingly require us to renounce our lives and meditate for lifetimes.

Awake ritual undermines this false dichotomy between ordinary life and sacredness. Heartfelt ceremony empowers us to see the sacredness inherent in where we are, rather than pointing to a place where we are not. A small ceremony—a genuine handshake—blesses the ensuing conversation; a medium ceremony—saying grace before a meal—opens us to the interconnectedness with the world that our food represents; a great ceremony—a marriage or a funeral—awakens us to the
sacredness inherent in the stages of our lives. Magical ceremonies, like the lhasang, invoke the dance of coincidence and the power of the natural world that vivifies human culture altogether.

The use of ceremony as tool for distributed empowerment in society is one of the great cultural adventures of the post-modern era. The panoply of sacred ceremonies can empower every strata of society and encourage every kind of person to reflect the inherent goodness and sacredness of life. Sacred perception need not be the exclusive province of priests and yogis; through ritual, people throughout society can transform their lives and cultures by lifting their perception from being based on anxiety to being a celebration of the present moment. Ceremony has been used this way throughout human history to awaken people of all stations of life to sacredness.

When sacredness is isolated from of society—through not believing in it, or because we have forgotten how to access it through ceremony—it seems impossible to protect our beautiful world from the momentum of materialism and technology. The anxiety of billions of people and the speed of materialism have aggregated into something that seems unstoppable. Through ceremony we learn to be, to be present, to be whole, and to be integrated into our culture and our world. Empowered to experience the sacredness and vastness of the world in the context of our personal lives, we can discover the courage to care for each other and for our world.

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Notes