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Why Do Rituals Grow as a Year Dwindles?

From 'Auld Lang Syne' to Christmas trees, the end of the year is full of rituals. Melvin Konner asks why.



New Year celebrations are about mortality but also rebirth. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

By MELVIN KONNER

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This season is filled with rituals, both religious and secular. Bringing evergreens indoors and brightly lighting them echoes pagan traditions of protest against the arrival of winter. Hanukkah candles light the darkest part of the lunar month, usually the new moon closest to the shortest solar day.

New Year's Eve will find us ritualizing, too—singing “Auld Lang Syne” (I always forget what it means), toasting with Champagne, kissing that certain someone at midnight. We’ll personify 2015 as an old man and 2016 as a baby, light the sky brilliantly and lamely promise ourselves that we’ll change through resolutions. Many thousands in Times Square and many millions from afar will watch that ball drop. Here in Atlanta, a Georgia peach descends. We can follow the fireworks in a sort of contest, starting with New Zealand as midnight circles the globe.

New Year celebrations are about mortality but also rebirth. We tend to hang with friends

our own age, ticking off another year, wondering how many more we have, proclaiming a fresh start full of new beginnings. In the Northern Hemisphere, we'll be in the midst of a long night, replaying the old antagonisms of darkness and light, death and birth, disenchantment and hope.

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But
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all
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ritual? For anthropologists, rituals are defined by certain qualities: They are repetitive, prescribed, compelling to our attention, reproduced in time and space, costly in resources and effort, and filled with actions that have no practical purpose. They often occur when people feel threatened—by drought, illness, engagement with an enemy—and at life transitions like birth, initiation, marriage and death. In our own culture, secular rituals also include graduation, retirement, championships and New Year's Eve.

Transitions bring joy but also uncertainty. The prescribed routines of ritual make us feel safer. When these are carried to extremes, as in obsession and compulsion, they highlight the underlying fears. But we aren't necessarily anxious when we engage in ritual. We feel comforted by the habitual performance.

Recent research has taught us more about how ritual works. As shown in a classic 1993 study by Michael Tomasello and colleagues, young children will imitate a needlessly complex route to a goal, but untrained chimps will not. Both species figure out they can cut to the chase and quickly get what they want, but children seem to like the wasteful mimicry. Other studies show they like it more as they grow through early childhood.

Chimps in Tanzania's Gombe Stream National Park do a sort of dance during a rainstorm—possibly a proto-ritual. But every human group has far more ritual than that, invests it with meaning and teaches it to children. Psychologist Cristine Legare of the University of Texas talks about the “causal opacity” of ritual because it includes useless movements, unrelated to cause-and-effect chains.

Recent studies in the journals *Cognition* and *Evolution & Human Behavior* from the Early Cognitive Development Centre at the University of Queensland, Australia have

shed new light on this. In one experiment, 4-year-olds were shown how to open a box to find one grown-up's favorite toy, missing because another grown-up hid it.

The second adult modeled how to open the box, including arbitrary actions such as tapping it three times with a stick. On the first grown-up's return the kids helped her retrieve her toy but included the arbitrary actions, even when the box was already open. "Overimitation" is due more to the desire to be like others than the need to reach a goal.

Undoubtedly this tendency was a crucial step in human evolution, confirming group solidarity, easing transitions and perpetuating culture. It helps to explain ritual's role in our universal humanity and reminds us that our evolution is, first of all, the evolution of childhood.

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