

Rational Ritual

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On Rationalist Solstice and Epistemic Caution

Since 2011, some LessWrong folk have observed the winter solstice, as a holiday ritual celebrating human achievement in the face of a confusing, often terrifying world.

I've written in the past about the [potential value, and danger](#), of ritual. Over the past years my opinion shifted somewhat, but is still essentially summarized as: "I think ritual is *less* epistemically fraught than generally exposing yourself to the beliefs of a peer group (something that pretty much everyone does by default), and meanwhile has many benefits. We should be cautious of it, but it's a fairly important human experience we shouldn't discard simply because it pattern-matches to woo."

Still, I think the practice of rational ritual should still involve a lot of epistemic care, on the part of both organizers and participants.

Since 2012, in the various editions of the Solstice Book of Traditions, I've included a disclaimer at the beginning, and I think it'd be valuable to have that more publicly accessible so that people going into a Solstice can be properly informed.

Individual Solstice celebrations vary, and I can't promise that this document will accurately reflect all organizers' intentions. But it reflects my own goals and hopefully provides a reasonable starting context.

What is a Ritual?

A ritual is about making a sacrifice to imbue a moment with symbolic power, and using that power to transform yourself. Ritual experience cannot be coerced - only entered willingly by those that believe in them. A ritual that you don't believe in may feel hollow, or alienating.

I do not believe ritual and rationality are *inherently* contradictory. The human brain seems designed *badly*. It is hard to truly accept certain facts about the world, even when you have empirical evidence - especially for facts involving large numbers, or unspeakable horrors.

It can even be hard for your brain to accept truths like "*You are not alone, and you can do this.*"

Rituals can be useful, to internalize those facts.

They can also be useful to help *make it true, that you are not alone, and you can do this.*

Nonetheless, with power comes responsibility. If you are considering participating in the Rationalist Solstice, first consider as carefully as you can, in the light of day with your clear-thinking prefrontal cortex, whether the concepts herein seem true and good - the sort of things you'd want to employ emotional tricks and a ritual journey to cement. Or, if you are uncertain, that you nonetheless trust that a ritual invoking these principles is a good thing to experience, for whatever your reasons.

If you are an organizer, each year you should reflect upon the principles here and the specific content of the Solstice. A rationalist holiday doesn't just need people to preserve one set of traditions - [it needs cultural stewards to actively pursue truth](#), who work to develop songs and stories that reflect our deepening understanding of the nature of reality.

Principle Underpinnings

First, that rational inquiry and empirical evidence are the best tools to make sense of the world.

Second, that our world is a harshly *neutral* world, with physics indifferent to our suffering.

Third, more subjectively, that *it is right and good* that we look upon the world and have opinions about how to change it. That it is *wrong* that millions struggle in poverty, or die of malaria, or are trapped by systems *we built ourselves* that are indifferent to our struggles.

Fourth, that *you* have the potential to help. Perhaps not now - maybe you must ensure your own life is flourishing before you are ready to help others or change the broader world. But you would, if you could, and that you would like a night to remember that possibility.

Fifth, some oddly *specific* things. These assumptions are not *intrinsic* to the solstice ceremony, but they permeate many of the songs and stories and it seems best to make them explicit:

Scientifically - That the modern astronomical understanding of the big bang, star formation, and evolution are more or less correct. That the natural world is often dangerous and human civilization could potentially be destroyed. That artificial intelligence is quite possible, and will probably dramatically shape our future, sooner or later, one way or another.

The more specific claims get less specific story and song lyrics, to avoid overcommitting epistemically. Any specific empirical claim is something we should be prepared to discard, no matter how pretty a song lyric.

Philosophically - Well, ethics is confusing, once you begin expanding your circle of concern beyond tribes of 150, and evolution-honed intuitions break down. But it seems to me:

That pointless suffering is bad. That the default state of nature - creatures, at least some sentient, eating each other alive, populations kept in check by starvation and disease - isn't okay.

That love and excitement and curiosity and creativity are good. This is arbitrary and human-chauvinistic, but that's fine. It's what we have. It is good when people build things together, when they come to understand the world more deeply, when they become more self aware. It is good that we relate to and love each other. It is good that sometimes we laugh and joke and screw around.

That death is bad. Every time a conscious being which knows itself and doesn't want to die is snuffed out of the world... that is a tragedy.

Strategically - that compassion is good, but *not sufficient*. That changing the world requires deep thinking and innovation that often feels strange at first glance.

And finally, sixth: that the neutral universe *does not begrudge our dreams*.

It does not fume at the death of smallpox or reduced scarcity or non-reproductive sex. We can choose as best we can what is right, and work to bring about the best world we can.

We may not agree on the specifics of what that means. The rest of the year, we may argue about what *exactly* is right and good and how to best achieve it. But tonight, we remember the visions we share. That in the space of all possible dreams, ours are incredibly aligned. That we share the meta-dream: we can work together to refine our visions as we strive to make them real.

We can cooperate, and help one another along the way.

Ritual Report: NYC Less Wrong Solstice Celebration

Note: Secular Solstice has evolved a bit since this original post (most notably, it no longer has a major Lovecraft theme).

Last Friday, the NYC Less Wrong community held their first Winter Solstice Celebration. Approximately twenty of us gathered for dinner and a night of ritual. We sang songs, told stories, and recited litanies. The night celebrated ancient astronomers, and the work that humanity has done for the past 5000 years. It paid tribute to the harshness of the universe, respecting it as worthy opponent. We explored Lovecraftian mythology, which intersects with our beliefs in interesting ways.

And finally, we looked to the future, vowing to give a gift to tomorrow.

This is the first of 2-3 posts on this subject. In this one, I'm telling a story about what we did and why I wanted to. In the followup(s), I'll explain the design principles that went into planning such an event, and what we learned from our first execution of it. I'll also be posting a PDF of a ritual book, similar to the one we read from but with a few changes based on initial, obvious observations.

Why exactly did we do this? Doesn't this smack of organized religion? Who the hell is Lovecraft and why do we care?

Depending on your background, this may require the bridging of some inferential distance, as well as emotional distance. Bear with me.

(If at the end, you DO still think this was a dangerous idea, or one you don't want popularized on Less Wrong, I want you to let me know. We're probably just going to disagree, but I want a sense of what the costs are of emphasizing this type of thing here)

Winter Solstice

To begin, a Just So Story, true enough for our purposes:

The Winter Solstice is the longest night of the year. It ushers in a time of cold and darkness.

For young civilizations, it was a time when if you HADN'T spent the year preparing adequately for the future, then before spring returned, you would run out of food and die. If you hadn't striven to use your tribe's collective wisdom, to work hard beyond what was necessary for immediate gratification... if you hadn't harnessed the physical and mental tools that humans have but that few other animals do... then the universe, unflinchingly neutral, would destroy you without a second thought. And even if you did do these things, it might kill you anyway. Because fairness isn't built into the equations of the cosmos.

But it wasn't just the threat of death that inspired the first winter holidays. It was that sense of unfairness, coupled with the desperate hope that world couldn't *really* be that unfair. It wouldn't have occurred to the first squirrels that stored food for winter, but it gradually dawned upon ancient hominids, as their capacity for abstract reasoning developed, alongside their desire to throw parties.

Our tendency is to anthropomorphize. Today, we angrily yell at our cars and computers when they fail us. Rationally we know they are unthinking hulks of metal, but we still ascribe malevolence when the real culprit is a broken, unsentient machine.

There are plausible reasons for humans to have evolved this trait. One of the most complicated tasks a human has to do is predict the actions of other humans. We need to be able to make allies, to identify deceptive enemies, to please lovers. I'm not an evolutionary psychologist and I should be careful when telling this sort of Just-So story, but I can easily imagine selection pressures that resulted in a powerful ability to draw conclusions about sentient creatures similar to ourselves.

And then, there was *NOT* a whole lot of pressure to *NOT* use this tool to predict, say, the weather. Many natural forces are just too complex for humans to be good at predicting. The rain would come, or it wouldn't, regardless of whether we ascribed it to gods or "emergent complexity." So we told stories about gods, with human motivations, and we honestly believed them because there was nothing better.

And then, we had the solstice.

The world was dark and cold. The sun was retreating, leaving us only with the pale moon and stars that lay unimaginably far away. There was the enroaching threat of death, and just as powerfully, there was the threat that sentient cosmic forces that held supreme power over our world were *turning their backs on us*. And the best we could hope for was to throw a celebration in their honor and pray that they wouldn't be angry forever, that the sun would return and the world would be reborn.

And regardless, take a moment to be glad for having worked hard the previous year, so that we had meat stored up and wine that had finished fermenting.

But as ages passed, people noticed something interesting: there was a *pattern* to the gods getting angry. Weather may be complex and nigh-unpredictable. But the movements of the heavens... they follow rules simple enough for human minds to understand, if only you take the time to look.

We had a question. "When will the sun retreat, and when will it return?"

When you really care about knowing the answer, you can't make something up. When you need to plan your harvest and prepare for winter so that your family doesn't starve, you can't just say "Oh, God will stop getting angry in a few months."

If you want real knowledge, that you can apply to make your world better...

Then you need to do science. Astronomy was born.

I want to give you some perspective on how much we cared about this. Stonehenge is an ancient archaeological wonder. To the best of our knowledge, it began as a burial site around 3000 BCE. Over the next thousand years, it was gradually built, in major phases of activity every few hundred years. Between 2600 and 2400 BCE, there was a

surge of construction. Huge stones were carted over huge distances, to create a monument that's lasted five thousand years.

30 Sarsen stones. Each of them was at least 25 tons. They were carried 25 miles. 80 bluestones. Four tons each. Carried over 150 miles.

In this era, the height of locomotive technology was "throw it on a pile of logs and roll it."

We don't know exactly how they did all this. We don't know all the reasons why. But we know at least one: The megaliths at Stonehenge are arranged, very specifically, to predict the Solstices. To the moment of dawn.

30 stones, each 25 tons, carried over 25 miles. 80 stones, each four tons, each carried over 150 miles.

200 years of that.

That's how much we cared about the answer to that question.

A Modern Journey

To modern society, Winter Solstice isn't very scary. We have oil to heat our homes, we have mechanical plows that clear our streets when the snow falls and other mechanical plows that work our fields all year round to supply us with food, carted from thousands of miles away, across land and sea. Many people today claim to enjoy Winter, although Richard Adams may accurately say that they really enjoy their protection from it.

Modern winter holidays are about enjoying that protection, not assuaging fear.

But there is a power in that, all the same. My family's Christmas Eve celebration is one of my favorite parts of the year. The extended family gathers. We have a big feast. Then 20+ people huddle up and sing songs and tell stories for hours. I don't believe in the literal messages of these rituals, but they have a power to them that I rarely see outside of religious-inspired works of art. They feel timeless and magical even though most Christmas carols have only existed for 50 years or so. The repetition of them each year grants them ritual strength. And the closeness I feel with my family grants them warmth.

Together, all these things are precious.

I didn't realize how precious, though, until the year I invited a friend of mine to the Christmas Eve party. Her first reaction amused me: "Wait, you guys literally sit around a fire and sing Christmas carols? Like, in movies?" Her second reaction, as the night ended, was even more amusing: "Oh my god, I had no idea Christmas could be so awesome!" But I knew what she meant, and it was accompanied with the realization that NOT everybody got to have experiences like this.

And that made Christmas Eve all the more special. It also made me realize how ridiculous it is that I only get to have that experience once a year.

That desire nagged at me a few years, and it was accompanied by another nagging dissatisfaction: That I didn't really believe in the words of the songs. They had power, generated by the *magnitude* of the songwriter's belief, and given lyric form by

carefully honed skill. But they weren't true, and the falsehood itched at the back of my mind. Not because of the songs themselves, but because there weren't other songs, equally beautiful and with the same cultural weight, that were about things that I truly believed in.

Flash forward five years. I've since discovered the sequences at Less Wrong. They outline studies in human behavior, how lots of our thinking is flawed if we want to achieve particular goals, how it can be hard to even know what our goals ARE, and why these are incredibly important questions to answer. Not just so we can succeed at life, but because if you're developing machine intelligence, and you haven't studied these questions (and solved problems that are, as I write this, unsolved), you could really, really, wreck the world. Wreck it worse than cold, uncompromising Nature ever could, worse and more unrecoverably than Hollywood has portrayed in explosive blockbuster films.

But if these questions are answered, and certain technological problems are solved, we can do incredible, important, beautiful things. In the past year I've read powerful works of science, prose, and poetry that have resonated with all my strongest values. They've changed how I approach my life and how I look at the future.

For the past year I've attended the local Less Wrong meetup. I've made new friends. I've gotten involved with a community that encourages everyone to figure out what their goals are and try to achieve them, using the best tools they can find. We're going through similar life experiences. And for the past year, I've been seeking out songs and stories that are fun, powerful and that we all truly believe in.

Ritual has been important in my life. I recognize that there is a risk whenever you begin elevating ideas and seeking them out *because* they are powerful and moving. I *don't* want to start a self-propogating organization designed to accrue followers blindly reciting the faith. But those of us who have studied these ideas and take them seriously - I want us to be able to find each other, to create friendship and family, and to celebrate together.

However, these powerful beliefs we share come with a cost:

I now believe a lot of really weird stuff that's hard to explain to the average person without sounding crazy. To certain people, they sound genuinely horrifying. I believe that living forever is a perfectly reasonable goal. I think that in the not too distant future, people will be able to radically alter their minds and bodies. In the not much more distant future, there's a good chance people will be able to live as uploaded computer programs. More frightening: I believe that people will eventually WANT to do this.

To be clear: I'm *currently* lukewarm about a lot of this - my beliefs are complex, and like most humans I have a poor understanding of what I really value. But I can imagine the future me, plugging into the Matrix like it was no big deal.

All of this pales compared to the possibility of AI. The rest of humanity goes about their daily lives, planning for a future that involves slightly smaller iPhones and bigger televisions, vaguely annoyed that it's 2012 and we don't have flying cars yet. Blissfully unaware that with barely any warning, an AGI might be created and then bootstrap itself to godhood.

Blissfully unaware of how big mindsphere is, and how little human morality would matter to a ghost of perfect emptiness, and how hard it is to create a mind from

scratch that would care about us the way we care about ourselves.

But perhaps most blissful of all, they look upon the horrors that nature has inflicted us, and they give them nice sounding names like “God’s mysterious ways”, or “The Natural Order of Things.”

Alien Gods, and Other Horrors

Now, who the hell is Lovecraft and why should we care?

H.P. Lovecraft was a science fiction/horror writer from the 1920s. He wrote about alien gods, about humans changing their bodies and minds, about the pursuit of immortality. But what makes him particularly relevant is one dominant underlying theme - that the universe is absolutely, unforgivingly neutral. That human life and morality has no inherent value. That mind-space is huge, and that possibility space is even huger, and that 99% of the things in possibility space are utterly terrifying to modern human values. *“All my tales,”* Lovecraft said, *“are based on the fundamental premise that common human laws and interests and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos-at-large.”*

Lovecraft identified as an atheist, a materialist and even a rationalist, and his protagonists often identify as such. He was also, as far as I can tell, a pessimist who hated people in general. I’m not sure what his beliefs about morality in the real world were. But he fascinates me because his writings suggest a dark mirror image of our ideals. Professor Quirrell to our Harry Potter, as a certain fanfiction would have it.

This is how Call of Cthulhu begins:

“The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.”

We, of the Less Wrong community, have gotten a glimpse of an expanse of possibility-space outside the scope of most people’s imagination. I know some people who are genuinely incapable of processing it. I know others who would, unless they took an initially painful plunge into the deep after us, look upon us with confusion and despair.

We ask hard questions about humanity, and about the universe, and a lot of the answers are dark. The Milgram experiment has been repeated many times, and consistently, we find that over half of humanity is willing to electrocute another person to death on the authority of a man in a lab coat. Across the world, people are born into situations — some natural, some human-made — where they can’t provide for themselves, and it is often beyond their power to change that situation.

Every day, approximately 150,000 people die, their minds forever gone.

These are the facts. Some people stare into the Abyss and the Abyss stares back and they crawl away from the truth into the safety of ignorance.

These are facts, but there is more than one way to feel about them. We can look at the darkness of the world and wallow in despair. We can make up reasons why the darkness isn't so bad. Or we can look at the light, the things that, by our standards, are beautiful and good. And we can say:

"This is what is possible. This is the kind of future we can have."

And we can look at the darkness and say: "This is not acceptable. We will not rest until it is gone." However long it takes, however hard. Our gift and curse is that we look at something as awful as Death and see no natural order of things, only a problem to be solved, that we can't in good conscience resign ourselves to accepting.

We can do all this without Lovecraft or other made up stories. There are plenty of truths that are powerful and beautiful enough to craft a night of ritual. But an important part of Solstice Festivals IS the fun, the joviality. It can be difficult to slip directly into the kind of profound state that I want to achieve. In my family's Christmas Eve, we begin the night with songs about Santa and Frosty - boisterous, fun songs that suggest a time of magic, friendship and generosity, even if they don't actually have to do with a virgin born savior. As we progress through the hymnal, the songs grow more somber, and they turn to the ideas that Christmas is supposed to actually be about - the birth of Christ, peace on earth, God's forgiveness of the world. We end with a solemn Silent Night.

In this Solstice Eve celebration, Cthulhu, Azathoth and the Necronomicon play a part akin to Santa Claus - fun, ridiculous things that don't directly parallel AI or Existential Risk or Evolution or Immortality, but which nonetheless pay tribute to the core ideas that make those things important to us.

The night begins with many sources of light - from candles and oil lamps to gas lanterns to florescent bulbs to lasers and lava lamps. We begin with fun songs like "It's Beginning to Look A Lot Like Fish Men." As the night progresses, we turn the lights off, one by one, and the songs grow darker. We occasionally read relevant snippets of Lovecraft, then abridged versions of Eliezer's Sequences. We read the Litany of Tarski, over and over, each time facing a darker possibility that we must prepare ourselves for.

The Gift We Give to Tomorrow will be read with one candle remaining, extinguished immediately afterward.

Solstice Celebrations haven't been truly scary for a long time, and I think that's a mistake. We are alive today, enjoying the comfort of a warm apartment with food on the table, because millions of people have spent their lives preparing for the future. Using the best wisdom their tribe was able to give them. Finding new wisdom of their own. Working hard. Sometimes courageously speaking out, when the tribe feared a new idea. Dragging eight-thousand-pound rocks across 150 miles of land so that they could figure out when winter was coming, and prepare, so that they and their children could survive.

We honor those people, those first astronomers, and all the laborers and scientists and revolutionaries who have come since, for creating the world we have today.

And then we look to our future. Tiny stars in the distant sky, unimaginably far away, surrounded by black seas of infinity.

We will stare into that Abyss, and the Abyss *will* stare back at us. But we will go crazy-meta and challenge the Abyss to a staring contest and win the hell at it, because we're aspiring rationalists and good rationalists win.

And then, jubilantly, sing of a tomorrow that is brighter than today, a tomorrow where we are worthy of those stars, and have the power to reach them.

This begins the Ritual mini-sequence. The next article is [The Value \(and Danger\) of Ritual.](#)

The Value (and Danger) of Ritual

This is the second part of my Winter Solstice Ritual mini-sequence. The [introduction post is here](#).

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Ritual is an interesting phenomenon to me. It can be fun, beautiful, profound, useful... and potentially dangerous.

Commenters from the previous article fell into two main camps - those who assumed I knew what I was doing and gave me the benefit of the doubt, and those who were afraid I was naively meddling with forces beyond my comprehension. This was a reasonable fear. In this article, I'll outline why I think ritual is important, why it's dangerous, why I think it's relevant to an aspiring rationalist culture.

Before I start arguing how meaningful and transformative ritual can be, I want to argue something simpler:

It can be really fun.

This is not to be discounted. For whatever reason, humans tend to appreciate songs, stories and activities that they shared with their tribe. Hedons from ritual can take the form of fun joviality as well as intense, profound experiences.

Not everything we evolved to do is good. If we feel an urge to hit the enemy tribesman with a huge rock and take their land, we can and should say "No, there are important game theoretic and moral reasons why this is a bad idea" and suppress the urge. But we can also devise new activities, like [knocking the enemy tribesman over and taking their ball](#), satisfying that urge without the negative consequences of war. I'd like access to the experience that ritual uniquely offers, if it can be done safely.

Ritual covers a range of experience. One subset of that is a kind of art. To give you some sense of what I mean here, here's a few clusters of activities.

- Art, enjoyed alone for simple aesthetics.
- Art that speaks to your beliefs.
- Art that you enjoy appreciating with other people.
- Beliefs that you enjoy sharing with other people.
- Repetition of activities that you do every year.

And here are a few songs I like:

- [Silent Night](#)
- [Carol of the Bells](#)
- [Do You Hear What I Hear](#)
- [The Word of God](#)
- [Singularity](#)

Art and Belief

I like [*Silent Night*](#) because it is a simple, tranquil song, often sung with skillful harmonies.

I like [*Carol of the Bell*](#) because it is a powerful, awe-inspiring song that is performed with immense complexity and skill.

I like [*Do You Hear What I Hear*](#) partly for the same reasons I like *Silent Night* - it begins with simple tranquility. But I also like it for ideological reasons - it showcases the power of a meme growing over time, magnifying, evolving and changing the lives of its hosts as they come to believe it. As an artist hoping to craft powerful memes, this is very important to me. I also like the imagery of the proud king, willing to listen to the words of a shepherd boy, acknowledging the importance of a small infant born into poverty far away.

And the king is able to command the attention of an entire nation: Take a moment, stop what you are doing, and pay attention to this child.

But *Do You Hear What I Hear* also bothers me slightly - it lies in the uncanny valley of ideological identification. The song strikes very close to home in my heart, and I want to give myself over to the song, not just to sing the words but to truly feel them in my heart. And I can't, because there is a slight snag when we get to the proud king. The king is valuing the child for all the wrong reasons. I want the child to be important because *all* children are important. But this king would not have given the child a second thought if it hadn't been the son of God. I don't believe in Jesus, so the intended message of the song clashes with what I want it to be about.

For the most part I sing the song without thinking about this, but that little snag is there, and it prevents the song from being one of my favorites ever.

Contrast this with *Silent Night*, where the message is largely irrelevant to me. Or *Carol of the Bells*, whose message is "Bells are pretty and people like them." I appreciate them aesthetically and I respect skilled performers. Their messages don't bother me, but neither do I feel as strongly about them.

Art and Tribe

[*The Word of God*](#) is beautiful because the world is an incredible place, and humans have discovered millions of beautiful true things about it. There is exactly one thing I dislike about this song, and it is not a disagreement with its ideology. It's just the use of the word "God." I don't think it was wrong word to use - it's a nice, simple word and I read it purely as a metaphor for "the universe."

Like *Do you Hear*, there is some uncanny-valley effect here. But here it's about tribal identification. (I draw a distinction between tribal identity and ideology - tribe is about identifying with a group of people, ideology is identifying with a belief-structure).

My mind snags because "God" is a word I normally associate with other cultures. This isn't as big a deal as in *Do You Hear*. I don't actually consider the goddists to be my enemy, I just don't feel connected to them, and the word takes me out of the beauty of the song and reminds me of this disconnection. I did go ahead and include *Word of God*, verbatim, in the Winter Solstice Celebration. I just want to note that there are different reasons to be moved by (or fail to be moved by) a song.

[Edit in 2018: [we've since re-written](#) Word of God (after touching base with the original songwriter) to focus more purely on scientific progress rather than God. This was less because "God" was problematic and more because it kept the focus on political conflict that didn't seem good for Solstice longterm]

Finally, we have [Singularity](#), which I like for all kinds of reasons.

The music begins whimsical and fun, but grows more powerful and exciting over time. If you have good speakers, there's a heavy but subtle baseline that drives the sound through your bones. It was refreshing to hear an unapologetic vision of how amazing the future could be. And when the sound abruptly cuts out and the song resets, there's another image I really like - that humanity is not special because we were created by some God for a grand purpose. Instead, we are special precisely because we were shaped by random forces in an un-extraordinary corner of the universe, and all of our potential power and greatness comes from our own desires, intellect and drive.

So it's ideologically moving to me. But I didn't really realize until I sang in a group how tribally moving it could be. I wasn't sure people would like the song. The chorus in particular sounds silly when you sing it by yourself. But as a group, everyone got really into it, and yes the chorus was still a little silly but we got up and waved our arms around and belted it out and it felt really good to be part of a group who believed that this weird, outlandish idea was in fact very plausible and important.

So that was cool.

I also thought it slightly terrifying.

Songs like Singularity are what give me the most pause about encouraging Less Wrong culture and rituals.

Signaling Issues

There are two big issues with ritual. The first is how it makes other people perceive us.

Rituals are, almost by definition, symbolic actions that look a little weird from the outside. They normally seem okay, because they are ancient and timeless (or at least were created a few years before people started paying attention). But any Less Wrong ritual is going to have all the normal weirdness of "fresh" tradition, and it's going to look extra strange because we're Less Wrong, and we're going to be using words like "ritual" and "tribal identification" to matter-of-factly describe what we're doing.

Some people may be turned off. Skeptics who specifically turned to rationality to escape mindless ritual that was forced upon them may find this all scary. Quality, intelligent individuals may come to our website, see an article about a night of ritual and then tune out and leave.

I think this is an acceptable cost to pay. Because for good or for ill, most humans *like* emotional things that aren't strictly rational. Many people are drawn to the Sequences not just because they say important things, but because Eliezer crafted an emotional narrative around his ideas. He included litanies and parables, which move us in a way that pure logic often can't.

There are smart cynics who will be turned off, but there are also smart idealists who will be drawn to recognizable human emotional arcs. I don't think ritual should be the FIRST thing potential newcomers see, but I think it is something that will get them fully involved with our community and the important things we believe. I think it may particularly help former theists, who have built their entire lives around a community and ritual infrastructure, make the transition into atheists who are proud of their new beliefs and do productive things.

It may even help current theists make the transition, if they can see that they WON'T have to be giving up that community and ritual infrastructure, and all the hedons that went along with it.

But there's another cost to ritual, that can't be resolved quickly with a cost-benefit analysis.

[Update from 2016 - I want to clarify that while I think Less Wrong as a community is a reasonable place for ritual and culture-building, there are other related communities and organizations that are more "PR sensitive" and I don't think should be connected to ritual]

Dangers of Reinforcement

Ritual taps into a lot of regions of our brain that are explicitly irrational, or at least a- rational. I don't think we can afford to ignore those regions - they are too essential to our existence as humans to simply write off. We didn't evolve to use pure logic to hold together communities and inspire decisions. Some people may be able to do this, but not most.

I think we need ritual, but I would be a fool to deny that we're dealing with a dangerous force. Ritual is a self-reinforcing carrier wave for ideas. Those ideas can turn out to be wrong, and the art that was once beautiful and important can turn hollow or even dangerous. Even true ideas can be magnified until you ignite a happy death spiral, giving them far more of your time than they deserve.

Some of this can be mitigated by making traditions explicitly *about* the rational process, and building evaluation into the ritual itself. We can review individual elements and remove them if necessary. We can even plan to rewrite them into new parodies that refute the old idea, ceremoniously discarding our old ideas. But this will be a meaningless process unless we are putting in genuine effort - not just doing a dutiful review as good rationalists should.

We can recite the Litany of Tarski, but unless you are truly considering both possibilities and preparing yourself for them, the words are useless. No amount of pre- planning will change the fact that using ritual will require deliberate effort to protect you from the possibility of insanity.

You should be doing this anyway. There are plenty of ways to fall into a happy death spiral that don't involve candle-lit gatherings and weird songs. When you're dealing with ideas as powerful as the Singularity - a meme that provides a nice, sound-byte word that suggests a solution to all of the most terrible problems humanity faces - you should *already* be on guard against wishful thinking. When you're talking about those ideas in a group, you should already be working hard - genuinely hard, not just

performing a dutiful search - to overcome group think and [evaporative cooling](#) and maintain your objectivity.

You should be doing that no matter what. [Every cause wants to be a cult](#), whether or not they have a [nice word that sounds way simpler than it actually is that promises to solve all the world's problems](#).

Ritual *does* make this harder. I'm particularly wary of songs like Singularity, which build up a particular idea that still has a LOT of unknown factors. An anonymous commenter from the Solstice celebration told me they were concerned about the song because it felt like they were "worshipping" the Singularity, and I agree, this is concerning, both for our own sanity and for the signaling it implies to newcomers who stumble upon this discussion.

I'd go ahead and exclude the song, and any meme that got too specific with too many uncertainties.... except that a lot of our most powerful, beautiful images come from specific ideas about the future. A generic rallying cry of "Science!", "Humanism!" or "Rationality!" is not a satisfying answer to the problems of Death and Global Suffering and Existential Risk. It's not satisfying on an artistic level, an intellectual level or a tribal level. Having specific ideas about how to steer the future is what gives our group a unique identity. Caring too much about that identity is dangerous, but it can also be extremely motivational.

As of now, I'm not sure what I think about this particular problem. I look forward to commenters weighing in.

With all this dire warning, it may seem like a slam dunk case, to abandon the idea of ritual. Obviously, I disagree, for a few reasons.

The first is that honestly, gathering a few times a year to sing "Singularity! Singularity!", even *without* all the preventative measures, simply pales in significance compared to... well... the entire Less Wrong community-memeplex doing what it does on a regular basis.

If we were genuinely concerned about making bad decisions due to reinforcement rituals, I'd start by worrying about much more *mundane* rituals, like *continuously discussing the Singularity all the time*. Constantly talking about an idea trains your brain to think of it as important. Hanging out on forums with a constant stream of news about it creates confirmation and availability bias. If you're concerned about irrationality, as opposed to weird ceremonies that might signal low status, you should already be putting a lot of effort into protecting yourself against a happy death spiral, and the extra effort you need to expend for a few nights of jubilant celebration shouldn't be that significant.

The danger of ceremonial ritual *in particular* is real, but overestimating it isn't much better than underestimating it. Even if we're just talking about ritual as a source of hedons that we've previously denied ourselves. Families across the world gather to sing songs about ideas they like, and while this *may* be a human behavior we need to sacrifice, I'm not going to do so out of fear of what *might* happen without a decent understanding of why.

But there's more to it than that. And this is why I've worked so hard on this, and why I think the potential upsides are so important.

Aspiring Rationalist Culture

I had two major motivations for the Solstice celebration. One of them was to produce a fun event for my community, and to inspire similar events for people across the world who share my memes.

The other was personal: Rationality training has made me better at identifying good solutions, but it hasn't made those solutions emotionally salient. This is particularly important when it comes to optimal philanthropy - a million starving people across the world simply can't compete with a single smiling orphan I get to personally deliver a Christmas present to. And those people have an even harder time if they live in the distant future.

Scope insensitivity and time discounting can be hard to overcome. Worst of all is when the best solution *might not work*, and I may not even *live* to see it work, and I can never get the emotional satisfaction of knowing I actually helped *anyone at all*.

I constructed the Solstice celebration around a narrative, based around the interplay between past, present and future. The process of crafting that narrative was extremely valuable to me, and has helped me to finally give Existential Risk the weight it deserves. I haven't committed to helping SIAI in particular, but I feel like I'm at place where if I got better information on how effective SIAI is, I'd be emotionally able to act on that information.

I don't think the first execution of the Solstice celebration successfully provided other people with that experience, but I think there is tremendous potential in the idea. I'd like to see the development of a culture that doesn't glorify any particular solution, but which takes important rationality concepts and helps people modify their emotions match the actual expected values of actions that would otherwise seem cold, hard and calculating.

I think this may turn out to be very important.

In some ways this has me far more scared than ritual-as-hedons. People can gather for a night of jovial fun and come away mostly unchanged. Using ritual **deliberately** to modify yourself is risky, and it is perhaps riskiest if you think you have a good reason for doing so.

I don't think this is that dangerous on the individual level. It was useful to me, I think others may find value in it. Actually allowing yourself to be changed in a meaningful way requires *effort* beyond an initial, inspiring ceremony. (It took me several weeks of intense work **preparing** the Solstice celebration, cemented by a final moment when a few ideas clicked into place and I came up with a metaphor I could use to alter my emotions. I don't know for sure whether this can be distilled into a process that others can use with less effort).

Next year, I expect the people who come to Solstice for the comfort and hedons will get what they need, and if anyone wants to use it as a springboard for self-modification, they will be able to as well.

The possibility that most concerns me is a chain of events going something like this:

1. Someone (possibly a future version of me, possibly any random person perusing these articles) will decide that this is important enough to deliberately propagate

on a mass scale.

2. Said person will become good enough at ritual-craft (or use additional dark arts techniques) to make this much more effective than I currently anticipate.
3. The result is an effective but low-status self-propagating organization that ends up corrupting the original goal of "help people be better at following through on correct but emotionally unsatisfying choices."

This scenario requires someone to put a lot of work in, and they would probably fail uneventfully even if they did. Even if events transpire this way, the problem is less that a hollow self-propagating memeplex exists (it's not like we don't already have plenty of them, one more won't hurt that much) but that its association with Less Wrong and related things may tarnish our reputation.

I'd like to think this is a bad thing, although truth be told I think it assumes a level of importance that Less Wrong hasn't really carved or itself yet in the greater world. But we are trying to gain status and out of respect for the community I should acknowledge this risk, and sincerely solicit feedback.

My current assessment is that a) this is unlikely, and b) any organization that's trying to accomplish things on a large scale WILL have to accept the risk that it transforms into a hollow, self perpetuating memeplex. If you don't want that risk *at all*, you're probably not going to affect the world in a noticeable way. Ritual-driven memeplexes tend to be religions, which many of us consider a rival tribe, so they carry more emotional weight in our risk assessment. But this can also happen to corporations, unions, non-profits and political movements that may have been genuinely valuable at some point.

I do plan to study this issue in more detail over the coming year. If anyone does have specific literature or examples that I should be aware of, I'd appreciate it. But my priors are that the few negative reactions I've gotten to this are based more out of emotion than a clear understanding of the risks.

My final concern is that this simply isn't a topic that Less Wrong should encourage *that* much of, partly because some people find it annoying and partly because we really should be spending our time developing tools for rational thinking and studying scientific literature. I have another article or two that I think would be valuable enough for the main page, and after that I'll be inviting people to a separate mailing list if they want to collaborate.

This is the second post of the ritual mini-sequence. The next post is [Designing Ritual](#).

Designing Ritual

This is the third post in my ritual mini-sequence. My first article was an [emotional rallying cry around of the idea of a rational-\(trans\)humanist culture](#). My second article examined the value and potential dangers of ritual.

So far, I remain convinced that ritual is a valuable experience for most people. I don't know if there can or should be a unified "Less Wrong" culture, but I do think individual communities should consider creating their own ("rational-humanist" or otherwise). Ritual can be a useful source of fun, comfort and inspiration for positive change. A decent heuristic for "Should my meetup try this?" is "Do the people at my meetup think this sounds cool?"

This article is both an explanation of certain design principles, and a case study of my attempt at one particular kind of community event.

Designing Timelessness

So, say your community decides to incorporate some ritual. How do you do that?

Ritual-space is large, and includes things as simple as "Pass around dark chocolate at the beginning of meetups." You probably already have *some* kind of ritual going on. Over time, these small traditions can accumulate into something interesting and comforting. But if you're like me, you want something more powerful - you want the gravitas of an ancient cultural cornerstone, and you want it *now*.

This is... a challenge.

"Creating tradition" almost feels like an oxymoron. To be effective, it has to have a timeless quality about it. It doesn't have to actually be *ancient*, but it needs to feel resonant, familiar and personal. Most ritual is created through a combination of artistic skill and memetic evolution. A few central traditions begin the process (say, a particular feast, prayer and/or anthem), and then the ritual begins to spread from family to family, adapting in response to memetic selection pressure, filling specific niches, often resulting in bizarre injokes and absurdities. The absurdities can actually help bind a community together, as a badge of pride.

Powerful governments and religions can attempt to steer this. The Catholic church votes on deliberate changes to their ceremonies. But the church could not have intentionally created Modern Western Christmas - a [bizarre gestalt of pagan and christian mythology, random stories](#), eventually infused with modern capitalism to become a monolithic culture and industry.

One of the hardest things an artist can do is create a work that *appears* to have already been weathered by natural forces. It's much easier to create a [clean room](#) than a [crumbling ruin](#). The weight of ancient cultural cornerstones is built out of a lot of subtle details, and if you get them wrong, you'll get a ridiculous, uncanny-valley effect (especially if you were taking everything really seriously).

But I think it can be done. The Solstice celebration I put together was a solid first attempt, and I feel that much more is possible. I'm going to walk through my design process, and then discuss what areas I think needed more work. I recently finished the [Extended Edition With Commentary](#) of the evening's songbook. You can either look it

over now, or after reading this article. (Ordinarily I'd say art should stand on its own without explanation, but since the actual "art" was an interactive ceremony, I don't think it matters much. The book *is* intended to be its own kind of art, but I'll leave it up to you.)

...

(Pausing here a moment so that the people who wanted to look over the book first have a second chance to do so, before being carried forward by inertia.)

...

All right. These were among my biggest considerations, when creating the Solstice celebration:

- Have a Goal
- Build on the Familiar
- Do Research, and Cultivate Diversity of Experience
- Manage Complexity
- Field Testing
- Remember (And Re-Evaluate) your Goal

Have A Goal

My primary goal for the Solstice was personal, and perhaps selfish: I wanted a particular, profound, intense experience. I'd had pieces of it in the past - communal singing, tribal belonging, reading beautiful prose that resonated with me. I've been to religious events and felt a hint of their potency. I wanted to weave all these elements into a single experience.

A related goal, not quite so selfish, was wanting to channel this power into changing myself, to inspire myself to be the kind of person I wanted to be.

Closely intertwined with those goals was the desire to create a fun, and hopefully moving experience for my community. In some ways this was instrumental to the first goals, but the event wouldn't have worked if I hadn't genuinely cared about creating something that everyone could enjoy together, for their own sake.

An unrelated goal, which I had to take care not to override more important ones, is that I've been wanting to have a Cthulhu-caroling party since like forever.

It took several months for these to weave into a single, unified plan for the evening. I'll return to that in a moment.

Build on the Familiar

Culture can be created, but not from nothing. You'll need to work off existing ideas that your tribe already shares.

One of the most important functions that tradition and ritual serve is to comfort. From what I've read and experienced, humans are hardwired to feel on-edge when they're in an unfamiliar situation. Uncertainty is a heuristic for danger - both to your physical life, and ostracization from the group (ultimately making it harder to find a mate). My accompanying just-so story is that repeated social traditions make your brain feel safe - you're surrounded by people doing familiar things you understand, so you don't have

worry about suddenly getting kicked out of the group for no reason. You're also surrounded by friends that could probably protect you if a tiger suddenly jumped out of the woods and attacked.

So if you want to induce that warm comfort, you'll need to be working with memes and activities that feel familiar. The NYC meetup has some diverse values, but we share a vision of the power of human achievement, and a future that is better specifically because of scientific progress. We also share an understanding of how dangerous and cruel the universe can be. Most of us have had these beliefs for a while, but it was Eliezer's Sequences that crystalized them into a coherent, specific and moving worldview, and brought us together as a community.

So the Sequences provided the content. But I turned to existing religious rituals for the structure. I knew that my family's Christmas Eve (where we feast, then gather and sing carols for hours, with a gradual emotion arc from silly-to-serious) was a good frame to build around. I've also had experience with Catholic Mass and a Seder, which incorporated stories alongside songs. These sorts of events are ubiquitous throughout our culture. Even if you don't have personal experience with them, you've probably grown up with ingrained stereotypes about them and vaguely identify them as "normal."

I think this was the single most important point - we had content that resonated with everyone, built around a structure that was familiar.

Big ideas are important, but weaving together smaller memes was also key. I looked for songs, stories or activities that I knew were already popular among our group:

- Our group has a fondness for dark chocolate, which has become something of a tribal badge. I don't actually even like dark chocolate that much, but it's oddly comforting to pass it around the living room.
- Songs like "Still Alive" and "RE Your Brains" are crowd favorites in our group. They aren't exactly on theme, but everyone knows them, and they were woven into the evening's narrative easily enough. Monty Python and Tom Lehrer also provided some examples, which were not only familiar but are just old enough to feel slightly "traditional".
- We're not all Lovecraft enthusiasts, but most of us are at least passingly familiar with them as a facet of nerd culture. There also is an existing large body of Lovecraft-inspired songs (on a CD entitled "A Very Scary Solstice"), that some of us already knew, and which parodied existing Christmas carols which would make them easier to learn.
- Our group is predominantly Jewish (ethnically, at least). We actually had a Rationalist Seder earlier in the year. This gave me an initial "reverse hanukkah" idea (turning out lights to represent the darkness of the universe).

These things made sense to consider for my community, and together they suggested a particular interpretation of the Sequences. They may *not* make sense for your community. If you want to do something like this, you'll have to look at your own community, identify your own proto-rituals, and use them to create something that feels like it's evolved around *your* group's selection pressures.

Research, and Diversity of Experience

Not only will culture look weird if you create it from scratch, but it's almost literally impossible to create an idea from scratch, period. Creativity is about combining

different ideas together in interesting ways. It's a lot easier to do this if you have a variety of interesting concepts to work with.

I started this endeavor with an array of background knowledge - I've had a lot of exposure to folk music and have written some amateur songs. I've trained in visual art, communications and game design (what you might more generally call "interactive media."). I've looked at several religious communities and seen a few different ways that ceremonies have been put together. These were valuable disciplines to draw upon.

On top of that, I did research on traditional solstice celebrations and the origin of H.P. Lovecraft's ideas. I shouldn't need to sell Less Wrongers on the value of research, but a common pitfall of amateur artists is that they get one good idea and then assume that's good enough. They don't care about factual accuracy, they're just making "art", and they're being "creative" which means inventing ideas from scratch. Which is horribly ineffective, even if all you care about is art. Doing research allows you to be more creative, since you get more ideas bouncing off each other. And if you choose to invoke poetic license, ignoring a particular fact, you can do so from a position of strength, knowing that the fact wasn't really essential to your point, or that it allowed you to emphasize a more important fact instead.

This is all the more important when you're creating something for rationalists, who are going to pick apart your story and identify [everything you get wrong](#).

The most powerful elements of the evening came from reading I did in the last few weeks. I hadn't even intended it as a solstice party when I first conceived it - it was just going to be a fun Lovecraft caroling party. The solstice, and Stonehenge in particular, turned out to be powerful symbols that supplied a concrete narrative. This was important, because vague symbols like "light" and "darkness" and "life" and "death" are so overused that you need a real, compelling story for them to feel meaningful. If I had just run with my initial idea, the result wouldn't have been worth posting on this site.

Manage Complexity

There's a proverb you may have heard: "*A designer achieves perfection, not when there is nothing left to add, but when there is nothing left to take away.*"

As you research and develop ideas, those ideas will accumulate and grow more complex. This will happen for individual pieces, and it will happen to the work as a whole. The problem is that there's a limit to how much complexity people can handle. The consequences vary from artform to artform. In the case of a ceremony, songs can be too challenging to sing, and stories can get too wordy or long.

Sometimes, you may want twenty verses for a song to communicate a complex idea. You may want interesting harmonies or modulations that make it really beautiful. Your audience may even be able to handle it - the complexity can be worth it.

BUT. Just because your participants can handle one complex song does not mean they can handle 30 in a row. You need to make each piece as simple as it can be, so you have leftover complexity to use in more important places. This means you may need to revise some songs - even songs you really like, cutting out perfectly good lines that just weren't quite pulling their weight, so that you could afford to make another, more important section lengthier or more interesting.

Communal songs are not like regular song. They must be easy to sing. They should have a refrain that everyone can easily join in on even if they get lost. Ideally, the lyrics should be someone “obvious” so that people naturally end up singing the right words even if they aren’t paying attention.

I ended up have 2-3 “hard” songs, another 2-3 “medium” songs, and the rest were deliberately less interesting but easier.

The Sequence readings were the most challenging part of this. I had to figure out which elements of them were most important and drastically cut them apart, while preserving the original impact of Eliezer’s work.

Field Testing

No amount of planning can replace actual empirical testing. Unfortunately, pieces of rituals can’t really be tested in isolation. By itself, a single activity can have a completely different feel compared to when you’re in the middle of a long ceremony, light sources flickering and surrounded by friends. On top of this, it’s impractical to hold a “practice” ceremony, since it’d make the “real” ceremony feel repetitive.

But at least some amount of practice can be valuable. If you’re writing new songs, or if you’re going to be giving a speech: Record yourself performing, and play it back. An iPhone’s voice memo app is a good way to do this. Not only will this give you vocal practice, but you’ll know how long a piece is, and you may be surprised at how something *actually* sounds compared to how it sounded in your head. (I sang some songs for weeks, carefully tuning them, until the day I actually recorded myself and realized a bunch of obvious problems I had been ignoring)

You’ll want at least some practice getting other people to participate. Getting people to try out a song by itself can feel a little awkward, but I managed a decent test at a meetup. I started by asking people to suggest songs they liked that were on-theme. We played them on youtube, and sang along karaoke style. This got everyone’s energy up, which gave me more confidence to try singing unfamiliar songs I had written, without musical backup. I learned important information about what people had an easy time singing along with and what they didn’t. People also got a lot more excited about the event. A lot of the songs people suggested made great additions to the final ceremony.

I had another important source of information from earlier in the year - the NYC had also done a Rationalist Seder in the spring. This actually had the opposite emotional arc than what I was going for - wine drinking is built into the Seder, and it becomes more jovial over time. I wanted things to start jovial, but then turn very dark before they eventually became uplifting. So I kept the dinner and singing sections separate. Those who drank during dinner were particularly jubilant at the beginning, but sober by the time we reached the parts that were intentionally grim.

One thing I did NOT test was use of light sources, which turned out to be a very complex logistical problem. More on this later.

Remember (and Re-Evaluate) your Goal

As you work on individual sections, it can be easy to forget your original goal. Remember that each piece isn’t just there to be awesome - it’s there to produce an awesome overall composition.

It's also okay if your goal changes - mine went from "silly Lovecraft caroling" to "serious (trans)humanist ceremony" to something in between, as I gained more data. I cut out all the Lovecraft when it seemed unnecessary, and then added chunks back in when I realized there was some genuinely interesting stuff worth including. But every now and again, I made sure to step from the work, and look at the whole. Every piece there needed to contribute to a coherent vision, even if that vision was different than the one I started with. Don't let your personal attachments to ideas blind you - anything that isn't pulling its weight should be changed or cut.

Finally, do at least one read of the entire script, to check how long it is. Don't rely on this for information on the emotional arc (it will be very different when you're reading by yourself than celebrating in a group) but try and get a general sense of the flow.

My Results

So, how did my event actually go?

I'm going to recommend you take a break now, and go read the actual [extended edition](#) and form your own opinion, before you read my self-critique. And maybe just take a while in general. This article is long, and I don't think it quite warrants two separate articles to split into. A breather may be good.

...

Okay. Back?

I actually answered this in a comment in the original post - I wanted to be upfront about the good and bad things, right off the bat. Here's the original comment:

1. The party was absolutely worth doing, even if it were just for general warmth, fun and togetherness
2. I did not personally achieve the profound feeling I was hoping for *at the event in particular*. But I did achieve it several times over while I was planning it, and I think I burned out on profundity before I actually got to the night in question. It was also warped somewhat by performance anxiety. I didn't actually feel like a participant in the event - I felt like a performer, and to some extent a scientist observing a phenomenon. I think that was mostly unique to me, although it will probably apply to anyone putting the event together for the first time.
3. So far I've spoken to a few other participants after the fact. Reactions seem to range based on how susceptible you are in general to warm fuzzies (more importantly, what I've come to call "warm shivers"). Everyone seems enthusiastic about doing it again, and most people seemed to have at least one moment that touched them, but different people reacted strongly to different parts of the evening.
4. A fairly common reaction was "this was a great idea and a good execution, but I have a strong sense that MUCH more is possible." (This was my reaction as well)

Some new information I've gathered since then:

- 5) I set up an [anonymous feedback box](#) on our mailing list, to address conformity issues. I only got two comments there, one was a person who didn't attend who was concerned about cult-image in general, and one was specifically concerned about the Singularity song, which I'm still reconsidering for next year.

6) There was a little too much Lovecraft. This was my fault - it was something I personally liked, which I should have been more careful not to overemphasize. In the final, extended edition of the ritual book, I removed excess Lovecraft and replaced it with other things.

7) Some mistakes were due to time constraints. The first five songs were not very good - they were pre-existing Lovecraft songs that I got off the internet. I deliberately allowed those songs to not be very good, because I knew that when the singing started, people would still be getting the hang of it. I had limited time to prepare and focused on the important parts. I've altered or replaced some of the early songs in the extended edition, but they are still deliberately less important.

8) A few people reported that I (successfully) made them almost cry during the dark sections, but that I didn't have enough uplifting songs to finish it off.

9) Relatedly, the lynchpin song, "Brighter Than Today," which I wrote for the transition from dark to light, is rather complicated to sing. I'm on the fence of whether I should make it simpler, or just allow the transitional anthem to be complex and expect people to get better at singing it over time. I think it would lose some power if I made it a more communal-friendly song. Different participants have given me different opinions on this.

10) Light sources turned out to be complicated. Partly because we just forgot to turn them off. I solved that by including instructions in the actual booklet. Partly because we didn't bring enough. I'm going to emphasize that more and ensure we have a better variety. (I left my own Lava Lamp and [Lightning Ball](#) at my parent's home and forgot them). But there was a harder problem that I don't know how to solve:

Each light source should feel dramatic when it turns off. Which essentially means that each light should be among the more "powerful" remaining lights. A single candle getting snuffed out is irrelevant when all the lights are on, but powerful when it's the last light remaining.

But there's only so many lights you can turn off before it becomes hard to read. This *could* be solved by using "True" communal songs - songs designed so you can figure them out and sing along without any text at all. But those songs tend to be louder and more boisterous. The whole point of the enroaching darkness is to become more grim.

Having more light sources may solve this problem - giving us enough to turn off while still having illumination to read by. Yet another part of the problem was a lack of table-space: there were 20 of us, and we ended up sitting in a circle of chairs. How to resolve this problem will depend a lot on who's participating, how well they can read in the dark, and what kind of room/table you have to work with.

11) I went back and forth on "The Gift We Give Tomorrow," and how short I wanted to make it. It reads like a conversation, and if you have two people who are both familiar with it, it can probably be okay as a longer piece. But I didn't find someone to read it with me early enough to practice together. So I ended up shortening it dramatically, cutting out the entire first half.

By the time I did this, I had spent three weeks wallowing in existential despair, studying a lot of grim writings about the cruelty of the universe, and I had basically lost the ability to discern emotional content. I thought I could get away with cutting away everything except the "poetic" sections of The Gift. It turns out you shouldn't do this. It wasn't bad, but it wasn't as potent as it should have been.

Next year I plan on doing the “full” version (i.e.[the abridged version I posted here](#)), and just make sure I get someone to practice with.

12) On a related note: make sure you give yourself enough time to work on something like this. You don’t just need time to write it, you need time to take a step back, let your brain recalibrate so you can properly evaluate sadness and beauty, and then still be able to revise it for a final draft.

Next Year

Last year, I let these ideas gestate for about 8 months before I got serious about putting this together. This year I’ll be planning ahead a lot more. I’ll also be setting some other things in motion, that may interact with the Solstice celebration in ways I can’t predict just yet. (Among other things, possibly getting a much cooler space to conduct it in)

I aim to have found or written more and better songs, possibly replacing some of the less on-theme ones that I included this year. I hope to collaborate more with trained musicians, do more research, and improve my own design skills. I have some specific thoughts on how to address existing problems, but those may radically change as I explore new possibilities.

I also plan to have networked with other local humanist, skeptical and rational communities. I don’t know if the end result will be a larger Less Wrong NYC community (having found people who’d naturally gravitate to our memes), a stronger coalition of Less Wrong communities beyond NYC, or a less specific coalition of rational/skeptical/humanist groups. Satisfying the needs of multiple tribes may [water down your values](#), but I think we can find plenty of things in common with related groups of people. Depending on the direction I go in, next year’s Solstice may be mostly the same or radically different. (I may even hold multiple ones for different target audiences).

I won’t be posting about this on Less Wrong - I think this website should mostly focus on quality technical posts, and I know culture-building can be a turn off to some. But I am interested in collaborating with anyone who’s interested (and if you’re NOT interested but are slightly scared of what I’m trying to do, I welcome you to keep an eye on me as a Rationalist Confessor). I’ll be starting a mailing list and possibly a design blog relating to this. Send me a PM if you’re interested.

And if you’re not really interested the large-scale culture building, but wanted some inspiration for your own community, Less Wrong or otherwise, I hope I helped.

Clumping Solstice Singalongs in Groups of 2-4

This post assumes you're familiar with [rationalist solstice](#). (It also assumes that while yes, ritual is something to be [epistemically careful about](#), the overall effect size is [relatively small compared to spending much of your life thinking about a topic](#) with peers that think that topic is important, and meanwhile having community identities is valuable. If you want to debate that please do so on one of those previous posts)

If you run a solstice ceremony with singalongs, there's particular value in:

- Doing at least 16 singalongs
- Clumping* them together in groups of 2-4, rather than alternating song / story / song / story. (Clumping is valuable even if you are doing a smaller number of songs)

This isn't the right approach for all possible solstice aesthetics, but there's a magic thing that can happen here if you do. And if you're not doing it (i.e. most solstice organizers seem to default to the "story/song/story/song" thing), you won't receive any feedback that there's a different thing you could do with a magic, synergistic outcome.

Reasons to want more songs, and to cluster them in groups of 2-4:

- It takes people awhile to get comfortable singing.
- Context switching makes it harder to get into the headspace of singing.
- There is a *secret, deeper headspace of singing* that you only get to if you do a LOT of it, in a row, in an environment that encourages being thoroughly un-self-conscious about it.
- There is a long game that I think singalong solstice celebrations can help with, which is to restore *musicality as a basic skill*, which in turn allows you to have much richer musical traditions than if it's an incidental thing you do a little of sometimes. The payoff for this comes on a multi-year timescale.

There are reasons *not* to want this many songs, or to have them clustered this way. Some people get more value out of the speeches or other activities than songs. One organizer of a small solstice mentioned their primary concern was "*Have each person bring one activity to the solstice*", and most of them weren't comfortable with songleading. Getting people directly involved with Solstice indeed seems valuable if that's an option. (This makes more sense for smaller communities)

But my impression is that much of the time, the ratio of songs/stories and their placement was determined somewhat arbitrarily, and then never reconsidered.

Getting Comfortable

It used to be that group singing was quite common. There were no iPods or headphones, or even recordings. Running into a 1-in-a-million musician was a rare event. Therefore, it was quite natural that if you wanted music in your life, you had to

make it yourself, and when you did you were comparing yourself to your friends and family, not to popular superstars.

This is no longer the case by default. So it takes people awhile to get used to "oh, okay I am actually allowed to sing. I am actually encouraged to sing. It doesn't matter if I sound good, we are doing this thing together."

For many people, it takes at *least* two songs in a row to get them to a point where they even consider singing at all, let alone feeling good about it. The feeling of hesitation resets when you spend a lot of time listening to a speech.

The idea here is not just "people get to sing", but, "people feel a deep reassurance that singing is okay, that we are all here singing together", and I think that's just impossible to get in the space of one or even two songs. (It becomes even harder to hit this point if there are proportionately few singalongs, and especially if there are also performance-piece songs that people are *not* encouraged to sing along with)

Deep musical headspace

In my preferred celebration, "Deep reassurance that singing is okay" is only *step one*. There's a second deeper stage of feeling connected to the other people in the room, and connected to ideas that you're all here to celebrate, for which reassurance is a prerequisite but insufficient.

Step two requires the songs be resonant, and for you to have a strong sense that the other people in the room all have a particular connection to the songs. (The sense of ingroup identity and sense of philosophical connection are separate qualities, but work together to produce something greater than the sum of their parts)

You can get pieces of this in the space of a single song, but there's a version of it with unique qualia that takes something like 8 songs to really get going (and then, once you're there, it's nice to get to stay there awhile)

Interwoven Story and Song; each Round Deepening

The formula I find works best (at least for my preferences) is:

- On average, groups of 2-4 songs
- *Start* with a song that's a particularly inviting singalong, to set the overall context of "this is an event where we're here to sing together."
- Each song gets a *brief story* (like 10-30 seconds) that gives it some context and helps people fit it into the overall narrative arc of the night. The brief stories are not long enough to take you out of singalong-headspace.
- In between sets of 2-4 songs, there are longer stories, speeches, meditations and other activities that move the narrative along more significantly. Each one sets the overall context for the next 2-4 songs, shifting the particular qualia of "deep singalong" that you'd get from it.

Once you've gotten into the overall singalong headspace, it's less necessary to do groups of songs – alternating between a song and a speech won't kill the headspace once it's had a chance to take root.

Your Mileage May Vary

Reiterating a final time that this is just one particular effect you can go for. I think it's important that local solstice organizers adapt to fit the needs of their particular communities. But the effect I'm trying to describe here is hard to grok if you haven't directly experienced it, and I wanted people to at least have considered an option they may have been missing.

Ritual Report 2012: Life, Death, Light, Darkness, and Love.

One winter ago, twenty aspiring rationalists gathered in a room, ate some food, sang some songs, and lit some candles. We told some stories about why the universe is the way it is, and what kind of people we want to be.

[I wrote some things about the experience.](#) But here's a fairly succinct description:

Like most things, winter was once a mystery.

The world got cold, and dark. Life became fragile. People died. And they didn't know what was happening or understand why. They desperately threw festivals in honor of sun gods with all-too-human motivations, and prayed for the light's return.

It didn't help. Though we did discover that throwing parties in the middle of winter is an excellent idea.

But then something incredible and beautiful happened. We studied the sky. We invented astronomy, and other sciences. We began a long journey towards truly understanding our place in the universe. And we used that knowledge to plan for the future, and make our world better. Five thousand years later, the winter isn't so scary. But the symbol of the solstice - the departure and return of the sun - is still powerful. The work we have done to transform winter from a terrifying season of darkness into a modern festival of light deserves a reverence with all the weight of an ancient cultural cornerstone.

Last year, we had fun. A few people reported being emotionally affected. By and large, though, the dominant conclusion was "This was good first effort, but much, much more is possible." In truth, I considered it a dress rehearsal, more a proof-of-concept than a finished product. I spent the last year working to do something better, but worried that I wouldn't be able to. That maybe people don't create holidays from scratch that actually latch on because it's just damn hard to do and I wouldn't be up to it.

And I was worried that either I wouldn't be able to make the experience as grim and intense as I wanted, or that I'd succeed, but then not be able to lift people back out of it. This was a problem for some people last year, and last year I didn't push things nearly as dark as I was planning to this time.

I worried that even if I succeeded at creating the experience for other people, I wouldn't be able to experience it myself. A year ago, I didn't feel like a participant. I felt like an anthropologist - clinically detached from the bonding ritual I had created.

But six months ago, four friends and I acquired a large, three story house named "Winterfell." And one week ago, fifty people squeezed into that house to celebrate humanity. The house seems a lot smaller once you crammed fifty people into the living room. But we managed to fit.

And then... I feel a desire to maintain some kind of modesty here, but honestly, I spent a year stressing about this and I think I'm just going to say that it went beautifully.

Not perfectly - nothing is ever perfect, and now more than ever it is clear how much more is possible with this endeavor. [Yvain wrote a pretty good review of which parts went well and which parts needed work.](#) But I got emphatic gratitude from people who had been merely lukewarm about it last year.

In the darkest section of the evening, people cried, and held each other, and I was one of them. And I was one of them as we watched time lapse footage of the stars from the international space station, and sang about a tomorrow that could be brighter than today.

This will be the first post of another short mini-sequence (either one or two additional posts elaborating on the design process, what comes next and what I'm concerned about). For now, I'll just note the one biggest flaw with this years was that it was too long. (Last years was too short, and I decided to err on the side of "test a bunch of ideas at once" so that future Solstices could settle into an ideal, traditional state faster).

I would like to note that I want to strongly encourage people who are weirded out by this to speak out (if for no other reason than to be counted as people who are turned off by it). If you have specific negative consequences beyond a vague dislike of the idea, I'd like you to articulate them, after looking through my post from last year - [The Value and Danger of Ritual](#).

Below is a link to the 2012 Ritual Book, and a collection of links to online media for the songs and videos that we listened to and watched during the event, which you can follow along with as you read to get something (vaguely) resembling the actual experience. (Plus side - you'll get to experience higher quality of music performance. Downside - you miss on the warm experience of singing with a group of people).

I couldn't find links for all the songs, but there should be enough to give you the idea.

[2012 Solstice Ritual Book](#)

First Litany of Tarski - If the sky is blue....

Why Does the Sun Shine (part 0)

[The Grinch](#)

Necronomicon

The X Days of X-Risk

Ballad of Bonnie the Em

Second Litany of Tarski - If I'm going to be outcompeted by simulated minds in a Malthusian Hellhole race to the bottom...

Minspace is Deep and Wide

One Wish (I found a Baby Genie)

[Build That Wall](#)

Quantum Entanglement

Third Litany of Tarski - If the Many Worlds Interpretation of Quantum Mechanics is true...

When I Die

[Why Does the Sun Shine \(part 1\)](#)

[God Wrote the Sky](#)

Blue Skies

Metalitany of Tarski - If reciting the Litany of Tarski is useful...

Beyond the Reach of God

[Blowin' In the Wind](#)

Stonehenge (The Sun is Going to Go)

[Gods Ain't Gonna Catch Ya](#) (slightly altered lyrics)

[Take My Love, Take My Land \(Mal's Song\)](#)

[Collect a Little Echo](#)

The Drummer's Little Boy

[No One is Alone](#) (dramatically abridged)

Serenity'

Gift We Give Tomorrow

Moment of Darkness

[A View From Above - Time Lapse Footage from the International Space Station](#)

[Brighter Than Today](#)

[Still Alive](#)

[Lean on Me](#)

[A Still Small Voice](#)

[Gonna be a Cyborg](#)

Move the World

[What a Wonderful World](#)

[Seasons of Love](#)

[The Sun's a Miasma of Incandescent Plasma \(altered lyrics for singability\)](#)

[Forever Young \(*slightly* altered lyrics\)](#)

[Uplift](#)

Final Litany - If human values will survive for five thousand years...

[Five Thousand Years \(Sun is Gonna Go, Reprise\) A Brief Recap \(Our Story in 1 minute and 30 seconds\)](#)
The Road to Wisdom

Solstice 2015: What Memes May Come? (Part I)

Winter is coming, and so is Solstice season. There'll be large rationality-centric-or-adjacent events in [NYC](#), the [Bay Area](#), and [Seattle](#) (and possibly other places - if you're interested in running a Solstice event or learning what that involves, send me a PM). In NYC, there'll be a general [megameetup](#) throughout the weekend, for people who want to stay through Sunday afternoon, and if you're interested in shared housing you can fill out [this form](#).

The [NYC Solstice](#) isn't running a kickstarter this year, but I'll need to pay for the venue by November 19th (\$6125). So if you are planning on coming it's helpful to purchase tickets sooner rather than later. (Or preorder the next album or 2016 Book of Traditions, if you can't attend but want to support the event).

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I've been thinking for the past couple years about the Solstice as a memetic payload.

The Secular Solstice is a (largely Less Wrong inspired) winter holiday, celebrating how humanity faced the darkest season and transformed it into a festival of light. It celebrates science and civilization. It honors the past, revels in the present and promises to carry our torch forward into the future.

For the first 2-3 years, I had a fair amount of influences over the Solstices held in Boston and San Francisco, as well as the one I run in NYC. Even then, the holiday has evolved in ways I didn't quite predict. This has happened both because different communities took them in somewhat different directions, and because (even in the events I run myself), factors come into play that shaped it. Which musicians are available to perform, and how does their stage presence affect the event? Which people from which communities will want to attend, and how will their energy affect things? Which jokes will they laugh at? What will they find poignant?

On top of that, I'm deliberately trying to spread the Solstice to a larger audience. Within a couple years, if I succeed, more of the Solstice will be outside of my control than within it.

Is it possible to steer a cultural artifact into the future, even after you let go of the reins? How? Would you want to?

In this post, I lay out my current thoughts on this matter. I am interested in feedback, collaboration and criticism.

Lessons from History?

(Epistemic status: I have not really fact checked this. I wouldn't be surprised if the example turned out to be false, but I think it illustrates an interesting point regardless of whether it's true)

Last year after Solstice, I was speaking with a rationalist friend with a Jewish background. He made an observation. I lack the historical background to know if this is exactly accurate (feel free to weigh in on the comments), but his notion was as follows:

Judaism has influenced the world in various direct ways. But a huge portion of its influence (perhaps the majority) has been indirectly through Christianity. Christianity began with a few ideas it took from Judaism that were relatively rare. Monotheism is one example. The notion that you can turn to the Bible for historical and theological truth is another.

But buried in that second point is something perhaps more important: religious truth is not found in the words of your tribal leaders and priests. It's found in a book. The book contains the facts-of-the-matter. And while you can argue cleverly about the book's contents, you can't disregard it entirely.

Empiricists may get extremely frustrated with creationists, for refusing to look *outside* their book for answers (instead of the natural world). But there was a point where the fact of the matter lay entirely in "what the priests/ruler said" as opposed to "what the book said".

In this view, Judaism's primary memetic success is in helping to seed the idea of scholarship, and a culture of argument and discussion.

I suspect this story is simplified, but these two points seem meaningful: a memeplex's greatest impact may be indirect, and may not have much to do with the attributes that are most salient on first glance to a layman.

Simplicity

So far, I've deliberately encouraged people to experiment with the Solstice. Real rituals evolve in the wild, and adapt to the needs of their community. And a major risk of ritual is that it becomes ossified, turning either hollow or dangerous. But if a ritual is designed to be mutable, what gives it its identity? What separates a Secular Solstice from a generic humanist winter holiday?

The simplest, most salient and most fun aspects of a ritual will probably spread the fastest and farthest. If I had to sum up the Solstice in nine words, they would be:

*Light. Darkness. Light.
Past. Present. Future.
Humanity. Science. Civilization.*

I suspect that without any special effort on my part (assuming I keep promoting the event but don't put special effort into steering its direction), those 9 pieces would remain a focus of the event, even if groups I never talk to adopt it for themselves.

The most iconic image of the Solstice is the Candelit story. At the apex of the event, when all lights but a single candle have been extinguished, somebody tells a story that feels personal, visceral. It reminds us that this world can be unfair, but that we

are not alone, and we have each other. And then the candle is blown out, and we stand in the absolute darkness together.

If any piece of the Solstice survives, it'll be that moment.

If that were all that survived, I think that'd be valuable. But it'd also be leaving 90%+ of the potential value of the Solstice on the table.

Complex Value

There are several pieces of the Solstice that are subtle and important. There are also pieces of it that currently exist that should probably be tapered down, or adjusted to become more useful. Each of them warrants a fairly comprehensive post of its own. A rough overview of topics to explore:

- Atheism.
- Rationality.
- Death.
- Humanism.
- Transhumanism.
- Existential Risk.
- The Here and Now.
- The Distant Future.

My thoughts about each of these are fairly complex. In the coming weeks I'll dive into each of them. The next post, discussing Atheism, Rationality and Death, [is here](#).

Solstice 2015: What Memes May Come (Part II - Atheism, Rationality and Death)

Winter is coming, and so is Solstice season. There'll be large rationality-centric-or-adjacent events in [NYC](#), the [Bay Area](#), and [Seattle](#)(and possibly other places - if you're interested in running a Solstice event or learning what that involves, send me a PM). In NYC, there'll be a general [megameetup](#) throughout the weekend, for people who want to stay through Sunday afternoon, and if you're interested in shared housing you can fill out [this form](#).

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This is the second post in the Solstice 2015 sequence, discussing plans and musings on the potential cultural impact of the Solstice. [The first post was here](#).

This explores the Solstice's relationship with Atheism, Rationality, and Death.

Atheism

Some may be surprised that I don't consider atheism particularly core to the Solstice.

This probably *will* remain a part of it for the foreseeable future. Atheists happen to be the demographic most hungry for some kind of meaningful winter traditions. And Beyond the Reach of God, a powerful essay that (often) plays an important role in the holiday, happens to frame its argument around the non-existence of God.

But this doesn't actually seem especially inevitable or necessary. Beyond the Reach of God *isn't* about God, per se (at least, I don't see it that way). It's about the absolute, unforgiving neutrality of the laws of physics. It's about all the *other* sacred things that even atheists believe in, which they may make excuses for.

I think it's **currently** useful for there to be a moment where we acknowledge that there is no God to bail us out, and that this is *really important*. But this may not always be the case. I would be pretty happy if, in 50 years, all references to God were gone from the Solstice (because the question of God was no longer one that preoccupied our society in the first place), but those crucial points were made in other ways. It can be a holiday for atheists without being *about* that in any specific way.

Rationality

It's common throughout the secular world to speak highly of "rationality." But oftentimes, what that means in practice is pointing out the mistakes that other people

are making, the fallacies they're committing.

The brand of rationality that spawned the Solstice has a different meaning: a specific dedication to looking at the way your own mind and beliefs are flawed, and actively seeking to correct them. Looking for the sacred cows of *your culture* (be it liberal, libertarian, academic or otherwise) and figuring out how they have blinded you.

Rationality is... sort of a central theme, but in an understated way. It underlies everything going on in the event, but hasn't really been a central character.

This might be a mistake. In particular because rationality's role is very subtle, and easy to be missed. Axial Tilt is the reason for the season, not crazy sun gods. But the reason that's *important* is a larger principle: that beliefs are entangled, that habits of excuse-making for outdated beliefs can be dangerous -- and that this can apply not just to antiquated beliefs about sun gods but (more importantly) to your current beliefs about politics and finance and love and relationships.

Aesthetically, in a culture of rationalists, I think it's correct for "rationality" to be very understated at the Solstice - there are plenty of other times to dwell upon it. But since Solstice is going to get promoted outside of the culture that spawned it, it's possible it may be best to include songs or stories that make its epistemic core more explicit, so as not to be forgotten. It would be very easy for the Solstice to become about making fun of religion, and that is very much not my goal.

This year I have a story planned that will end up putting this front and center, but that won't make for a very good "permanent" feature of the Solstice. I'm interested in people's comments on how to address that in a more longterm way.

Death

I think one of the most valuable elements of the Solstice is the way it addresses' death. Atheists or "nones" don't really have a centralized funeral culture, and this can actually be a problem - it means that when someone dies, you suddenly have to scramble to put together an event that feels earnest and true, that helps you grapple with one of life's harshest events, and many people are too overwhelmed to figure out how to do so.

Funerals, more than any kind of secular ceremony, benefit from prior ritualization - a set of clear instructions on what to do that feel familiar and comfortable. It's the not the time to experiment with novel, crazy ideas, even genuinely good ones.

So Solstice provides a venue to test out pieces of funeral ritual, and let the good ones *become* familiar. It also provides a time, in the interim, for people who haven't had the chance to grieve properly because their loved one's funeral was theistic-by-default.

I think for this to work *optimally*, it needs to be a bit more deliberate. There's a *lot* of death-centric songs in the Solstice (probably more than there should be), but relatively few that actually feel appropriate for a funeral. I'd like to look for opportunities to do things more directly-funeral-relevant, while still appropriate for the overall Solstice arc.

There's also a deeper issue here: secular folk vary wildly in how they relate to death. Some people are looking for a way to accept it. Other people think the very idea of accepting death is appalling.

Common Ground

I have my own opinions here, and I'll dive a bit more deeply into this in my next post. But for now, I'll just note that I want to help shape a funeral culture that *does* feel distinctive, with traditions that feel at least a *little* oddly specific (to avoid a sort of generic, store-brand feel), but which also strike a kind of timeless, universal chord. Funerals are a time when wildly disparate friends and family need to come together and find common ground.

When my grandmother died, I went to a Catholic mass. Two hundred people spoke in unison "our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name." The words themselves meant very little, but the fact that two hundred people who speak them flawlessly together felt very meaningful to me. And I imagine it'd have been even more meaningful, if I believed in them.

In the secular world, not everyone's into chanting things as a group. But it still seems to me that having words that are familiar to you, which you can at least listen together and know that two hundred people also find them meaningful, could be very important.

Now, humanity has certainly not lacked for beautiful poetry surrounding death. Nor even beautiful non-supernatural poetry surrounding death. Nor even beautiful poetry-surrounding-death-that-matches-you-(yes-you)-re-specific-worldview-surrounding-death. But what it does seem to be lacking is are *well-known* cultural artifacts that a wide array of people would feel comforted by, in a very primal way.

There's a particular poem that's meaningful to me. There's another poem (very similar, both relating to the turning of the seasons and our changing relationship with the seasons of over time), that's meaningful to my girlfriend. But they're just different enough that neither would be feel safe and familiar to *both* of us, in the event of someone's death.

So something I'd like to do with the Solstice, is to coordinate (across all Solstices, across the nation, and perhaps in other holidays and events) to find words or activities to share, that can *become* well known enough that everyone at a funeral could feel united.

An actionable question:

In particular, I think I'm looking for a poem (not intended to be the *only* element-addressing-death in the Solstice, but one that has a shot at widespread adoption), with a few qualities:

- Short enough (or with a simple refrain) that people can speak it aloud together.
- Whether metaphorical or not, hints at a theme of relating to memories and the preserving thereof. (I think this is something most worldviews can relate to)
- All things being equal, something fairly commonly known.
- Since everyone's going to want their own favorite poem to be the one adopted, people interested in this problem should try applying some meta-cooperative-

considerations - what do you wish *other* people with their own favorite poems were doing to try and settle on this?

If you have either suggestions for a poetic contender, or disagreements with my thought process here, let me know!

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In the next (probably final) post of this mini-sequence, I'll be talking about Humanism, Transhumanism, and the Far Future.

The Summer Solstice Paradox

In which I call something a paradox that, like most “paradoxes”, isn’t really. But is nonetheless a confusing problem.

After every Winter Solstice I’ve run, I get people asking me “so what’s for Summer Solstice?” It seems like an obvious question – clearly the Winter Solstice is just a small piece of a much larger puzzle. One holiday does not a culture make. And on the flipside, it’s helpful to build off of something already familiar. So a Summer Solstice feels like the obvious next step... right?

Honestly, that doesn’t feel right to me.

What are holidays for again?

Holidays serve a few key purposes – they connect us to our community, they connect us to ideas. Depending on their nature, they may give us an excuse to celebrate and have fun, or they may give us an excuse to be calm and contemplative. The generalized case of this is “give us an excuse to have an experience that society doesn’t normally encourage us to have.”

Used to be, there wasn’t a giant economy churning out more novel things to entertain us than we could ever possibly consume. Used to be, you had more or less one culture per-town, and your community ran a few big holidays per year.

Then we started having melting-pot (“salad bowl?”) metropolitan centers where we had lots of different cultures clashing, along with more and more people/companies/movements churning out novel experiences.[1] Now there are huge numbers of big parades, live-action theater events, conferences about art and science, a dozen new movies each week, as well as numerous small meetups catering to random niche interests.

The positive side is we get access to all these experiences. The downside is that we may lose access to the particular experience “my entire tribe is coming together to celebrate this thing we all care deeply about.”

Humanist culture has the potential to fill that void. But to successfully do that, it needs to create something people go to *instead* of all the other fun, exciting experiences that already exist.

The Brighter Than Today Solstice was successful because it was doing something that literally wasn’t being done – creating a holiday experience that had a story, had good original music and good art that tied together to create a deliberate experience. It also wasn’t afraid to get dark and explore sadness.

The Summer Solstice Paradox

Winter feels like a time of huddling in the darkness, drawing people close. I want to be reminded that the light will return, that I’m not alone.

Summer... I just want to enjoy the light. June 22nd, I just want to be out in the woods with friends, having a picnic or throwing a frisbee.

You *could* make a Summer Solstice that deliberately echoed the Brighter-Than-Today-style Winter Solstice – have a big outdoor music festival that celebrates being alive alongside reason and human achievement. But really, I'd rather my Summer Solstice just be fun, and if we're just doing fun, it's not something that really *needs* to be uniquely humanist. There are already outdoor music festivals and parties.

The people running those have years of experience, they are better at it than I am, and any unique spins I've thought of so far to put on it feel a bit awkward and forced. (If you *are* good at running that sort of event, by all means run a humanist-focused version of it, but most humanist organizers I know aren't experienced festival organizers as well).

More generally – I'm not sure that the Solstice/Equinox framework makes for the best wheel of the year, especially if we're trying to set something in motion that'll weather the sands of time. Most places on the globe have some form of winter – even if doesn't have life threatening cold, it typically at least has an encroaching darkness that makes for a potent symbol. But not as many regions have as distinct an autumn or spring. And four "Big" holidays seems to be asking for a *lot* of limited cultural attention.

But, still. *One* holiday seems overly minimalist. So, what to do?

I do have some ideas I'm still mulling over. But first, I'd like to pose the question to people here. Think for a moment about how many holidays you actually want in a given year. Think about what you'd actually want to experience, *when* you want to experience, how busy you're likely to be at that time of year and what it'd likely be competing with for your attention.

What do you *want* out of a humanist holiday year?

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[1] I'm not actually certain I'm getting the history quite right here. One bug/feature of the rationalist community is that I start (correctly) second guessing everything I think I know, which means I feel obligated to do lots of research before I make any claims, which means I feel paralyzed and don't actually get around to writing. But meanwhile, there DO clearly seem to be states of the world that need fixing, which requires writing stuff that motivates people.

My current strategy is "do minimal research on wikipedia to make sure I'm not grossly wrong about my claims about history, holidays and ritual, and then go ahead and write the damn blogpost.

Visions of Summer Solstice

Previously:

- [Winter Solstice](#)
- [The Summer Solstice Paradox](#)
- [The Steampunk Aesthetic](#)

i. Off the beaten path

*See the light as it shines on the sea? It's blinding
But no one knows how deep it goes*

- *How Far I'll Go, Moana*

The experience begins with a journey.

This partly by design, but largely by necessity.

Winter Solstice is about the long arc of history. Summer Solstice is about the here and now, and why *being human* is something worth protecting. It's about freedom, fun, physicality. It's about figuring things out in Near Mode. It's about building things together.

Getting a particular kind of Special out of that physicality requires a particular kind of space.

It's not enough to find a small nearby park. Ideally, you want an outdoor space vast enough to *feel in your bones that the sky is the limit*. There is no one and nothing to help you build a tower to the stars, or to cross the ocean, or cartwheel forever in any direction. But neither is there anyone to stop you. There is only nature, and you, and your tribe, and whatever you choose to do.

If you live in a major city, this probably means you may need to undertake a nontrivial journey before finding such a place. The best places will be off the beaten path, and a bit hard to navigate to. If it were easy, humans would have already crowded around it. You might be able to have fun, but you wouldn't be able to carve out a spot for *your people* to invoke a *Sacred Fun*.

As you contemplate this from your comfortable couch and think about the journey, you may find it daunting. If you attempted it alone, you might find it frustrating and lonely.

So, don't attempt it alone.

Journey together. If you get lost along the way, getting un-lost is part of the fun. You may find something valuable in overcoming the obstacles. I do, anyway.

The best journey is one that borders on the mythologic – you pass through narrow passages, winding your way through wild undergrowth, slightly confused about where you are going but compelled onwards by curiosity. You cross a threshold into a fae-like enclave that clearly communicates "you have left the default world behind."

And then suddenly find yourself at the top (or edge) of the world, slightly unclear how you got there.

Sometimes you are lucky, and such hidden enclaves exist right in your backyard. But the efficient Other World hypothesis says that such unspoiled passages are rare.

There are many possible destinations you can choose for your journey. I suggest one additional constraint: As much as possible, find a low horizon line – a beach, or hilltop. Dense foliage is beautiful in its own way, but there is something valuable, for this holiday, about getting a clear view of the sunset.

You are here to celebrate the longest day of the year.



ii. Build a sacred space for your tribe

Ultimately, you are here for embodied fun. Build sandcastles. Fly kites. Wrestle. Play foot-to-face. Run barefoot in the sand. Cook together. Eat together. Go swimming. Climb things. Sing songs as you hike the local trails.

The border between ritual and non-ritual can be subtle. You can do all those things, and have it be a simple day-of-fun with no special significance. You can do all those things, and choose to imbue it with transformative, symbolic power. The power is greater if it involves sacrifice. The sacrifice is more potent if it is resonant – a costly signal, but not an arbitrary one.

You are here to become – or to remind yourself that you are – a tribe.

And there is something special about *building something together*, greater than any of you could have built on your own, to make this fact true in your gut.

There are different aesthetics you can bring to this. Last year, the [NYC community journeymed](#) to Long Island, near some old ruins, and built a temple of heavy driftwood logs that nobody could have even lifted on their own.

In the Bay Area, folk organized a giant dome build. Less primeval, [more steampunk](#). A couple dozen people worked in tandem, half of them holding up a 50 foot, 600 pound sphere of steel while others darted around tightening bolts. If anyone had fucked up, the whole thing would come tumbling down. Then they hung silks and put a trampoline in it.

Whether primeval, steampunk or otherwise, the key is cooperation, and to fully engage the human experience. Solve physics puzzles that are not just about thinking

at a computer screen, but which require you to be *embodied*. [Sensory Experience](#). [High challenge](#). [Living by your own strength](#).

Then, take a step back, and marvel at the monument you have built to yourselves, and the space you have created.

And play.



The 2017 Bay Summer Solstice Dome

iii. Winter is Coming

That all seemed well and good to me. It was the plan I and the NYC rationalists went to Long Island with. But when we got there, and set about building a temple of driftwood, we were presented with a question:

How should we design our temple, such that it oriented around the longest day. Could we align it with the sunset?

This was a physics question, and an engineering one.

Where on the horizon, precisely, will the sun set?

With nothing but crude physical tools and the naked eye, could we figure it out? Could we do so with enough time left over to erect a set of pillars lining the sun?

And then, it all clicked together.

Winter Solstice celebrates the birth of astronomy – the human ability to look up at the sky, predict when the seasons will change, plant your grains at the right time, plan for the coming darkness. The long, slow bootstrapping of humanity. Building the tools that built the tools that built the tools that built the cities around us. Culminating in the ability to look out in the universe and know exactly what is going on. To send machines into space and turn around and see our home, in our obscurity, in all this vastness, and think "That's here. That's home. That's us." And know that there is no hint that anyone out there will save us from ourselves.

The ability to look into a murky, uncertain future, and *plan*.

And now, here we were, actually having to begin that journey ourselves from something-like-first-principles, and it didn't even feel *contrived*. The connection to Winter Solstice didn't require any grim speeches or cerebral songs. It just *was*.

My favorite part: Those pillar we placed?

That was our *confidence interval*. The more clearly we could predict sunset, the closer together we could afford to place them. As it turns out, we were off by about a foot. But the problem left a number of ways to scale the difficulty in future years, building towards more precision as our skills increased.



The 2017 NYC Summer Solstice temple

iv. Next

Real holidays are not created. They evolve.

- Secular Solstice Hymnal

Right now, the vision depicted above feels approximately like Winter Solstice 2011 - the broad strokes are there, but a lot of the pieces will require some finessing, settling into place, or evolving based on the local needs of your community.

Moreso than Winter Solstice as, Summer Solstice *demands* an environment of improvisation and whimsy. It benefits from people bringing cool idea to try out. Do you know how to fire-twirl? Play guitar? Teach Acro Yoga? Have some random cool outdoor toy? Go for it, and don't worry overmuch of if it all fits neatly together.

I think plenty of people won't be interested in the Building of the Space, or might want to contribute their own thing to it, and that's fine. At NYC 2017, some people were erecting the pillars, or measuring shadows to calculate sunset, while others built sand-art to go along with it, or just went off to swim or explore.

I think having at least a small group of people building the central monument helps to give all the rest of the kite-flying, swimming, climbing, wrestling, barbecue etc an underlying sense of purpose - a thing that we might come together to do once a year, to be a tribe together in a way that is in some sense *sacred*.

Comments can be for both discussing this conception of Summer Solstice, as well as for people pitching their own local Summer Solstices and whatever ideas you plan to try out.

Stories of Summer Solstice

[Epistemic Status: talking in the language of metaphorical soul and mysticism.]

Previously:

- [Visions of Summer Solstice](#)
- Obligatory link to [The Value and Danger of Ritual](#) for people just tuning in.

June 23rd, the Bay community journeyed out to the edge of the world to celebrate the longest day of the year.



Photo Credit to Shaked Koplewitz

This came on the heels of EA Global, which had a strong focus on action, networking, planning projects and thinking about the future. Much of rationality is about thinking and doing. But once a year, it's nice to *be*.

We scoped out several possible locations, and ultimately settled on the Marin Headlands – a surreal, remote world of hidden beaches, spooky ruins and epic cliffs. Approximately 100 people came, some in 15-seat caravan vans, some individual carpools.

At solar noon, when the shadows are shortest, we opened with a speech by Malcolm Ocean. "The biggest thing you'll want to be wary of here is *fear of missing out*. There's going to be a lot of stuff going on today. It is *not possible* to see it all – just like life.

Rather than trying desperately to optimize your time, I recommend just... going with the flow of the moment."

During the day, we had a few major activities:

- Circling
- Capture the Flag with water guns, war paint and a literal fort (although we ended up having to find a *second* fort because the one we meant to use got sniped by a wedding)
- Group singing
- Exploration in small groups of the various nooks, crannies and cliffscapes of the Headlands.

We didn't end up building a solar-temple, due to various logistical issues (and I think largely because there were lots of competing things to do). But a) I'm fairly confident about getting that done next year, and b) meanwhile... the drum circle at sunset felt deeply good.

On the event feedback survey I sent out, the overall ratio of *meh/good/great/ecstatic* for was 2/10/13/3, which has me pretty confident that we got the general shape of the event right.

This post is a scattershot of takeaways.

Drum Circles and Mary's Room

I've observed drum circles. I've participated in drum circles with strangers who were not really "my people." I've done circle-singing, which is sort of like a drum circle except with voices instead of drums. I have some theoretical background in music, and in ritual. I know what a drum circle is *supposed to be like*.

Nonetheless, I hadn't *really* done a drum circle until last weekend.

I was sort of like [Mary, the hypothetical neuro/optic-scientist](#) in a black-and-white room who knew everything there was to know about the color red except having ever seen it... who then finally sees a rose.

Rationalists are heavily selected for being very cerebral – and correspondingly, somewhat selected *against* being particularly in touch with their bodies and (for lack of a better word), souls. And drum circles are very much about the intersection of body and soul. Being present in the moment. Losing yourself in the beat. *Feeling* the beat in an important way. Leaning into it, moving, gyrating, maybe getting up and dancing.

Brent, Malcolm and others arranged for Bay Summer Solstice to end with a drum circle at sunset. I was worried that we wouldn't be able to pull it off – that we'd be a bit too self-conscious to lean into it and really have the magic happen.

But, it worked. Holy hell. Not *everyone* was able to get into it, but the majority did, and at least some of them reported it as a peak experience.

I'm not sure if this generalizes, as "the thing rationalists should do at Summer Solstice Sunset." It *does* require a critical mass of people who are able to lean enthusiastically

into it and lead others, which not every community has.

But I think the median-quality-rationalist-drumcircle would still be at least as good as most other ways to end the day. I also think it works best if you invest in some high quality, resonant drums. Which brings us to....

Material Components

The most important element when creating a ritual or holiday, is to understand what experience you're actually trying to create. If you're planning a wedding, it's easy to end up spending thousands of dollars on things that *don't* actually make the day more meaningful for anyone.

Before you worry about expensive things, make sure that you understand the basics. Make sure you know what kind of emotional transformation you're going for. Make sure you've gotten basic logistic needs met so the event can happen at all. Think about what all the people involved are going to experience and why.

But.

I gotta say, there is something about High Level Ritual Components that is, like, actually important.

I think intuitions from fantasy stories / video-game transfer pretty well here. A low level wizard has simple spellbook and wand. As they level up, they gain skill (more spells, deeper understanding of magic such that they can devise their own spells). They also seek out more powerful artifacts – gem-studded golden spellbooks, ornate staves, The Amulet of the Ancients, whathaveyou, which amplify their power.

They also seek out ancient temples and secret leylines that are latent with energy.

The highest level wizards (i.e. Dumbledore) don't need that all that flash. They can cast wordless, wandless magic, and travel in simple robes.

But, still, when serious business needs attending to, Dumbledore busts out the Elder Wand, gathers up artifacts, and positions himself at Hogwarts, a seat of magical power.

Translating all of that into real-world-speak:

Aesthetic matters.

A good artist can work with crude tools and make something beautiful. But there's still a benefit to really good ingredients.

I used to buy cheap candles or electric-tea-lights for Winter Solstice. Eventually I [bought these thick candles](#) which look beautiful and have lasted through several events.

For Summer Solstice, in addition to things like buying a literal conch shell to rally the people when the people needed rallying... this translated into something which doesn't (necessarily) cost money, but which does cost time:

Location matters. A lot.

In [Visions of Summer Solstice](#), before I had seen the Marin Headlands, I said:

It's not enough to find a small nearby park. Ideally, you want an outdoor space vast enough to *feel in your bones that the sky is the limit*. There is no one and nothing to help you build a tower to the stars, or to cross the ocean, or cartwheel forever in any direction. But neither is there anyone to stop you. There is only nature, and you, and your tribe, and whatever you choose to do.

And *after* having seen the Marin Headlands, I have to say "holy shit guys location matters *more* than I thought when I wrote that paragraph."

The natural beauty of the coast is immense. And *then* there's century-old ruins layered on top of it – which *hint* at the power of civilization but still ultimately leave you on your own.

The location also leant itself well to *transitions* – walking through tunnels, and around corners into sweeping vistas. Ritual is about transformation, and an environment that helps mark this with literal transition adds a lot.

This all made it *much* easier to tap into a primal sense of "This is the here and now. This is worth protecting. These are my people."

The Sunset Pilgrimage

After a day of exploration, games, and good conversations with good people in beautiful places... we gathered at the staging site for dinner, and a final speech. As it ended, Malcolm began a simple drum beat that people joined in on.

We began walking to the coast, drumming as we went. I felt a brief flicker of tribal power, followed by apprehension – was this going to actually work or would it end up dragging? Would I feel self-conscious and awkward?

Then we took a turn, and marched through the battery tunnel.



Battery Wallace - photo credit to the [Goga Park Archive](#). Slightly modified

The drums took on a deepened tone, and we began to sing – wordless chanting, improvised humming. Some people who didn't have drums banged on the walls. The sounds echoed through the bunker, powerful.

Meanwhile the sun glinted through the end of the tunnel, silhouetting the people ahead of me. And... I felt a piece of myself crack open slightly, a particular flavor of longing that I'd never *quite* satisfied. I've felt that I have a community before. I've felt the somewhat-deeper version of it that Scott Alexander describes in [Concept Shaped Holes](#).

But this was deeper still, given material form by the resonance of the hall and our emergence into the hilltop and the setting sun.



Photo credit Philip Lin

We continued down the hill. The feeling faded in the face of logistical hiccups. We got a bit spread out. I think most of the people with drums were near the front and the people near the back had a less good experience.

But despite that, one thing that struck me was the multiple phases of transition. There were four major arcs to the sunset walk – the tunnel, the hilltop, winding our way through the woods, and finally the cliffside path.

At each stage, the sun's character shifted. In the tunnel, it glinted around our silhouettes. At the hilltop it shined over the region that had been our home for the day. As we emerged from the woods into the final stretch, it lay straight ahead.

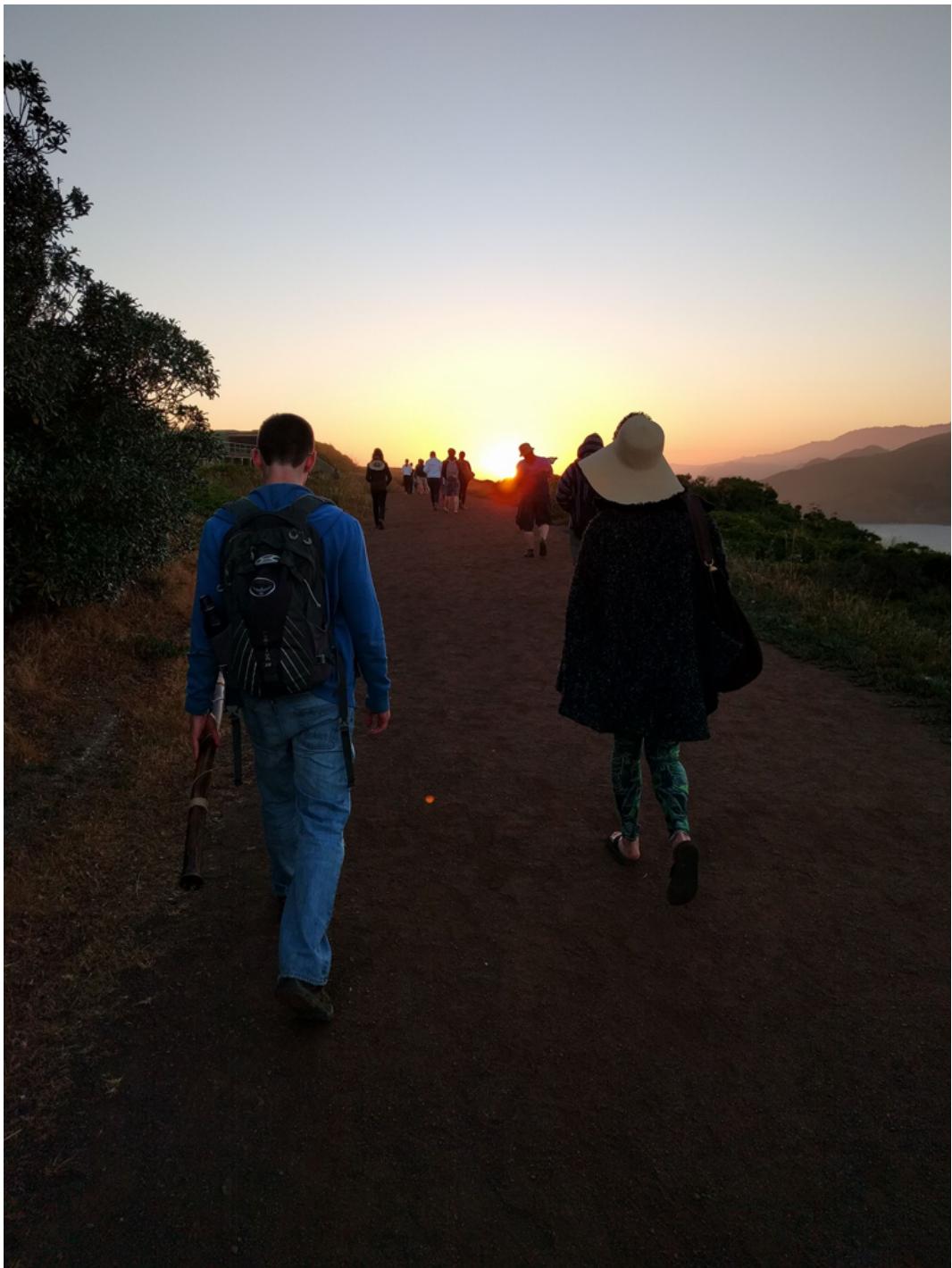


Photo credit Sarah McManus



Photo credit Anisha Mauze

As we approached the cliff, the sun touched the horizon and began it's final descent.



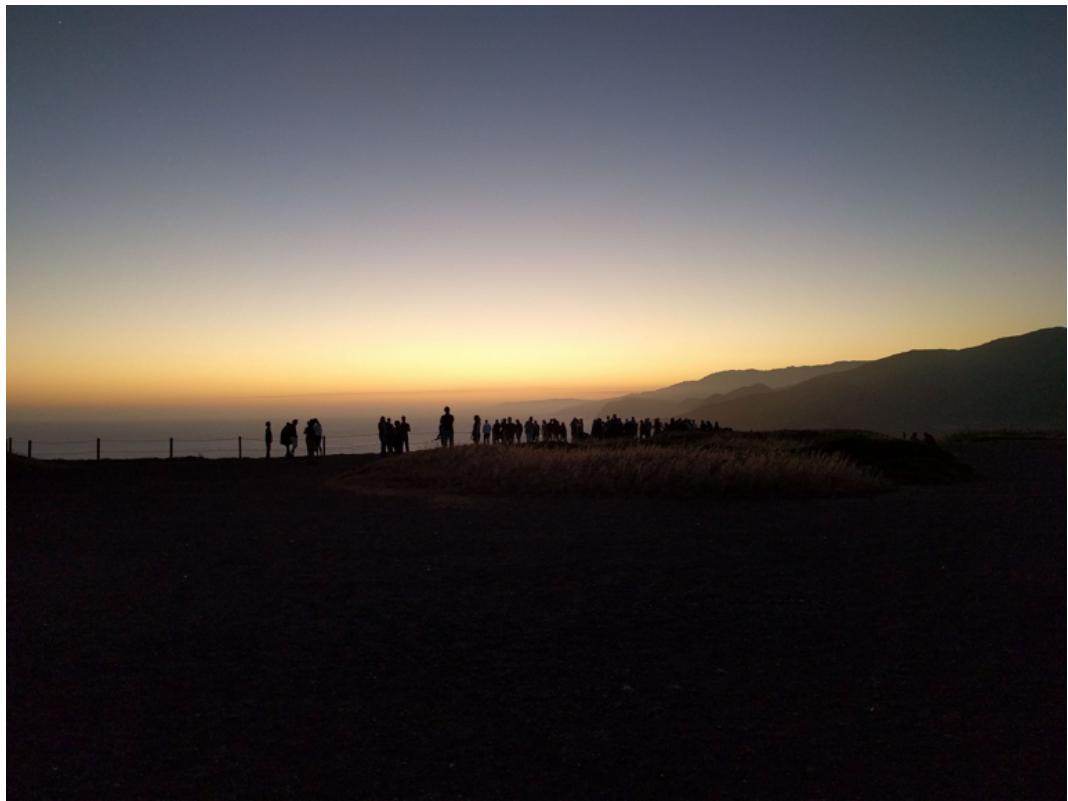
This and next photo credit Sarah McManus

We clustered and regrouped at the cliff, and formed a proper drum circle. It grew in fervor. People began to dance. Some people played didgeridoos. As the last quarter of the sun dipped below the horizon, people started to sing again, rising in pitch and intensity.

Eventually all but a single pixel of the sun had vanished.

And I wondered – would a hundred people with no pre-planning all realize in time that the ideal culmination would be to abruptly stop at the precise moment that last pixel disappeared?

A few moments later, the pixel was gone. And there was silence at the world's edge.



Funeral Ritual

Followup to: [Solstice: What Memes May Come \(Part II\)](#)

Content note: My own opinionated thoughts on rationalist funeral ritual, which have evolved a bit since I first started thinking about it in 2012. I expect that if you haven't thought about funeral ritual and find that you need to, this will make for a better starting point than figuring things out from scratch.

But, human mindspace is diverse enough that I wouldn't be surprised if this anti-resonated with some people. Make of it what you will.

[Edit: In this post, I was specifically exploring 'funerals where a majority of attendees are "culturally rationalist"', as opposed to general secular funerals. However, it turns out much of the advice is still relevant regardless]

Prior: a desire for deep cultural ritual

In October 2012, as I planned the Winter Solstice ceremony, I was thinking a lot about death. In the space of three weeks, three friends of mine had lost someone closed to them. And it occurred to me that the rationality community had very little in the way of funeral ritual.

My friends were all young, but it seemed likely at least *someone* in the community wouldn't make it. And we were not ready.

When [my Grandmother died, I went to a Catholic funeral](#). And as much as I don't believe in any of the doctrine, there was something comforting in having several hundred people join together to say the Lord's prayer in unison. The literal content of the words was basically meaningless - what mattered was the knowledge that my Grandmother was not alone, that hundreds of people were connected to her, and to each other.

Another friend of mine lost their mother, and had a similar experience. They said (paraphrased) "when you lose someone, you *do not have the energy* to try new things. You are lost. You don't know what to do. The point of funeral ritual is not to be epistemologically sound, it's to *give you something to do*, that you know how to do, that everyone knows you're supposed to do, so that at least you can *do something*."

A ritual that completely fails will feel hollow. [Ritual that almost succeeds but doesn't match your values or aesthetic feels cringey](#). I think pushing past that cringe is an important piece of the modern search for meaning and culture.

But funerals are not the time to experiment.

I looked at this set of facts, and it seemed like the solution (if you wanted an epistemically sound culture with its own traditions) was to create new ritual *in advance*, and somehow make it already a part of your culture by the time someone died.

For a few years, I approached Solstice with this in mind - using it in part to explore small fragments of funeral ritual. Hopefully, one day, we'd have some words or deeds

we could share together, that *felt right*.

Then in 2016, a friend of mine died.

My beliefs about funerals have changed.

It took me awhile to get these thoughts written up. In the past year there have been at least two more deaths that I know of in the rationalsphere, and I'm finally getting around to it.

Cosmopolitan Aesthetic Clash

I still believe in everything above – in principle. In practice...

...there are just too many different aesthetics and values at play that are *orthogonal to main criteria of who needs to get value from a funeral*.

The point of a solstice-like-event is to bring people together around a shared sense of values. The point of a funeral is to bring people together surrounding a shared connection to a person.

Sometimes, there is enough of an overlap here for you to do something oddly specific. If a loved one had a strong aesthetic sense of their own, or spelled out in advance what kind of funeral they want, that can be a schelling aesthetic that everyone can agree to honor. There *is* value in having traditions that feels special, if you can, and there can be value in respecting the wishes of the deceased, as a way to carry their agency a little bit further into the future, past their death.

Much of the time you will not have a clear sense of the person's wishes, or aesthetic.

Instead you have a loose collection of people who may or may not know each other, who may or may not agree about religion or rationality or transhumanism or poetry or music. This seems to be a brute fact about the modern, atomic, cosmopolitan world.

Tight-knight, culturally homogenous places with longstanding traditions can lean harder into funeral ritual that is unique, intense and/or deeply significant to the people involved, but I think this just isn't an option if you're the sort of person living in a major modern city. This makes me sad but I now think it's true.

Funerals are often times when people who *don't* normally quite mesh with each other come together again to remember a person they have in common.

And meanwhile...

...the default, minimum-viable funeral or memorial is... *just surprisingly potent*:

Have a facilitator who welcomes everyone and sets the tone for the event. Have everyone who wants to take a turn saying what anything they need to say.

Some people will share funny stories.

Some will share times when the person helped them.

Some people might need to be angry, to get some kind of closure on unresolved conflict they had with a friend.

Some people might share a song or poem that is meaningful to them, without any implicit pressure that the song feel relevant to anyone else.

Some people may just need to silently cry and shake and then be held by someone.

Some people may not have known the deceased well, but have feelings about death in general that they need to share and process. (Sometimes, most people in the room may be in this category, and in this case it may perhaps be better for the facilitator to set a tone, early on, that this is okay.)

When everyone who's had a moment has gone, the facilitator gives a final short speech to wrap things up, and create a space where people who still need to cry or shake or sit in silence feel a space for that, and people who need catharsis and release and to laugh and joke with old friends a space for that.

This seems to be the schelling structure of funerals, at least that I've seen.

Small bits of sacred uniqueness

When my friend died, I erred on the side of trying out some oddly specific things at the memorial I facilitated. I think this was the correct choice – the longterm value of rationalist culture required *someone* to try something at least once that tried to push through the cringe towards something culturally meaningful.

Having been through the experience once, I think I have a pretty clear sense of what sorts of things might possibly work, in which contexts. I do recommend most people err on the side of something simple.

The basic format was similar to the minimum-viable-funeral described above, but with a few additions. Some thoughts on each:

Passing Forward the Light

I wanted to have at least one ritual frame that was simple and elegant – oddly specific enough that I could imagine it becoming a cultural motif, but straightforward enough to resonate with non-rationalist friends.

We began the ceremony with a single lit candle, placed next to a picture of my friend. Each person was welcome to stand, to say anything they might want to say, and then light another candle off of my friend's flame. If you didn't have anything to say, you were still welcome to stand silently and pay your respects and light a candle regardless.

In the end, after the closing of the ceremony, we extinguished the central candle, while leaving each of our own lights to burn into the night.

It may not be a very satisfying answer to death, to say that we carry a person forward in our thoughts and memories and in how they shaped us as a person. It's not a *good enough* answer. But I think it is a [true answer, and in most situations of death, realistically the best answer we have](#). A simple ritual that highlighted that while giving some structure to the event seemed worthwhile.

I think this basically went well, and would recommend it or something in a similar vein.

Some bits of logistical advice re candles:

- I used [these small votive candles](#) because they were cheap. But they melted very quickly in a way that a) made a mess that was awkward to clean up, b) sort of ruined the moment. I now recommend splurging for more expensive candles (which last long enough to be re-usable). Longer, tapered candles with a long melting time are best.
- I think the difference between real and electric candles is enormous.
- A mistake I made at the end was snuffing out the first candle too quickly, in a way that some people noted felt a bit anticlimactic.
- Candles can drip wax – make sure to put them on something easy to clean or dispose of afterward.

Leaving People Space

The single biggest mistake at the memorial was not giving people multiple spaces for different emotional needs at the end.

Some people were ready to move on, and start talking/eating/joking/connecting.

Some people needed silence, and saw the former people with a kind of horrified “you’re acting like now everything’s all right. And it’s not.”

So I now think it’s important to have a transition space – whichever place the memorial was taking place in should probably remain quiet, or at least keep voices soft, and let the people who are ready to move on go to another room that’s (hopefully) fairly sound isolated.

Shared Canon

In the opening section, I mostly told a series of stories that highlighted what kind of person Adam was and what he cared about, but wove in a couple passages from [Beyond the Reach of God](#). The goal here was to have a moment that included “most of the people here share some sacred text and beliefs, that gives us a sense of shared culture.” At least some people said afterwards that that was... well, comforting isn’t quite the right word. But, was helpful.

The passages I chose were intended to mostly fit into the broader story without feeling weird or preachy. (I also framed it a bit as “this is the sort of thing Adam believed” as opposed to “this is what we all believe.”).

I’m not sure how it came across to the people who weren’t rationalists and/or didn’t resonate with that aspect of Eliezer’s writing. At least one person said that basically “any time you (Ray) were talking about something other than a story about Adam I basically tuned out”, and I think some other people found it actively offputting, but it was hard to tell.

The part that I think ended up *most* cringey was at the end, when I gave the [Origin of Stories](#) speech (from Solstice, although with some parts retailored for the current context). Some of this probably had to do with the speech being relatively new at the time, some with the overall quality of the speech, and being the sort of speech that lent itself to an over-the-top presentation that was wrong for a memorial. (And, some

of the cringe had to do with the fact that I had written the piece, so it felt a bit more performative than reading someone else's piece might have)

Closure

Despite my leanings toward simplicity and commonality, it still feels important to have some kind of final moment, giving everyone the opportunity for closure. I think the ideal ending will strike a fairly neutral tone, that can resonate whether you're feeling angry, grief-stricken, hollow, or bored (and/or perhaps be interpreted through any of those lenses).

If there is *no* common cultural beliefs among the participants, I think a fairly safe ending is taking seven-breaths-worth of quiet reflection, or perhaps passing around the candle representing the deceased giving everyone a final opportunity to say goodbye. Or any kind of ritual action that is mostly free of ideological content.

I think it's good for the closing moment to involve everyone standing – simultaneously rousing people slightly so they can be more actively involved with the ending, and leaving them in a stance where they can either sit back down (if they want more quiet reflection or talking), or leave the room for food and drink, and have both options feel like equally active choices.

If there *is* enough cultural alignment, my own aesthetic preference is to have some kind of short poem that most people are familiar with and have some connection to, that they can either join in reciting, or at least nod along with.

Among "cultural rationalists", I'm not sure how much consensus there is. Some people identify with the far future. Others do not. Some people see death only to be fought with grim determination, never acceptance. For some, acceptance is necessary.

I don't know that there's a final piece that can work for everyone, but the single best contender I know of is Eliezer's *Song of Dath Ilan*:

*Even if the stars should die in heaven
Our sins can never be undone
No single death will be forgiven
When fades at last the last lit sun.*

*Then in the cold and silent black
As light and matter end
We'll have ourselves a last look back
And toast an absent friend.*