

Creativity, Grit and Ritual

In the domain of psychology, the concepts of "ritual" and "grit" possess more intricate meanings than their everyday usage might suggest. Rituals can be simple, minor ceremonies; structured sequences of actions and thoughts. And grit, as defined by Angela Duckworth, a psychologist known for her research into the concept of grit, defines it as "**perseverance and passion for long-term goals**". By utilizing rituals, we might help ourselves to generate grit, or create a growth-oriented mindset, to see that failure is not a permanent state.

Many of us adhere to routines: making the bed, a morning cup of coffee, driving our commute, having tea time in the afternoon, bathing after work, reading before bed. These activities can become so habitual that our mind wanders as we think about other things, or in many cases, we may even suffer from "automaticity," and not remember having done these things at all. The routine takes over and we find ourselves at the office without specifically remembering the journey there.

These moments of routine, can instead be transformed into moments of ritual, and you can make that ritual's focus one of grit. An excellent example of this is a ritual that Steve Jobs spoke of doing, saying that, "I have looked in the mirror every morning and asked myself: 'If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I am about to do today?' And whenever the answer has been 'No' for too many days in a row, I know I need to change something." This is an example of a routine, looking in the mirror in the morning, and taking pause to ask a question—the same question—daily. This is transforming the rote behavior of looking in the mirror in the morning into a ritual. It is asking a pertinent question that can set the tone for the day.

Consider another commonplace example: making coffee in the morning. It does not need to be a rote or automatic task. It can be an opportunity to reflect, a brief stint of time to ask a useful question of oneself regarding perseverance—or even the opposite! In a sense, to imbibe a routine with a particular thought process (one might even loosely say a mantra) a routine task can be turned into a ritual. And, for the creative person, that ritual can be used to generate grit. Hungarian mathematician Alfred Renyi humorously said that “a mathematician is a machine for turning coffee into theorems.” So, when making coffee, one might take that time to ask, “What will I use this coffee's energy for today?”

To clarify, grit should not be equated with stubbornness, and having grit does not alleviate a person of the need to recognize failure. The creative individual is a font of ideas, and the real usefulness of that ability comes from sorting through those ideas to find the truly novel ones. Sometimes that takes a bit of experimentation and in experimentation, there must be room for failure. Acknowledging failure and the need to change tactics or methods, but still pursue a goal, is to possess grit. So a useful question to ask during a ritual might be, “Is this what I thought it was in the beginning?” As Steve Jobs recognized, there are times when unwavering perseverance proves unproductive, demanding change.

It is crucial to highlight that posing the question in such a ritual does not require you to answer the question. That may seem counterintuitive, but one thing that neurologists understand about the brain is that thought processes are often cyclical. You may find yourself not being able to recall a particular word or perhaps the title of a movie only to “suddenly” recall it hours later doing something completely unrelated. The brain can work on tasks in the background of our attention, activating networks of neurons while we are entirely unaware of the search being performed. So, in some sense, posing these questions as a ritual sets in motion background processes that may help us to stay focused.¹

It has been demonstrated scientifically that [mindfulness meditation assists with focus and attention](#). To oversimplify mindfulness meditation, the process generally

involves the act of not having thoughts. For instance, focusing only on one's breath and letting other thoughts occur without dwelling on them. Mindfulness walking involves paying attention to which foot is being put forward and ignoring or not pursuing other thoughts that occur. So, I do not mean to indicate that the ritual of posing a question to yourself is an opportunity to ruminate or obsess about that question. Merely asking the question daily during the same ritual sets a context for the mind and for the day. Also, don't rule out the possibility that you may feel a loud, instinctual "Yes!" Or "No!" upon asking your question. Don't ignore those instincts. But if the answer isn't there, let the question linger.

If you are of a creative mind, you know more than most that to be successful at your craft means doing your thing *every day*, whether you feel like it or not, whether you have an interesting idea or spark of inspiration or not. The habit of engaging your craft sets in motion a raft of signals that your brain will utilize to get ready for the task at hand. So, engaging that craft at the same time every day is also important. William Faulkner said, "I only write when I am inspired. Fortunately I am inspired at 9 o'clock every morning." A ritual can be both a habit—being in the same place at the same time every day—and a moment of reflection. And a regular ritual also sets up the opportunity for the brain to begin to prepare for the task before we've even sat down to do it.

Sitting behind all of this lies passion. The first task for a creative person is to find what you simply love to do—to follow your bliss. That passion can be buttressed in many ways and one of those ways is ritual. Merely being on time and engaging in the task is not necessarily enough. Checking in with yourself and repeatedly asking yourself if you are satisfied with the project that is engaging your passion is useful. Accepting that perhaps this current project is not fully baked, or changing the scope of the project, or perhaps shelving it in favor of a different project, are reasonable alternatives to continuing. Pursuing your passion regardless of these obstacles and changes is what takes grit.

Rituals, ranging from simple ceremonies to structured sequences, hold the potential to transform mundane routines into meaningful acts. Similarly, grit, characterized by perseverance and passion for long-term goals, offers a mindset for growth and resilience. As routines become ritual, introspection becomes a guiding force, fostering the development of grit. The familiar can be imbued with purpose. The cyclical nature of thought processes and the power of rituals underscore the background work that contributes to focus. Rituals can serve as both anchors and catalysts for the creative journey, setting the stage for accomplishment even before the work commences.

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1. Disclaimer: I am not a neurologist; my study of the field in graduate school does not represent expertise in the field; this is a useful simplification of processes in the brain. ↩