

RITUAL

Ronald L. Grimes



The Notion of Ritual

“Ritual” is a provocative notion, not a precisely delineated analytic category. One reason is that much of the scholarly literature fails to distinguish between the category and the thing categorized, between the idea of ritual and the enactment of rites. Another reason is that the literature has produced no coherent taxonomy of the kinds of ritual. There is no consensus whether ritual is most usefully treated as a superordinate or subordinate term. What subcategories does the category ritual include? Is festival, for instance, a kind of ritual? Alternatively, what larger category includes the smaller category ritual? Is ritual a component of religion, for example? Or of culture?

Besides the bedeviling problem of inclusion and exclusion, there is little agreement whether the terms “ritual,” “rite,” “ritualizing,” and “ritualization” ought to be precisely defined or used as mere synonyms. There is the additional difficulty of deciding how to use related terms such as “ceremony,” “magic,” and “liturgy.” Many scholars use the terms synonymously—except for magic, which, with few exceptions is still understood pejoratively, meaning “manipulation of supernatural powers.” But is magic a kind of religion? Or a kind of ritual? Or an activity independent of both ritual and religion?

A few theorists distinguish ceremony from ritual, usually by making ceremony the less religious or less important term. For example, anthropologist Raymond Firth (1967a: 73) says:

By *ceremony* I understand an interrelated set of actions with a social referent, and of a formal kind, that is, in which the form of the actions is regarded as being significant or important, though not valid or efficacious in itself. A *rite*, on the other hand, is also a formal set of actions, but the form in which these are carried out is regarded as having a validity or

efficacy in itself, through some special quality which may conveniently be termed of a mystical order, that is, not of the workaday world.

Most religious studies scholars leave the term liturgy to Christian theologians. A few writers, for example, anthropologist Roy Rappaport and I, use it as synonymous with "religious ritual." This way of using the term relieves one of the necessity of implying that all rituals are religious. Rappaport defines liturgy as "the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not encoded by the performers" (1979: 175).

Appeals to dictionaries are of little help in stabilizing usage. *The Random House College Dictionary* offers five definitions. In the first one, ritual is any "established or prescribed procedure" for "a religious or other rite." In addition to the frustrating circularity of defining ritual as a procedure for engaging in a rite, the definition hedges the question, Is ritual by definition religious? A second definition equates ritual not with a single procedure, but with a system of rites. But again, the definition is circular: ritual equals a system of rites. A third identifies ritual with a particular type of it, worship: ritual is the "observance of set forms in public worship." A fourth definition uses "ritual" to cover ritual-like procedures: "any practice or pattern . . . reminiscent of religious ritual." The fifth treats "ritual" as a synonym for "a book of rites or ceremonies."

Diligent readers who try to beat the dictionary at its own game by looking up both "rite" and "ceremony" find they have not solved the conundrum so much as compounded it. "Rite" sports six definitions, most of which are synonyms for "ritual." The only exception is a usage in which "rite" refers to any historic division of Christian eucharistic liturgy, for instance, the "Eastern rite" or the "Anglican rite." The same kind of trouble plagues one who looks up "ceremony." Most uses of this term are synonymous with "ritual" and "rite." Other uses equate ceremony with formality, politeness or even meaningless observances.

If one tries to cut below the contemporary linguistic confusion by consulting an etymological dictionary hoping to arrive at the pristine simplicity of original usage, one still flounders. "Ceremony" might be based on the Latin word *caerimonia*, meaning "rites performed by Etruscan pontiffs near Rome." "Ritual," one etymological dictionary says, is derived from the Latin adjective *ritualis*, and "rite" comes from the Latin noun *ritus*. Both words simply mean "ritual," leaving us no further ahead. "Rite" is said to share the same root as "arithmetic," and thus one might assume a vague connection between ritual and counting things or putting them in order. The most provocative claim about the etymology of the word ritual is proffered by Judy Grahn who says: "At base [that is, in Sanskrit], *rituals* and *rites* mean *public menstrual practices*" (1982: 270). *Ritu*, she believes, were practices in India meant to socialize and confirm the powers of menstruation. Although this derivation is

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apparently unknown or not convincing to the editors of etymological dictionaries, it is at least provocative.

Distressed in the search for a useful, ordinary-language definition of ritual, the confused may turn to scholars for help, only to find some of them, Jack Goody (1977) for instance, concluding that the word has no utility whatever. The notion of ritual not only has vague or conflicting definitions in English, it is also a Western, scholarly construct, a made-up object of study. Arguments to this effect are predicated on the observation that many languages have no word that one might translate with the English word ritual. Instead of having a general term, many people have only specific nouns—some common, some proper—that are parallels of “birthday,” “Christmas,” “Ramadan,” “Bar and Bat Mitzvah.”

But having no word for ritual does not mean there are no events in which people dance or pray, or that the word is useless. Probably any key term in scholarly discourse will expose its fictive nature after being run through the mill of cross-cultural comparison and having sustained analytical attention focused on it. So most scholars continue using the idea of ritual, along with an implicit or explicit definition of the term. Among those who offer formal ones, there is a noticeable division between broad and narrow strategies. Broadly defined, rites are, for instance, “culturally defined sets of behavior” (Leach 1968). The broader views of ritual treat it as synonymous with symbolic actions, deeds for which one can predicate not just consequences but meaning. In such definitions, ritual is a kind of communication, thus not so much one activity alongside others as an implicit dimension of all human interaction. Holding this view, one would not say, for example, that Caesarian section *is* ritual but that the symbolic dimension of Caesarian surgery is ritual. But because human actions, even ordinary ones, are fraught with meaning, most activities would become, by this definition, ritual. The broadest definitions include too much.

Many of the broad definitions are so vague as to be useless. So the majority are more tightly focused. An example of a narrow definition of ritual equates it with “traditional, prescribed communication with the sacred” (Honko 1979: 373). The more focused views often identify ritual with actions predicated on a theistic, mysterious or animistic premise, or performances by religious functionaries in sacred places. In this view, ritual is one kind of work *alongside* other kinds, for example, the deeds of midwives, dressmakers or morticians. This narrower way of defining ritual, which limits it only to religious rites, is in decline, but its advantage is that it cuts down on the confusion created by definitions with fuzzy boundaries. By using it, one can be certain what counts as ritual and what does not. The disadvantage is that it excludes emergent and non-religious ritualizing.

There is utility in both views, the narrow and the broad, because ritual is both different from and implicit in daily interactions. Ritual is both special and ordinary, so most contemporary definitions avoid the two extremes and instead specify two or three characteristics assumed to be common to all kinds of ritual. In these middle-range definitions ritual is a style of action, one that is

formal, stylized, prescribed, symbolic, non-technological, repetitive, traditional and so on. Unfortunately, there is no general agreement on a single short list of qualifiers, but a typical example construes ritual as “a culturally constructed system of symbolic communication. It is constituted of patterned and ordered sequences of words and acts, often expressed in multiple media, whose content and arrangement are characterized in varying degree by formality (conventionality), stereotype (rigidity), condensation (fusion), and redundancy (repetition)” (Tambiah 1979: 119).

The Study of Ritual: A Meta-History in the Ethnographic Present

The history of the study of ritual has yet to be written. What I offer in its place is a kind of meta-history written in the timeless, ethnographic present as warning about its abstracted nature.

Rites are among the most visible aspects of a religion or culture. Ancient and contemporary travel literature is replete with tourists' accounts of public festivals and civil ceremonies. First encounters with a tradition were often mediated through visitors' encounters with ritual displays. But rites are not mere transparent windows opening into the heart of cultural values and meanings. They are also opaque; it takes enormous effort to comprehend a rite. Much early writing about ritual consisted of sketches of colorful surfaces and moving bodies. In ancient writing about ritual these exterior dimensions are bereft of cultural meaning but overlaid with the writers' own fantasies and projections. Ancient explorers, like contemporary tourists, were not in place long enough to make sustained inquiry, so their accounts transform religious enactments into aesthetic objects.

If noticing ritual begins with explorers, pilgrims and tourists, the defense of ritual begins with ritual experts. Those who lead, propagate or finance ritual activity are also obligated to interpret it—if not to the inquiring young, then to visitors; if not to visitors, then to themselves. This study of ritual from within is usually tagged with one of two clumsy labels: liturgical theology or indigenous exegesis. Rites are not merely enacted, they are also talked about. And they are talked about by those who perform them. In some societies, a class of ritual interpreters emerges as distinct from ritual performers. Although insider talk about ritual may sound like explanation, much of it is further ritualization, deeper mystification. Indigenous exegesis is, one might say, the ritualized study of ritual. More commonly, it is called the normative or theological or religious study of ritual. The purpose of studying ritual in this way is to maintain a ritual tradition's cogency, relevance and legitimacy. Insider study is not necessarily naïve. It can be quite critical, but its aims are practical and vested.

The normative study of ritual continues unabated, but it has competition. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the objectivist study of ritual

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begins when ethnographers enter the field to observe and document “other” people’s rites, thus rendering performances as texts. Rites, taken to be enactments of religious beliefs and myths, become a privileged object of study, because they are thought to condense a society’s values. In effect, ethnographers documenting rites become a second class of ritual interpreters. Unlike ritual specialists, ethnographers stand outside the sacred circle with no obvious vested interest in either the outcome or meaning of the rite. The anthropological interpretation of ritual posits hidden, tacit, unconscious or functional meanings of rites that lie beneath or behind the surfaces of the ceremonial events themselves. By virtue of their training and positions as sympathetic outsiders, social-scientific interpreters presume to have access to this hidden meaning. Thus they can explain to readers of their grant applications, articles and books what these rites mean. And asked, they sometimes even explain their discovered meanings to those who enact or lead the rites. In actuality, the social-scientific study of ritual is no less vested in its interests than the theological study of ritual; the difference lies not in *whether* it is invested but in *where* the investment is located.

In the early 1970s the study and practice of ritual in North America makes several rapid strides. Participant observers come back home announcing their initiations in far-away places; the dividing line between participation and observation is no longer sacred. In addition, ritual undergoes a drastic image change. Within a decade it becomes subversive, not conservative; creative, not traditional; exciting, not boring; processual, not structural. On the heels of this reenvisioned ritual, ritual studies emerges. It is an interdisciplinary enterprise involving performance studies, religious studies, anthropology and several other disciplines. The new constellation results in the founding of the *Journal of Ritual Studies*, along with ritual interest groups in the American Academy of Religion, the American Anthropology Association and the North American Academy of Liturgy. Ironically, shortly after the phrase “ritual studies” appears in scholarly discourse, the notions of ritual and ritual meaning are subjected to sustained critique. Dan Sperber (1975) and Frits Staal (1996) attack the assumption that rites “mean” anything. And Catherine Bell (1992) declares that ritual is not something “out there” that scholars find people doing and then describe or explain. Instead, it is a scholarly contrivance invented and defined so as to mediate classical Western dualisms such as thought and action. Bell’s arguments appear to dissolve the very ground upon which she and other ritual studies scholars stand.

An Exemplary Ritual Theorist

However one names, or refuses to name, the phenomenon I persist in calling ritual, people still dance and scholars, Bell included, still write books about it.

The result is provocative but frustrating. Ritual theory is no more coherent than the history of the study of ritual. Much writing about ritual is done by people who engage in it as a sideline. As a result, contemporary students of ritual read little of each other and engage in a minimum of sustained conversation or scholarly debate. So even though there is theorizing and essaying, there is a minimum of ritual theory, by which I mean sustained, collaborative effort to agree on definitions of terms, formulate coherent classifications, conduct research that depends on previous research, and identify the co-variances, causes and consequences of rites.

For the purpose of theoretical orientation to the topic of ritual it would make little sense to summarize a dozen scholars' ideas about ritual. It is more useful to critique and build on the most promising or most fully developed scholarly writings on ritual. To that end, I will consider one key claim of Victor Turner (1920–1983), whom I take to be the most influential and prolific ritual theorist of the twentieth century.

The idea that rites conserve and consolidate social reality has its primary expression in Émile Durkheim. The notion that rites can also transform social reality has its most articulate spokesperson in Victor Turner. In the 1960s and 1970s the seed planted by Arnold van Gennep in *The Rites of Passage* (1960 [1909]) culminated in a dense grove, the prolific writings of Victor Turner. The most widely read of his works, *The Ritual Process*, was published in 1969. For Turner, the whole of ritual theory, not just rites of passage, was determined by the image of passing across a threshold or a frontier. For Turner, real ritual effects transformation, creating a major “before” and “after” difference. In Turner's hands, the *limen*, or threshold, is not just a phase in a rite but a creative “space” resulting in a temporary state known as liminality. Liminality is what enables ritual to do the work of transformation. In Turner's vision, ritual is a hotbed of cultural creativity; its work is more to evoke process than to buttress structure. Ritual that merely confirms the status quo rather than transforms it Turner preferred to call ceremony.

Turner shared the widespread assumption that rites of passage have their proper matrix in small-scale societies. Nevertheless, he was ambivalent about treating them as irrelevant to large-scale societies. Although he admitted that rites of passage achieve *maximal* expression outside of Europe and North America, Turner retained his interest in rites of passage, making them the model for understanding how ritual in general works. He treated one rite of passage, initiation, as the quintessential rite of passage, and he regarded one of its phases, liminality, as definitive of ritual. In Turner's writings liminality becomes even more autonomous than it had been for van Gennep. In fact, under Turner's influence liminality was not only an important dynamic of ritual, but a value, a virtue. The liminal had moral and religious worth. It was to become the generative, therefore primary, principle of ritual in particular and culture in general.

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Especially important is Turner's identification of sacrality with liminality and secularity with social structure. The two equations were consonant with some of the values of the 1960s and 1970s inasmuch as they reversed the earlier equation of sacrality with structure and secularity with transition. When sacrality came to be identified with liminality, a new view of ritual was possible.

In Turner's view liminality is understood as "the Nay to all positive structural assertions, but as in some sense the source of them all, and, more than that, as a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise" (V. Turner 1967: 97). The resulting new image of ritual was that of a generator or matrix. In Turner's theory ritual became subversive, the opposite of ceremony, the staunch conservator of culture, maintainer of the status quo and glue of society that Durkheim (1995 [1912]) had made it.

In Turner's view liminality constitutes a zone of creativity because it is a crucible capable of reducing culture to its fundamental elements, its "alphabet." This reduction allows for their playful recombination in novel or fantastic patterns. Turner refers to these elements as first principles and as building blocks. The whole set works as a template, ultimate measure or paradigm.

In a liminal state, thought Turner, a peculiarly important kind of temporary community emerges. He referred to it as *communitas* and regarded it as the "fountainhead and origin" of social structure. The generativity of liminality, then, is not limited to ritual or artistic creativity; it includes cultural and social creativity as well. Said Turner (1967: 106):

Put a man's head on a lion's body and you think about the human head in the abstract. Perhaps it becomes for you, as a member of a given culture and with appropriate guidance, an emblem of chieftainship.

There could be less encouragement to reflect on heads and headship if that same head were firmly ensconced on its familiar, its all too familiar, human body.

Liminality here breaks, as it were, the cake of custom and enfranchises speculation.

Liminality is the realm of primitive hypothesis.

As Turner turned his attention from Africa to North America and Europe, he found that the liminality-saturated model of initiation served him less and less well, so he turned his attention to other ritual types, most notably pilgrimages and festivals. Pilgrimage functioned for him as a transition type between tribal initiation and the dispersed, quirky stuff of the North American arts scene, especially experimental theater. Pilgrimage rites had some of the attributes of liminality, but pilgrimage was voluntary rather than obligatory.

Turner's tendency to treat initiation as a synonym for rites of passage in general was quite pronounced. For him, initiation is to tribal society as pilgrimage is to feudal society, but the analogy left one asking, Where does liminality appear in industrial society? Though Turner never explicitly answered the question, the implied candidate seemed to be festival, the exemplary form of ritual play. In festivity one does not have to believe but can participate "subjunctively." In festivity not only is participation optional, but so is belief. In the end, Turner dislodged liminality from its original context, traditional initiation, in order to coin a new, larger notion, the liminoid. The liminoid is constrained by no particular type of ritual—not initiation, pilgrimage or festival—so the liminoid is virtually synonymous with cultural creativity, imagination actively rendering the world a more habitable place.

Turner not only observed, interpreted and theorized about ritual; he also participated in it and created it. In fact, he was initiated by the Ndembu. Though he recognized the boundary between theory and practice, he regularly crossed it: for him the boundary was not a sacred artifact. Rather, it was a social construction, and one could—in fact, ought—to imagine it otherwise. One of the bridges between Turner's theory and his practice was pedagogy. The term he eventually used for one of his most distinctive practices was "ethno-drama," or "performing ethnography," by which he meant the imaginative re-enactment of social dramas, life crises and their corresponding rites. By the end of his life Turner himself was becoming an example of liminoid ritualizing.

Because rites of passage, liminality and *communitas* have become such generative ideas, and because they continue to be unreflectively cited and popularly venerated, we should recognize some of their limitations. For instance, is it obvious that rites transform? In some societies rites are not thought to *transform*, that is, to change things fundamentally. Instead, rites of birth, coming of age, marriage and death *protect* participants, or they may *celebrate* transformations that have already occurred by other means. The Bemba say their rites *purify* women at the moment of first menses. This is a view quite different from one which holds that the rite transforms girls into women. And it suggests that we cannot *assume* that rites transform any more than we can assume they conserve.

A brief but trenchant critique of Turner is advanced by Caroline Bynum (1996; see also Lincoln 1981). Her arguments are aimed specifically at his theory of liminality and his notion of dominant symbols. Even though her reservations are based on women's stories rather than women's rituals, they imply a rejection of basic assumptions in rites of passage theory. Bynum's argument can be summarized in four related statements:

1. Compared with men's lives, women's lives have either fewer or no turning points. Even if men's lives develop by utilizing conflict and in distinct stages, women's lives do not, or, if they do, women's dramas are often incomplete.

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2. Women's symbols do not invert their lives; they enhance their lives. They emphasize continuity, not reversal.
3. Liminality is not a meaningful category for women, because either they are permanently liminal (thus the category is meaningless) or they are never truly liminal at all.
4. Liminality is a theory from the point of view of a man looking *at* women, not a theory that assumes the point of view of women looking at the world.

Thus, says Bynum, liminality is better understood as a temporary respite from obligation by elite men of power. This depiction is a far cry from the Turnerian celebration of liminality as *the* engine of ritual and culture.

The "transformationism" implicit in theories of ritual inspired by van Gennep and Turner is now in serious question. When Robbie Davis-Floyd, for instance, defines ritual as "a patterned, repetitive, and symbolic enactment of a cultural belief or value" and says "its primary purpose is transformation" (Davis-Floyd 1992: 8), she implicitly contaminates her feminist treatment of birth ritual by importing a view of ritual that is skewed by its over-reliance on the model of male initiation rites. So when claiming that rites transform, it is important not to romanticize or merely theorize. A way to avoid both errors is to specify what a rite changes and to say what degree of change transpires. In an initiation, for instance, transformation may occur in self-perception, relationships with cosmic or divine powers, access to power, knowledge or goods, kin- and other social relationships. We need to ask, What are the "before" and "after" states, and how do they compare? How significant is the change? Who is changed by a rite of passage? In some New Guinea cultures, for example, it seems that only men are ritually transformed. If so, what happens to ritual theory if we admit that liminality is a gender-specific category?

Divining the Future of Ritual

There is no end to the uses of ritual; it is a provocative notion to think, an engaging activity to enact, and sometimes difficult to know where the one activity ends and the other begins. To speculate about either the future of rites or the idea of ritual is to engage in a peculiar kind of ritual activity, divination. So divine I will, but not without inviting readers to raise a skeptical eyebrow just as one is wont to do with real diviners.

The genealogy and future of ritual practice do not depend on the fate of ritual studies or ritual theory. Those who study ritual are bit-part players. But the boundaries between practice and study are less easily separated than they once were; they are being breached coming and going. The ordained are becoming scholars of ritual, and ethnographers are participating in order to observe. Devotees of the scientific study of religion enjoy maintaining the fictive

purity of religious studies against the contaminating influence of “theology” and “politics.” But liturgical theologians regularly co-opt anthropological writings on ritual, and field anthropologists now embrace their informants’ practices. Because of the taboo that separates theorists from practitioners, courtship across the sacred line is persistent and impassioned, and the threat is not from theologians only. People from both sides dart across the theory / practice line and then back again, sometimes within the space of a single sentence. The messiness, I predict, will continue; it is what makes ritual studies exciting as well as distressing.

The distant past of ritual theory is replete with ideas and images of ritual that deaden. They were developed in part to account for and control “primitive” societies and to account for the resistance of tribal peoples to the incursions of “civilization.” Ritual, defined as guardian of social structure, was part of what made those societies at once attractive and glamorous, but also opaque and backward. This view at once exaggerated and diminished the importance of ritual. And it was incapable of making sense of the emergence of rites and the alliance of ritual with artists and revolutionaries.

The more recent past of ritual theory, the phase that culminated in Turner, flipped ritual on its ear, making of it a crowbar to be employed against closed doors and disciplinary boundaries. It was one of several conceptual and performative instruments for webbing and cobbling in the empty spaces, the corridors separating sectors of a highly differentiated society. After Turner, theologian Tom Driver (1998), for example, not only did fieldwork but also made of ritual a power capable of bringing about the “magic” of social justice. And performance theorist Richard Schechner (1993), who collaborated with Turner, made of ritual an efficacious, rather than merely entertaining, cultural activity. These activist conceptions of ritual, though open to criticism, remain an enduring legacy, and I expect to see this strand of scholarship on ritual to continue.

But the Turnerian turn is also being co-opted by New Age enthusiasts. Along with Eliade and Jung, the deceased Turner is being pressed into indentured service on the workshop circuit, where rites of passage organizations are now being legally incorporated, and where vision quests are standard fare served up on weekends, for a price. So the idea that ritual by definition transforms looks increasingly dated, an artifact of the 1960s and 1970s.

Some of the more promising directions in the study of ritual are, I believe, these (see fuller discussion in Grimes 1995: xi–xxii):

1. There are at least three major new attempts to write a theory of ritual: Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw’s *The Archetypal Actions of Ritual* (1994), E. Thomas Lawson and Robert N. McCauley’s *Rethinking Religion* (1990) and Roy Rappaport’s *Holiness and Humanity: Ritual in the Making of Religious Life, Religion in the Making of Humanity* (1999). Little

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progress will be made in the study of ritual until these works are thoroughly discussed and debated. Rappaport's ecological approach to ritual is especially important, because it promises to integrate cultural and biogenetic research on ritual.

2. If one follows the leads of popular culture, there needs to be continued study of ritual in its fictive, subjunctive and virtual modes. Studies of "re-behaved behavior" (Schechner 1993), the sort of action typical of theme parks and ritual tourism, continue to be fruitful. In rites performed for tourists and in re-created ceremonies trotted around the globe in road shows, there is a rich convergence of the theatrical and the religious.

In a similar vein, several works argue for the importance and authenticity of cyber ritual (see, for instance, Brasher and O'Leary 1996). There is little doubt that the study of ritual, like the study of many other things, will have to take account of the several waves of the electronic revolution and their effects on contemporary ritual sensibilities.

3. The micro-questions, the basics of posture and gesture at the root of any ritual, and the formations of ritual sensibilities in small groups and individuals remain key topics. Although the global electronic trend, along with the cascade toward the millennium, promises ritual flair and excitement, the basic building blocks of ritual—if there are such—remain obscurely understood. If the fundamental components are not symbols, or if ritual symbols do not "mean" anything, then of what are rites constructed? And under what conditions do they emerge? Basic theoretical work at this level is still much needed.
4. There is a developing zone somewhere between ritual theory and ritual practice. For lack of a better term, I call it applied ritual studies. It resembles applied anthropology more than liturgical theology. The interest in ritual among museum curators, film makers, theater producers and other culture-brokers continues to emerge. Some of the interest is in small-scale events—birthday parties, retirement ceremonies, museum openings and the like. Some of it is large-scale—turn-of-the-millennium celebrations and graduations, for instance. Some of it would put ritual to artistic use in plays, dances and film. Some of it is dangerous—rites, for instance, for those who would actively end their lives of interminable illness. One can frame these as either "job opportunities" or as "data," but if they are pursued for either motive, they may well revise how we currently theorize, define or imagine ritual.

Ronald L. Grimes

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