

Ritual, anti-Ritual

By [James Como](#) (July 2018)



The Cat with the Red Fish, Henri Matisse, 1914

The individual . . . is the measure of what he will do, and he himself is the judge. His fealty is to his own inclinations. . . . The man who takes this view cannot accept the sovereignty of the gods, of tradition, of history, or of consensus. He experiences directly and forcefully the sovereignty of his own passions.

–Thomas Howard, *Chance or Dance*

Lately I've been collecting the names of certain drugs advertised on TV. Here is a sampling: consentyx, chantix, emflamza, entresto, trulicity, levitra, stendra, zetia, spiriva, premarin, vytorin, xifaxin, ranexa, pentasa, pristiq, estring, multaqa, elantra, sentra, fit, clarity. Yes, the final four are cars; I put them in because they sound right: if you didn't know better they could be drugs, especially the last one, 'clarity' (a Honda plug-in hybrid). Try running Spell-Check on that paragraph.

But all are genuine, none has any phonic similarity to the sound of its pharmacological name, each is *vaguely* suggestive of function, expertise, or trustworthiness, all are easy to say, most are mellifluous, some sound somehow scientific ('xifaxin' is my favorite). How many committees, polls, and focus groups did it take to come up with 'pristiq'? How many variations on 'emflamza' were kicked around? Were any random-selection algorithms used? Do the people who make them up go home at night to normal lives, or back to the loony bin? One thing we know, certainly: the names sell, or they wouldn't exist. Each is incantatory, enacting its own authoritative micro-psycho-ritual of wellness.

Now, any experienced teacher knows never to underestimate the power of sheer stupidity (especially that of colleagues). Take, for example, the voting public. They inform themselves only to the rim of inconvenience, *then take themselves to be fully informed*. And what might be that "point of inconvenience"? Why, anything beyond Facebook, Twitter, a tendentious blog, a *New York Times* editorial, or Rachel Maddow (or the smirky Laura Ingraham, for that matter). Or take a CNN

anchor—perhaps the best-looking woman dispensing cable news (notwithstanding a touch too much blush)—who took pride in *not* knowing what the GRU is. Or almost anything Hillary (the gift that keeps on giving, bless her heart) says these days.

Or me, lacing up to “move a couple of rounds” with Luis Resto for recreation. Sure, I was a middle-aged college professor who bothered no one, who enjoyed the ritual wrapping and lacing up and stepping between the ropes into the ring. But Resto—the nicest guy in any gym I’ve ever visited—had been a top-ten middleweight contender who had put an opponent in the hospital and went to jail for it. (His trainer had taken the stuffing out of his gloves.) Before we climbed into the ring, Luis came face-to-face and whispered how many new holes he would rip in me and what he would do to them. Brutal guy, old ritual, and it worked: the fear was concrete, not symbolic; I was unprepared for this non-ritual. For the record: I caught Luis hard with a straight, right-hand lead and backed him into the ropes. Big mistake. Twenty seconds later he showed me the same straight-ahead look, I took the bait, he twitched to his left and stepped in past my extended right arm with his own hook to my liver. That was that. (I mentioned this to a former student—twice the national amateur boxing champ—and Brian laughed: “sparring is *never* recreational, professor, never.”) In other words, not ritual.

Lately a guilty pleasure, indulged ironically at first, had become a duty. The famous Page Six of the *New York Post*—all gossip all the time—has a daily TV version. My wife and I have been catching it for about two months now and have just about had enough; any fun is gone and duty (to learn about the lowest common denominator of popular culture) is done. We are sufficiently repulsed by the Kardashians and their ilk; by the grotesque “life styles” of the fabled rich (who attack “the

one per cent"); by the sheer inelegance of most of these denizens; and by the cultish "followers" who make this trivializing ritual of attention possible—and take it oh-so-seriously. The people who dish this out are charming, but shouldn't there be a life to go with the style? (Daniel Boorstin once defined a celebrity as "someone who is famous for being well-known.") Ritual for its own sake.

We cannot do without ritual, of course, from greetings, to dining and classroom rituals, to weddings, births and funeral rituals. In truth, I'm annoyed when they are dismissed as 'empty', or excessive, or merely as habit or custom, or—dreaded thought—as convention, as though there were something self-evidently wrong with that. All may be true in this case or that, but the criticism says nothing about ritual as a practice, for example, something as pedestrian as the unfunny stand-up comic who gets laughs as a sort of genuflection (see any Colbert audience): an unhealthy ritual devastatingly anatomized by Kevin D. Williamson in "Monkey Hear, Monkey Laugh" (NRO, June 7, 2018).

Then there is the vexing and duplicitous pseudo-ritual. I once ran for CUNY-wide union office and twice participated in the ritual of debate against the then (and current) president. (Bunny is beloved by a coterie who would sometimes sing the *Internationale* at union meetings.) I did not expect my long-term colleague and friend to compare me to Goebbels (but to understand Gloria see the sentence above on stupidity), or for an iterant fascist to try to turn the debate into a beer hall putsch. I did not know then what vexes me now: the absence even from the *academic* Left of actual rebuttal (as opposed to the sneer or the slander). For example, I know many a presumably illegal immigrant: courteous, hard-working, and (mostly) pious people. But among them are the criminal, the

sadistic, and the outright demonic: *why does not the Left say so and agree that they must go*—and I do not mean concessionally but loudly? Does this cynical ritual of “inclusion” require silence, or is it a checking of the brain at the door?

Rituals make for much insider custom (and argot) and so account for considerable bad behavior. Who has not known a drug addict, alcoholic, or compulsive gambler? One remarkable feature of the addiction stands out: each is ritualistic. The atmosphere of the saloon, with its camaraderie, array of delights, and *shared dissolution*