

Traveling Companion: I better watch it!

Fr. Michael Tracey

It occurred to me a long time ago that we are creatures of habit. We have our regular routine and rituals that begin and end our days and often legislate the rest of our day as well.

First of all, I have my morning rituals. I don't even bother to set an alarm; I just wake up automatically at 3:30 a.m. as directed by my inner clock. I change into my biking shorts, a T-shirt, a pair of sneakers and, of course, I make sure I have a key to the house in case I might get locked out. A few gulps of orange juice helps with some much needed energy. Gingerly, I exit the back door, making sure the neighbors dogs don't hear me and head off for my morning bike ride.

Just over an hour later, I am back again and ready for the rest of my morning rituals. Of course, there are the personal ablutions, the fiber breakfast, washed down with some orange juice while I catch the overnight news happenings on CNN.

At 5:50 a.m. I am on my way to the office through the deserted streets. There, before the 7 a.m. morning Mass, I answer some overnight emails and glance at some local newspapers on line and am ready for Mass.

Following Mass, I make my way to the car line at Holy Trinity Elementary School where I meet and greet the children and their parents as another school day begins. Then it is back to the office for another day of surprises.

Of course, I have to have my sacred time at 9 a.m. and then again at 3 p.m. when I have my morning and afternoon tea and it will be a high tea if I have any goodies to enhance it.

The other morning, my routine was shattered with devastating consequence. Amid all my morning rituals, I forgot one thing that upset the morning experience.

I went through my morning ritual as if blind. I had done this ritual so often that I didn't need to think about it. It just fell into place automatically.

I found myself in a quandary for the rest of the morning. Instinctively, I kept looking at my wrist. I wondered, often to the point of panicking. Later that morning, I could not bear to be without the missing piece of my morning, I had to go home and retrieve it.

As I reflected on my experience, I remembered Robert Fulghum's book, "From Beginning to End: the Rituals in Our Lives." In the book, he reminds us that, to be human is to be religious. We all ask ourselves elemental religious questions: who am I? What am I doing here? Where did I come from? Where am I going? What is the meaning of life?

Secondly, he reminds us that to be religious is to be mindful; mindful that in asking such religious questions, we find answers and hold on to them with faith and devotion, thereby making them sacred to us. This sanctifies existence. We repeat this process which, in turn leads to rituals. Thirdly, our lives are endless rituals. They arise from the stages and ages of life and they transform the ordinary into the holy. Obviously, such rituals can be both public and private as they create a time where the Eternal dwells. Fourthly, rituals speak to the heart, not so much the chime of the clock. They are connected with seasons and holidays; feast days and family days. Finally, the function of ritual is paradoxical in that if not only anchors us to high places in a world where we are always losing our footing. Rituals remind us how hard it is to be human and yet how necessary it is to celebrate our humanness.

Tomorrow morning, I will wake up again with the help of my inner clock and go through my usual morning routine. Through it, I will feel connected and complete, until I forget something that throws it off balance. I just need to make sure that I watch it a little more closely this time.