



Obama's Inauguration and Why We Still Need Rituals

I have a picture somewhere of my son and I playing in the living room the day of Barack Obama's first inauguration as 44th President of the United States. My son was five months old, the ceremony on the TV behind us. I had left work early to watch it. That night, we wrote about it in his baby book.

It was impossible, even from afar, not to feel the enchantment of that moment, not to grasp its historical significance.

Two months earlier, the morning after Obama's election, I had happened to be with a group of fellow leadership academics, a crowd that maintains an affectation of skeptical detachment for all manifestations of unbridled hope in charismatic leaders. (Humans always fall for it. It never ends well.) One, rather out of character, shared that he had cried.

It will be different, this time around.

The National Mall will be less crowded and the hope in many hearts no longer of the unbridled kind. Less of a new dawn, more like a second chance. (This, I have [argued elsewhere](#), may be a good thing.) While its significance may be different, however, Obama's second inauguration will be just as meaningful. Because the ceremony, first and foremost, is not about him.

It is about us.

Public rituals often mark the transition of individuals into, or out of, significant roles and life stages. In doing so, they serve a crucial function for a community at large, affirming its ability to renew itself. Far more than displays of vanity and mass celebrations, rituals keep culture alive. They put people into culture and culture into people. This is why uprooted or oppressed communities go to great pains to preserve their rituals. When rituals disappear their culture goes with them.

Humans have always gathered to perform rituals that tie leaders to their communities and vice versa. Rituals help craft a tie made of belonging without possession, the kind of bond where each side gives the other permission to change them for good. Leaders use rituals to infuse their communities with meaning — to signal what matters, who we are, what we must do and why. Communities use rituals to

demand leaders' allegiance — to signal what norms they must conform to, which principles they are to uphold, who they are meant to serve. Put another way, rituals are reminders that leaders are both shapers and custodians. It is their job to influence as much as it is to represent their people.

In days like this, it is hard not to wonder where those rituals are in business organizations today. In many, commitment and community have weakened. Loyalty has declined. Rituals have ceased to exist, or they don't mean much. People may be freer and perhaps less gullible. But they are often also more isolated, connected without belonging. It is perhaps not a coincidence that in those same organizations the trust in leaders, and leaders' ties to followers, are at their weakest. Rituals are cast as anachronisms or follies, rather than something that governs, binds, and reminds us that good leaders are stewards of a purpose and community, not the other way around.

Think of the inauguration again. On the one hand, the Obama administration — as every other before and after his — will use its power to shape the event. It has chosen speakers, singers, guests, words, and symbols that present its values, its identity, and its aspirations as those of the American people.

On the other hand, Obama will swear allegiance to the United States constitution — his hand on two bibles — Abraham Lincoln's and Martin Luther King's — with the same formula used by every US President since George Washington. He will be surrounded by representatives of military, political, legal, religious, and economic powers whom he will need as much as they need him, and sometimes more. And he will stand, as leaders always have, before a crowd. Them, his people. And he, theirs.

Obama, like Bush and Clinton before him, has also demonstrated a capacity for public introspection that we have come to expect of leaders — a performance of authenticity of sorts that turns leaders' personal experience as a source of

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legitimacy in the eyes of those who resonate with it. When the boundary between person, work and role — who they are, what they do, and what others expect — is so thin, leaders are most inspired and inspiring. They feel and look “real,” committed, all in. It is also then that they are most vulnerable — to attacks, to losing their role, to becoming obsessed with success, to losing themselves. They are easier to love and easier to hate — depending less on how much we agree and more on how close we feel to them.

President Obama seems well aware of the opportunities and risk that lie at the boundary between him as a person and his role. Michael Lewis’s [recent profile](#) of his is a chronicle of the struggle to remain a human being while also fulfilling the duties of such a demanding, visible, and controversial leadership role. As many leaders these days, Obama is open about the desire, necessity or presumption — depending on how you see it — of having a life while attempting to lead.

“One of the things you realize fairly quickly in this job,” he told Lewis, “is that there is a character people see out there called Barack Obama. That’s not you. Whether it is good or bad, it is not you.” He continued, Lewis reports, “You have to filter stuff, but you can’t filter it so much you live in this fantasyland.”

As boundaries between private and public, person and role, become thinner for everybody and for leaders most of all, learning to remain present while exposed — somewhere between detached and overwhelmed — is vital to be well and to do well. Rituals help leaders do just that — show up fully and yet remember that even when you are at the center, it is not all about you.

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