



I am a person who loves words. I mean I REALLY love words. How they sound. How they feel in my mouth. The feelings they invoke. The ideas and thoughts they convey. Words matter and so using the exact right word is important. Mark Twain said that the difference between the almost right word and the right word is the difference between a lightning bug and lightning. And he couldn't be more right.

You don't ask for soup when you mean spaghetti. I have a good friend, one of my favorite conversationalists, and we always make a point of stopping one another mid-conversation to define our terms just to make sure both of us know EXACTLY what we mean when we use words so there's no confusion or misunderstanding between us.

It fascinates me how certain words have more weight than others. Like *contract*. *Contra* *cf* just feels so much heavier than *agreement*. At least it did when I signed mine with my new publisher. *Decree* feels more important than *say*. And *ritual* speaks to my soul in a way that *routine* just doesn't.

I have three rituals that have taken up residence in my spirit and have rooted me while still giving me wings: morning, evening, and New Year's Day.

Before I even get out of the bed every morning, I do a full body stretch and spend time in prayer. Most mornings I either practice yoga or take in a spin class. I like to start the day getting my body moving because that helps my mind find peace and gets me ready to move forward in my intentions for the day. After either, I make a cup of tea. Two, actually. And I use a kettle on top of the stove. I like that it is old fashioned and I like the whistle to let me know the water is ready. Every day I make a tincture of turmeric, local honey, and ground black pepper. I mix this up in one of my grandmother's mugs. When the kettle sings, I love watching the orange spice swirl with the hot water. The second cup is usually some sort of black tea. Often Earl Grey. I take both mugs into my meditation room/library, gather a meditation book, focus stones, Palo Santo, and get comfortable on the couch. Stenciled in navy, my favorite color, above the couch is my mantra: Be still and know. As I settle in, I drink the tincture and think of what I want that day to look like, not just what I want to accomplish. Next I go through one of the meditations from the Calm app. I burn the Palo Santo as I hit play, holding one stone in each hand to help me focus my energy. When my mind wanders, as it often does, I come back to my breathing and concentrate on just being aware of the sensation. Once I've completed the exercise, I almost always find myself breathing easier and deeper than I was before I sat down. I then take the lid off the other mug, inhale the strong aroma that helps my concentration sharpen, and curl the mug against my chest, letting the heat warm me from my heart out. I read an excerpt from a book of meditations; right now it is *You are a Badass Every Day* by Jen Sincero, but other favorites are

*Meditations for*

*Women Who Do Too Much*

by Anne Wilson Schaef,

*Reflections for Ragamuffins*

by Brennan Manning, and

*My Utmost for His Highest*

by Oswald Chambers

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I then out loud release all energies that do not serve and limiting beliefs about anything that may be holding me back from fulfilling my intentions. When the tea is done, I go wash my dishes and hop in the shower, more ready than I'd be if I'd skipped the ritual.

Most evenings, after I've cooked dinner, done dishes, aired the dog, annoyed the cat, and had a glass of wine, I wash my face. Now, I know that just sounds like a hygiene routine, but I do each step deliberately, consciously being present throughout. When I'm all clean and moisturized, and have treated my aging skin (I am forty after all), I go back to the meditation room and write down at least one thing that I'm grateful for that day. Most days it is several, but even if it is just roasted Brussels sprouts, every day gets a grateful. I date each note, fold it, and drop it in a wooden box. I then slip into bed and read a chapter of some sort of spiritual guide or awakening book like *Big Magic* by Elizabeth Gilbert or *Make it Happen* by Jordanna Levin. Both are centered on growing joy and are currently on my nightstand. Then I give thanks to the Creator. I find that ending the day with a spirit of thankfulness often helps me let go of the day's troubles and focus on the blessings. It also helps that my cat, Minerva Jane, is usually curled

into my side purring.

Remember the gratefuls from the previous paragraph? They take center stage on New Year's Day. Now this is my favorite ritual and it has taken years of refinement to get it exactly right for me. At some point on New Year's Day, I take my box of all the notes from the previous year and go sit on my porch with a big metal bowl (and usually a cup of tea). I snuggle in a very comfy swinging chair with a fuzzy blanket and open the box. I read every single thing I wrote the year before in no particular order. It takes me over an hour because I like to remember all of the loveliness that occurred in the previous rotation. After I read each one, I drop it in the metal bowl. Once everything has been read and remembered, I set them all on fire. I believe that spending the first day of a new year remembering and meditating over the blessings of the previous year sets a tone. And I love that the flames of joy help light the way for what is to come.

Some people would call at least my first two rituals routines, but not me. Calling them rituals prevents them from becoming commonplace. They are spiritual practices for me that help better my daily existence. And the year end ritual reminds me how much I always have to be grateful for and that those blessings, big and small, make a joyful existence. I told my friend last night that I refuse to live a life that is not full of life and these rituals help me accomplish that.

So my challenge for you is to examine your routines and figure out what is actually more of a ritual and dig in. I think you will find your experiences richer as a result.

*Rowe Carenen's poems have appeared in various literary journals and magazines, and her first collection, In the Meantime, was published by Neverland Publishing in 2014. Her second collection, First Drafts from the Brewery, is forthcoming from Unsolicited Press. She lives in Greenville, SC, with her cat Minerva Jane and dog Neville Jameson.*