



New Year's Ritual

By [Charles Vogl](#)



Mark Levy asked about creating a meaningful experience around New Years celebration.

You may have noticed as I have that many people in your tribe are trying to make a New Year's "exciting" in some way and there is apparently little to get excited about the calendar changing over. For my tribe getting drunk and screaming for a few hours is no longer worth the effort. I wonder if it ever was.

My wife and I have been hosting hundreds of intimate gatherings for over 10 years now. Our goal at each event is to invite guests into a space where they feel comfortable and understood, and where we can together create or strengthen friendships. Ideally, I aim to create the feeling that they don't want to leave. Ideally, they understand how this one intimate experience can enrich their whole life.

Last year we hosted a New Year's Eve dinner for 14. I wanted to create an experience that was more meaningful, memorable, and enriching than just a room full of drinks and hot food.

Name Tags

One of our rules is that if even one person is new to the group, all of us have to wear name tags. Yes, some people have an aversion to nametags, but they help strangers address one another. It also means that the end of a four-hour dinner, we all remember the names of the people we now know.

I tell guests the nametags are not for us, they're for the new people who want to speak to us. We are giving them a chance to know us better.

Silence

We began the evening sitting together in ritual silence. Rituals are important because they have meaning. Without meaning, there are just actions that use up time. I noted that New Year's Eve is a time where people appear to want to find something to celebrate and get rowdy and loud just to show they are celebrating. That got me thinking: what would be the opposite of superficial rowdiness? Silence.

Silence is a precious thing in our culture. We all have plenty of devices, people, and scheduled activities to distract us at every moment. Moreover, we almost never take time to be silent with the people who are most important to us. Silent time can be the most important time. Ironically our culture fills silence so much that just the presence of silence between us makes most uncomfortable. Chaplains, therapists and journalists know the silence can be the beginning where the magic in a relationship happens.

The people with whom we can be silent are people with whom we do not need to fill each moment with talk or entertainment. We can just be with these people as

we are and trust that is enough for them. In these precious moments, and with these precious people, we realize that simply being with our friends is powerful. Being doesn't require sparkling conversations, humorous personalities, or raucous laughter.

At our party, everyone gathered in a circle in our living room and sat in silence, experiencing being without any effort to impress or entertain. Every conversation that would take place over the rest of the evening depended on this experience of silence, and the evening changed.

Notes to Our Community

Next, I wondered what would be the opposite of the cultural zeitgeist to look to the future and make promises to ourselves and others about how we would think and act differently in the new year. In my community, a lot of us spend a lot of time striving to achieve more.

The opposite, then, would be to reflect on the past and appreciate what is now.

I therefore put out a stack of 100 colorful note cards and envelopes (and pens!) in the center of our living room. Each guest was encouraged to write at least three notes of appreciation. They were to think of the people who were important to them in the last year and whom they didn't thank enough, or about people who do not know how much they were appreciated.

Most of our guests wrote many more than three notes. Before we all sat down for the meal, we had reflected on how much other people had extended themselves and enriched our lives in the past year.

One of our guests was a date of our good friend Chef Adam. She wrote a card to me, thanking me for inviting her into our lives and the new community of friends. She had not been given the forum to express her appreciation before.

Sacred Space

Sacred spaces are spaces that are set aside. We do things there that we don't do elsewhere. Obviously these can be elaborate permanent ritual rooms, whether traditionally sacred (like a church or mosque) or secular (like a sports stadium). They can also be spaces we set aside temporarily to make them special for a particular time. We make our home, including the dining table, a sacred space when we host an event. There are several ways to do this. Two ways are how we orient participants intimately and how we light the space between participants.

Powerful and close relationships develop over "intimate experiences." These experiences allow for guests to share stories about their formation as people and possibly the vulnerable parts of themselves that we keep from strangers. Wandering around a large room filled with loud music and bumping into people we don't know is not conducive to these kinds of experiences.

Our dinner table seats 14 (tightly) and so we limit our evenings to 12 guests. We all sit down around a single table lit by a central overhead light and a dozen low candles. Lighting around the room is dimmed so attention is naturally brought to the table where we are all gathered. We can all feel the intimacy.

Another of our rules is that no cooking or plating takes place when the meal begins. All present must sit together. At this moment of gathering, I remind everyone that we are all present because of personal invitations, and that all have chosen to spend this time here together. There is no accident in our gathering. This reminds everyone that the time and conversations shared take place within a context of choosing to connect and know one another.

Epilogue

We created our New Year's Eve event specifically to meet our preferences and to serve our community. You don't have to emulate us. What I hope you understand here is that we can consider what values we want to bring to a special event and create a space and rituals that can make the time meaningful for participants. What's important isn't whether there are 12 guests or 2, a linen tablecloth or paper plates, candlelight or broad daylight. What matter is that no one is just going through the motions of yet another forgettable gathering.

Encourage connections for belonging both within the room and relationships. Don't worry about imbuing too much meaning in the actions you choose in the space you construct.

Have fun. The world is waiting for us to bring people together.

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