Rituals punctuate life. This truth remains even during the last chapter of life, and even when life is lived within a nursing home. This article explores how rituals can be grouped into three broad categories as they apply to life in a nursing home: everyday rituals, such as having an excellent cup of coffee in the morning; annual rituals that revolve around birthdays, public holidays, and other days deemed sacred; and life-transition rituals related, for example, to being admitted to a nursing home, and to the death of a nursing home resident. Opportunities exist as well for individuals and communities to honor, through ritual, direct-care workers (and their families) who dedicate themselves to nursing home care.

**Simple Pleasures Count: The Importance of Everyday Rituals**

Everyday rituals reflect our tastes and bring comfort through their routine. They signal continuity and stability of self. Everyday rituals have a way of providing cadence to daily life and can include the time of day a person prefers to wake up, how someone likes to be awakened, and individual practices related to bathing, dressing, and eating.

For many adults in the United States, a good cup of coffee is an essential part of their morning ritual. The importance of this ritual doesn’t diminish because someone is admitted to a nursing home; in fact, the case can be made that a good cup of coffee becomes all the more cherished as other aspects of daily life are lost.

The continuation of daily rituals can help a nursing home resident retain a sense of self. When staff and family members help to facilitate these rituals, they honor the dignity of each nursing home resident. In *Everyday Ethics*, authors Rosalie Kane and Arthur Caplan (1990) share insights gleaned from interviews with nursing home residents. Many dilemmas they disclosed related to dining preferences. Residents said they wanted to decide whether to dine alone in their room or as part of a larger group in the main dining room. If eating in the dining area, residents wanted some say about tablemates. The types and temperature of food and its arrangement on the plate mattered. All of these foregoing factors are key parts of the daily meal ritual.

Finding out what daily rituals are important to residents is an ongoing process that can begin before admission. If a nursing home staff
member (usually a nurse or social worker) visits the prospective resident at their home, they can talk about the person's everyday rituals. On the day of admission, amid all the bustle and paperwork, there could be—and should be—some time devoted to again addressing the resident's preferred daily rituals. This line of inquiry sends the message that while the new resident (and their family) will be expected to learn and adjust to group living, the nursing home staff members also expect to adjust to the resident. Asking the resident and family about their rituals, and brainstorming ways to continue these, can bring a modicum of comfort to the admissions process, which most residents and families perceive as a crisis.

Some daily rituals involve simple pleasures that help support the well-being of a person and bolster their sense of life continuity. These seemingly insignificant daily activities can matter greatly to the resident's quality of life. For example, many residents appreciate sitting outside, weather permitting. The feel of the sun's warmth and the brush of a soft breeze can be soothing. Without a family member or volunteer to accompany a resident outside, many nursing homes are too short-staffed to take residents outside even for fifteen minutes. The result is that some residents spend weeks and months inside. For people who have been accustomed to spending a lot of time outdoors—especially farmers, athletes, and smokers—this lack of access to fresh air can be upsetting.

Early on I came to appreciate deeply the meaning of everyday rituals in the lives of nursing home residents. Natalie had devised a way to carry on some of her favorite rituals despite her declining health status. Her story shows that while it is not always possible to fully reenact familiar daily rituals in a nursing home,

A Well-Loved Ritual of Laundry and Poetry

As a young adult, I found myself living across the street from a nursing home. I met the volunteer coordinator, who matched me up with Natalie, a resident in her eighties (both in terms of age and weight). Her progressive neurological disease was eroding her eyesight and leaving her too weak to get out of her wheelchair without assistance. Her main complaint about nursing home living was the laundry. Natalie was deeply and repeatedly upset that her clothes were being damaged in the laundry, so I agreed to do her washing. I visited Natalie twice a week for years: one day to pick up the soiled clothes and a few days later to drop them off, washed and folded. Our friendship soon grew beyond the folds.

During one visit, she asked me if I would read a poem to her, one she had long ago memorized but was now fumbling over. She handed me a well-worn book of poems and as I opened the book, I opened a new chapter of our friendship. I must have read "To a Waterfowl" ten times that evening, as she recited along (she knew 95 percent of the words). She coached me on proper intonation in between her little shouts of glee at being reunited with her poem. After reading several more poems, I topped off the evening with Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud".

Cracking open the poetry book became a weekly ritual for us. As her illness progressed, her world shrank to her room, then to her bed. One Saturday morning, I received a call from the nursing home; it was Natalie's daughter, telling me that Natalie had died. I went over and spent a few minutes alone with Natalie's body, coming to terms with the reality. After a while, her daughter entered the room, embraced me, and handed me the book of poems, saying, "Mom wanted you to have this." More than twenty years later, that book remains one of my prized possessions.
in many cases rituals can be adapted and revised for the setting. Consult with the expert—the resident—to find out how the ritual represents familiarity and comfort. Randy’s ritual of observing the world around him was important—more so than learning how to use a glue gun, or listening to a choir, or hearing about current events. Randy liked his ritual of watching the world go by, and while he would welcome company, he didn’t like to leave his perch. These stories illustrate that after weeks or months in a nursing home, many residents find ways to adapt their old rituals or to develop new ones.

**Annual Rituals**

Aside from daily individual rituals, nursing homes have formal ways of recognizing residents’ birthdays, public holidays, and days that are considered sacred. How nursing homes commemorate these events reveals much about how they honor residents and strive to keep residents connected to the broader community.

It can be easy to overlook the “home” in nursing home, especially if the setting emphasizes “nursing” more than “home.” A home has a soul and reflects the identity of its inhabitants. At home we can let our hair down and put our feet up. Homes change with the seasons; recognizing and celebrating the changing of the seasons can have special meaning. My family’s Christmas story conveys the message that we can all help residents and families with rituals—even when the rituals are not our own.

We should not expect nursing home staff to meet all the needs of every resident; this is not realistic or healthy. But family and community volunteers can play a vital role in nursing homes: not only can they help connect residents with past rituals, they can also help teach new rituals.
A Christmas Ritual Rescued

A few years after we married, my husband Mike (an only child) and I moved Marie, his mother, from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to Washington, D.C., to be closer to us. After a series of strokes, Marie could not lift herself up, move about easily, or feed herself. She was admitted to a local nursing home about one mile from our apartment. We visited daily. On Christmas, Mike and I spent the most of the day in the nursing home with Marie. Although the staff had planned a special meal and activities, Marie did not want to leave her room. Her yearning for her mother was particularly strong around holidays, especially at Christmas time. Far from home and from her youth, Marie missed the magical German traditions she learned from her mother and the rituals that marked how Christmas was supposed to be. We sat together in her room and visited; after a while, we three were silent, each of us buried in thought. After a few hours of this, I heard some carollers coming down the hallway.

When they arrived at Marie’s door, she sent them away: “You can’t sing what I want to hear anyway,” she said. My heart sank. About an hour later, as the singers were wending their way back, they passed Marie’s room again. Mike invited them in, asked for a song, and they sang a lovely rendition of “The First Noel.” My husband’s eyes moistened. Marie sat in her wheelchair, expression unchanged. The lead caroller asked Marie, “What is the song you like—we have a book—even if we aren’t familiar with the song, it might be in the book.” Marie refused to look at her. Finally Mike turned to his mother and pleaded, “Please, Mom, what song would you like?” “They can’t sing my song,” Marie pronounced flatly, “it is from the old country... ‘O Tannenbaum’... but I want to hear it in German, or not at all.”

The lead caroller shook her head sadly, saying, “You are right—we know the song ‘O Christmas Tree’, but not in German.” An uncomfortable silence ensued. Then, one of the carollers cleared her throat and, softly, began singing the song—in German! Her clear voice was angelic. Marie chimed in for the last verse. So beautiful was the moment, so delighted was Marie to hear this special song in her mother’s tongue, and so meaningful to her were the words and melody. As Mike escorted the carollers into the hall, he thanked them for spending their Christmas Day at the nursing home and sharing their gift of music. The lead caroller smiled and accepted his thanks, saying, “Our families are not expecting us home today—we are Jewish.”

We must acknowledge the different cultures that exist in nursing homes, and not assume that everyone possesses the same ethnic or religious background. Honoring the rituals of residents’ and staff members’ cultural groups is an obvious place to start. Learning about holidays and rituals, music, food, and ideas of other cultures enriches life and promotes cultural awareness.

**Life-Transition Rituals**

Life transition rituals mark the major milestones of life, such as birth, coming of age, life partner-
independent living to any type of sheltered living (e.g., group homes, assisted living centers, or nursing homes). A ritual helps to normalize the life transition and guide the people who are most affected by it.

Bridges (2004) explains that all transitions begin with an ending; the first stage of all major transitions is the recognition that a status or circumstance has come to an end, and that one is in transition and eventually will be in a new circumstance. Ritual is a way to help a person transition from the in-between phase (in Bridges’ terms, the “neutral zone”) to the new circumstance. Transition rituals are about saying goodbye to one set of circumstances and hello to a new set. But people don’t always welcome new circumstances, especially if these are connected with reduced social status and increased social stigma, which is often the case when a person enters a nursing home after the progression of a chronic illness or the loss of a support system.

Most nursing home residents experience multiple losses. Advanced old age can be accompanied by the loss of vital roles and relationships. Advanced chronic illness is often accompanied by the loss of function and health. As most nursing home residents advance in years and have chronic illness, the experience of loss is common, and can include being a witness to the deaths of fellow residents. Despite the avalanche

In her sixties, Elizabeth “Grandma” Layton learned about contour drawing at her community college, and used this technique to express political and social views. Much of Layton’s art depicts experiences of older adulthood; this drawing is part of her 16-piece series, “This Motherless Child,” which Layton created based on visits to her aunt, a nursing home resident. The series is exhibited at the Landon Center on Aging, inspiring the next generation of health professionals preparing to work in long-term care. Artwork is reprinted with the permission of the Landon Center on Aging, University of Kansas Medical Center.
of losses—or perhaps because of them—the nursing home setting is ripe for rituals that restore a sense of meaning and connection. Rituals can help remind us that while it is normal to die in advanced old age, the death of one member of a community is a loss for all in that community.

Some nursing homes, through their activities or social services departments, have developed rituals related to residents’ deaths. These rituals are important to the culture of the nursing home. In some cases, a short, informal gathering is held at the bedside of the deceased with staff, family, and residents who were close to that person in attendance. In other nursing homes, families are welcome to use the library or chapel for a service. Social worker Lynn Oliver works in a nursing home where a small, anonymously penned poem called “The Little Ship” is posted on a deceased resident’s door and remains there until after the person’s funeral.

This same nursing home also plays a hymn over the intercom system upon a resident’s death. Oliver says, “I post ‘A Little Ship’ with the resident’s name by the time clock for staff. Death prefers no certain shift.” She also says that the staff sends the deceased person’s family a Christmas card in the year of a person’s passing and a card on the first anniversary of the death (Sharr and Bern-Klug, 2010).

At the Solon Nursing Center in Johnson, Iowa, a white silk rose is placed on the bed of a resident who has died, and a vase with a white silk rose adorns their dining table as a sign of remembrance. Staff and residents post online condolences. The nursing home hosts a monthly remembrance service, led by a resident and staff, and there is also an annual remembrance service (Sharr and Bern-Klug, 2010).

At the Manilla Manor Nursing Home in Manilla, Iowa, after a resident dies, the body is draped with a white cloth and the staff and other residents form an honor guard, lining up in the hallway as the person’s body is taken out of the building. Social worker Jean Gibbons says, “We create a memory book where each resident who has died has a page and there is a picture of the resident...the page is left blank for staff to write whatever they wish...it is a good way to honor the people we serve. Many times the staff cannot attend the scheduled family services, so this is their way of having their time to say goodbye” (Sharr and Bern-Klug, 2010).

Unless the nursing home has a culture of openly recognizing residents’ deaths, residents will have to come to terms with these occurrences on their own. Without healing rituals to signify the death of a resident, others in the community may feel their own death will go unnoticed, their life unremarked. Some may choose to not participate in marking the death of a fellow resident, but they should know that they are welcome to do so, and that the resident’s passing is noted.

Cultural sensitivity must be part of how rituals are developed, adopted, or adapted for nursing home residents, families, and staff members. What some find meaningful and comforting may not be appropriate for others. Within any religious group there are degrees of adherence to doctrine and individual interpretations of what is significant. Nursing home staff and community members enhance residents’ quality of life by facilitating the continuation of daily and milestone rituals. Honoring rituals can make the experience of living in a nursing home more satisfying, and this satisfaction can spill over into the lives of the people who work and visit there.

A Ritual of Gratitude
In conclusion, I encourage local communities to develop rituals that honor the people who work in nursing homes. Such rituals could annually recognize the work of nursing home staff members, many of whom go well beyond the call of duty to provide gentle care to residents. These are the people who listen, smile, cajole, and empathize, spending long hours doing physically and emotionally demanding work. It is crucial
that the community lets them know that their work and efforts are valued. This is especially significant for those who perceive their work in the nursing home to be a “calling.”

Honoring rituals can make the experience of living in a nursing home more satisfying, and this positive benefit can affect the lives of the people who work and visit there.

One way to publicly recognize this value is by creating a community ritual of gratitude. For example, a community group—perhaps from a place of worship, sorority, or service group—could sponsor an annual luncheon or dinner for direct-care workers, the front-line nursing home staff members. Another option is for community groups to collaboratively host a picnic for direct-care workers and their family members. The event would honor the direct-care workers, welcome new staff members, and acknowledge specific persons whose contributions to resident care are particularly exemplary. Event activities might include a prize raffle. Community groups could also host fundraisers to build scholarships for direct-care workers and their children.

At the state level, there are other opportunities to show appreciation and support for workers. An example of an organization that is devoted to doing just that is the Iowa CareGivers Association (www.iowacaregivers.org/about_us/about_us.php), founded in 1992 by former nurse aide Di Findley to provide resources to direct-care workers. Their slogan is: “We will not rest until every direct care worker receives the education, compensation, and respect they need and deserve.” At its annual direct-care workers conference, awards are presented for outstanding service and also for longevity. One of the 2011 awardees had worked thirty-eight years in direct-care services. In attendance at the reception honoring direct-care workers were twenty-two direct-care workers who had each worked at least thirty years in long-term care.

These celebrations that honor the people who provide direct care to nursing home residents also celebrate community. No matter how old, frail, or cognitively impaired we become, we all benefit from being part of a community. This is especially true for people both young and old—those who are living in the “bookends of life.”

Mercedes Bern-Klug, Ph.D., M.S.W., is associate professor at the University of Iowa in the School of Social Work and director of the UI Aging Studies Program, Iowa City, Iowa. She is a member of the Generations Editorial Advisory Board.

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