



## Formality is Your Friend

### *How to add structure without sacrificing spontaneity*

by Elizabeth J. Agnew

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Let us first define formality for the purposes of my intent. “Formal” should not imply discomfort or stuffiness, or be likened to a straightjacket. Formal, in its true sense, means official, proper, recognized, or ceremonial. My personal definition of formality is: *creating a structure in order to get what you want.*

I am here to convince you of the immense benefits of embracing formal acts and rituals. I have encountered friends who don’t want resolutions, don’t want to plan their days, and don’t want to have any sort of ‘guided’ conversation. It seems that what they’re afraid of is overriding nature and their sense of freedom. They don’t want to miss out on what fate may have brought them through casual conversation. Above all it can feel **fake** if they’re not used to it. Sound familiar?

I am here to denounce these limiting beliefs. As an avid proponent of formal rituals and structure, I believe that they do none of the above. Just like children and dogs, we all crave some level of safe boundaries. And remember, the structure is set up for a purpose beyond that of pure dictatorship. It’s set up to achieve a goal or a desired outcome that *you choose*. So in effect, you are creating your fate, and taking full responsibility for your own outcomes. Nature will continue to show through, believe me.

Adding formality, say at a dinner party where everyone shares what they’re thankful for, can increase the richness and intimacy of the conversation. It gives everyone *permission* to take the conversation to a new level that may have raised eyebrows if the subject had been broached with no stated intention. People leave the dinner party feeling elated by the satisfaction that comes with sharing, and their new level of intimacy with newfound friends previously thought to be acquaintances.

Still wondering how this increases freedom? With permission. You give yourself permission to get what you want by intentionally setting up a ritual or boundary. You create a structure within which you allow yourself to be and do what you want. As Loehr and Schwartz put it in *The Power of Full Engagement*, “Rituals provide a stable framework in which creative breakthroughs often occur.”

You probably have many formal rituals set in place already. Consider brushing your teeth – you do it every night without thinking. You have taken something you wanted – your health – and made it a habit so that your conscious mind didn’t have to spend energy everyday saying: do I want a healthy mouth? Creating formality around the areas of your life you want to improve or cherish can help take some of the conscious decision out of the process, allowing you to move forward easily with the action. Make one big choice to set up a formal event so that you’re not continually making many little choices on how to invest your energy – you’ve given yourself prior permission and it feels natural and easy.



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