9*. The Healer of Shattered Hearts*, David Wolpe (pp. 110-111)

Ritual is language. The exploding study of symbols makes it increasingly clear that the network of symbols and rituals that tie a faith system together shares many characteristics with language. Like language, ritual imparts specific messages, it grows and changes, speaks more fully to those conversant with the system, telling of things that are not directly spoken, but are suggested, hinted at, understood by fluent speakers.

Think of a candle lit for the Sabbath. What a complex and varied tale is told by that simple light! First, lighting is the fulfillment of a ritual obligation. The glow portends the coming of the Sabbath. Simultaneously, memories are evoked by other homes the world over, throughout history, illuminated by that same modest light on a Friday night. The sanctity of the day is signaled in its flame, in the way the Sabbath is divided from the week as light is divided from darkness. In the glow is a glimmer of the original creation that the Sabbath commemorates.  
All of this and a great deal more is implicit in the lighting of a candle for the Sabbath. It is an immemorial sign for the Jewish people. Above the ark in every synagogue there hangs a lamp called the eternal light that is to remain lit... There is no eternal light- save the Sabbath candles. They have been lit over the span of centuries, in different cultures and lands, never extinguished, ever renewed. As one looks at such a rich symbol from various sides, the language becomes both clearer and more expressive, progressively deeper.

One more level brings us again to our familiar destination: the Sabbath candle, too, is a reflection of the dialogue between human beings and God. The first two manifestations of this are evident: First is the blessing, prescribed upon the lighting of Sabbath candles on Friday night ΑBlessed are You, O God, King of the universe, who has sanctified us with Your commandments, and ordained the lighting of the Sabbath candles. The action is tied directly to the will of God. Second, the entire experience of the Sabbath, the day of rest, is in emulation of God’s conduct of resting after creation...

But a somewhat subtler point is suggested by the wording of the blessing: “who has sanctified us.” The Sabbath candle represents the raising of life to a plane of sanctity. Sanctity is the domain of God; one who enters a realm of sanctity enters the realm in which the Divine and human meet. Here one enters into dialogue with God.

Ritual is the magic looking glass of access to that other world. Sometimes, like the subtle flourish of a great actor, it is the apparently negligible gesture that holds volumes of meaning...

10. Normal Mysticism

from *The Healer of Shattered Hearts*, David Wolpe

Some fifty years ago, the scholar Max Kadushin coined a curious term to describe the rabbis of the Talmud and Midrash. He called them “normal mystics.” The paradox in the words is deliberate. We do not think of mystics as everyday people. The words evokes an aura of otherworldly apparitions. As Kadushin pointed out, the unadorned term “mystic does not apply to the Rabbis.

A *normal* mystic does not have hallucinatory visions of celestial glories. A normal mystic does not spend days and nights in ascetic pursuits, conjuring up some other, arcane realm of existence. A normal mystic is not a cave-dwelling Corybant practicing secret rituals. He is normal.

Still the tag “mystic” remains. For a normal mystic is one who sees—or better, feels—the shaping and guiding hand of Divinity in all things. No event, whether personal, political, or natural, is outside the realm of Divine providential concern. The normal mystic is, in the phrase often used to describe the philosopher Spinoza, God-intoxicated. Drunk with the Divine. An awareness of God seeps into all the activities of human life until this unseen presence is taken as the true ground of being, more real that what we glibly dub “reality.”

Normal mysticism was the outlook that shaped the Rabbinic tradition mandating that a blessing be recited for all manner of things: a beautiful sight in nature, an earthquake, a rainbow, a scholar, a potentate, a meal. The great range of experience was related to its origins in the Divine. No natural or human eminence could pass by without the Rabbis acknowledging the presence of grace of Divinity behind it. Without God the mountains would not be raised, not the sea roar. There would be no bread on the table. There would be no governments, societies, glory. There would be no wisdom or wonder. There would be no life. The normal mystic is the exceptional individual who is ever conscious of what is taken to be a pervasive albeit elementary truth: God’s presence and providence are everywhere.

Perhaps we can explain the difference between the mystic and the normal mystic by suggesting that they reach the same place by different routes. Each seeks God. The mystic tries to find God by absenting himself from his fellow human beings, because they are a distraction from the single-minded pursuit of God. By trying to leave the world behind, the mystic seeks to discover its true foundation.

The normal mystic, on the other hand, plunges *into* the world to uncover its foundation. In the eyes of another human being, in the daily activity of average people, the normal mystic sees the presence of God. Not the telescope but the microscope, is the proper scientific analogue: the normal mystic is the searcher for the wonder near at hand. The normal mystic looks at life as you and I know it, but with an acute eye one that tracks the almost imperceptible or often overlooked suggestion of God in every corner, at each turn.