THE REAL QUESTION

RITUALS (THE HAPPINESS LAB)

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CASPER: Hi everyone! It's Casper. We've got a special treat for you this week, because we are sharing an episode of The Happiness Lab, in which I am interviewed. It's hosted by Yale professor Dr Laurie Santos, and she is the professor who leads the wildly successful class at Yale called The Science of Well-Being. And so she brings together in the most wonderful way insights both from science and lived experience. And in this episode, we're exploring the power of ritual. Which you know is a topic close to my heart. And I hope at this point, one that's close to yours, too.

VANESSA: Casper, the reason that we decided to share this episode is that it feels so close to The Real Question, in that the episode is about real concerns that people have, right? Laurie interviews Scott Kelly as sort of an extreme example. He is an astronaut who spent months in space, and he talks about these very highly stressful anxious moments, and he talks about how using ritual can help you feel less anxious, right? These are live questions that you and Laurie are discussing, and I'm wondering what questions you feel like ritual is often an answer to? When people pick up your book, The Power of Ritual, when people listen to an episode like this, what are the questions that they are bringing?

C: Yeah, Ritual can feel sometimes so abstract or complicated, and in fact it can be the answer to such simple everyday questions. I think one of the – the things that I love about ritual is that it gives our life rhythm. And that when we are living in rhythm, there's a stability to our time, to our actions, and so starting with something every morning, or making sure to turn off our phones once a week, or doing something every quarter, like celebrating a new festival. These are ways in which our lives get shape and there's a sense of meaning that happens even within all the instability that life often brings us. So, that's one of the reasons I'm so passionate about ritual, cuz I think it's a really practical way to orient ourselves to the instability of life.

V: Right. And so, I feel like some of the questions, right, are: I get really anxious about this kind of event. How can I help myself to feel less anxious before every time I see my mother-in-law? Or [both laugh] in the middle of COVID I just feel lost in a sea of, like –

C: Yeah.

V: -- meaningless days. How do I give shape to my days? Right? I feel like all of these questions could be brought to this episode that we're about to play.

C: Absolutely. So, although it's an episode of The Happiness Lab, really, we think of it as an extension of The Real Question. So, hope you enjoy this listen, and do check out The Happiness Lab. It has its own feed, of course, and Laurie is amazing. I'm sure you'll fall in love with her just like I did.

[soft music plays under the intro, and throughout most of the episode. It shifts between electronic soundscapes and soft drums, but is always quiet and never distracting]

RICHARD DIMBLEBY [old timey British male radio voice]: We have a saying here, when you're nervous about something, that you have butterflies in the tummy. [soft audience laughter] Can you really, honestly say that you did not have any butterflies in the tummy before you started?

LAURIE: Butterflies in the tummy. The most British question ever. I stumbled across this BBC interview on YouTube and became a bit obsessed. It's 1961, and famed journalist Richard Dimbleby is asking Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, the first man ever to travel to space, if he was nervous in the moments before blast-off.

YURI GAGARIN, IN OLD RECORDING: [laughs] Speaks in Russian.

TRANSLATOR, IN OLD RECORDING: Yes, I can assure you there were no butterflies, moths, or anything else in my stomach. [interviewer and audience laugh]

LAURIE: Yuri was strapped into a tiny capsule on top of a rocket filled with an explosive mix of kerosene and liquid oxygen. He was sitting there all alone, waiting to venture where no other human had ever ventured before.

YURI, IN OLD RECORDING: [speaks Russian]

TRANSLATOR, IN OLD RECORDING: The brief period of time I did spend in the spaceship before the actual take-off, I think I spent in a quite normal condition, and I think the scientists will confirm this by producing the records of my pulse count and so on.

YURI, IN OLD RECORDING: [speaks Russian]

TRANSLATOR, IN OLD RECORDING: And I don't think there were any grounds for me to be seriously anxious, either at that period or at any time throughout the flight.

LAURIE: So, full disclosure, one of the reasons I love listening to this interview is because I've always found Yuri to be, well, kind of swoon-worthy. He has an absolutely amazing smile. And this sort of young Luke Skywalker jedi sort of chill. But the thing I find most attractive about Yuri is the fact that he was pretty much the bravest dude ever. I mean, he's sitting there waiting to blast off into space, and he says he wasn't even scared. Which is pretty incredible, because back in 1961, hopping onto a spaceship was basically like playing Russian Roulette. The Soviets succeeded in getting the first satellite into orbit only a few years before the Vostok I launch. Before Yuri, only a few other living things had been sent outside of the Earth's atmosphere, and the results were shaky. Laika, the first dog in space, scientists sent her up there knowing she wouldn't return alive, and a faulty heat shield finished her off. After her came space pups Lisichka and Bars. They were both killed by explosions soon after blast-off. Then it was Pchyolka and Mushka. They were headed home safely when it looked like they might land outside of Russia by mistake, so Mission Control blew them up. Smelaya and Malyshka did a sub-orbital mission, and nearly made it back safely, except their parachute didn't deploy. Yuri must have known that statistically speaking, he had a decent chance of not making it back to Earth. But despite these odds, he was totally calm when he waited for blast-off. Which is pretty bad ass. These days, the space program is much safer than it was back in 1961, but traveling off of the only planet you've ever known must still be terrifying. How are astronauts able to control their anxiety enough to do something so incredibly scary and brave? Most of us won't be shooting into deep space anytime soon, but the challenge of regulating our anxiety during tough moments isn't just a problem for astronauts. We blast into uncharted territories every time we begin a new job or big project. When we decide to start a family or have our first child. Or even when

we sign on for something that's fulfilling but a little out of our comfort zone. All of these changes require taking one scary step in order to make that giant leap into something better. But boldly going where we've never gone before requires controlling all our anxieties and doubts, and being brave like that can be hard. The good news is that behavioral scientists figured out an unexpected trick we can use to overcome the fear and uncertainty that come with big changes and life events. It's a practice so powerful that NASA and other space programs around the world have employed it for decades. It's also a strategy that earth-bound folks like us can use to feel a little bit more in control when the going gets tough. But be forewarned: The strategy we're about to share might look a little bit more like hokey superstitions than rocket science. [theme music begins] Our minds are constantly telling us what to do to be happy. But what if our minds are wrong? What if our minds are lying to us? Leading us away from what will really make us happy? The good news is that understanding the science of the mind can point us all back in the right direction. You're listening to The Happiness Lab, with Doctor Laurie Santos. [theme music gets louder, fades, ends]

SCOTT KELLY: You know, my philosophy has always been when doing things that are challenging and difficult, especially technically difficult, you just need to be the expert and uh, understand as much as you can.

LAURIE: This is retired astronaut Scott Kelly.

SCOTT: And then everything you don't understand, you need to know where those rocket scientists are located so you can find the right answers from the right people.

LAURIE: Scott is a veteran of four space flights. He's lived in orbit for nearly a year and a half. And maybe it's just a consequence of having done way more terrifying things than the rest of us, but he's got a no-nonsense, totally matter-of-fact attitude. He doesn't seem like the kind of guy who's gonna succumb to any pre-flight jitters.

SCOTT: My thing has always just been trying to just be prepared as possible.

LAURIE: But Scott, like many astronauts, has used a psychological strategy to prepare himself before heading off on his missions. What is this time-worn space program-tested strategy? It's the act of using a simple ritual. Now, my regular listeners may remember that we've talked about rituals before on The Happiness Lab. In an episode called The Power of a Made-Up Ritual, we learned that you can use rituals to feel better after a terrible event, like a breakup or a bereavement. But the power of rituals goes way beyond reducing grief. Astronauts in the space program use a ritual that allows them to follow in the footsteps of giants: the very people who've done the scary thing that they are about to do and have lived to tell the tale. And for Scott, and other modern-day astronauts, that means going back to the days of my Russian cosmonaut crush. It means literally asking, what would Yuri Gagarin do? Or perhaps more accurately, what was it that Yuri Gagarin did on the morning of his pioneering launch?

[sound of a bus braking, stopping, someone walking across gravel]

LAURIE: And that means Scott and his crewmates engage in what might seem like a strange and possibly not so sanitary pre-flight practice.

SCOTT: We get out of the bus taking us to the launch pad, unzip our space suit that has just been pressure checked, and urinate on the tire in the same spot that Yuri Gagarin did. Because [pause] I guess it helps.

LAURIE: Yeah, so, fun fact I forgot to mention earlier, about Yuri's famous Vostok I trip. As Yuri was on his long bus ride out to the launch pad, he really had to pee. Legend has it that he asked the bus driver to stop, hopped off the bus, unzipped his spacesuit, and relieved himself on the bus's back right tire. I mean, when you gotta go, you gotta go. But now, decades later, every bus trip to that Russian Baikonur launch pad includes the very same bathroom break.

SCOTT: It's like kissing the Blarney Stone, I guess. I don't know.

LAURIE: Nowadays, it's not as easy to take the same bathroom break that Yuri did. It's much more of a production. I mean, you can't just unzip a modern spacesuit like you do with a pair of Levis. Several suit techs on board the bus are needed to help astronauts unlock all the cumbersome fasteners. And I imagine the whole process must be kind of annoying, since a bunch of scientists would have just finished conducting a series of elaborate suit safety checks before the spacemen hopped on board. And then there are also women cosmonauts now. They can't just whip it out and pee in the same way Yuri did. So they've had to find creative ways to join in on the tradition.

SCOTT: Sometimes they use a bottle of water, or I've even heard a bottle of urine, to dump it on the tire.

LAURIE: But the tire-peeing stop isn't the only way that Russian cosmonauts ritualistically follow in the footsteps of the first man in space. Two weeks before their launch, they visit Yuri's old office, sign a guestbook, and even plant a tree in the same spot that the first spaceman did before his flight. Forty-eight hours before launch, cosmonauts get a haircut because that's what Yuri did. And the morning of their trip, the crew signs their hotel room door. Because, you guessed it, my space dream boy did the same thing. But the strange cosmonaut customs don't end with Yuri. The Russians also have other weird traditions that copy the behavior of former spacemen. Back in the nineties, Soyuz mission commander Alexander Victorenko asked to have a Russian Orthodox priest bless him and his ship with holy water before the launch. Decades later, this blessing has also become a required part of the Baikonur Cosmodrome pre-flight traditions. Even for American astronauts like Scott, who aren't members of that religion.

SCOTT: I think, especially in the case of the Russians, you don't wanna offend anybody's culture.

LAURIE: But rituals aren't just a Russian thing. On the morning before a big launch at the Kennedy space center, American astronauts often copy the culinary choice of one of their heroes, Alan Shepard, who allegedly enjoyed a breakfast of steak and eggs before his mission. And this traditional, though slightly heavier than necessary breakfast, is followed by yet another time-consuming NASA custom.

SCOTT: At the Kennedy space center, the crew has to play a, uh, a few hands of low-ball poker before you can walk out of the suit-up room. The commander of the mission has to lose a hand. The idea being, then he's gotten rid of all of his bad luck, and we'll have a successful launch. Now, I don't know how much these rituals actually help, but they're more, I would say, superstitious.

LAURIE: Why would one of the most scientifically literate organizations in human history, one that's filled with literal rocket scientists, authorize what seem like dumb and possibly dangerous superstitions that involve opening your intricate spacesuit to pee on a bus tire, or eating a super-heavy meal before

subjecting your bodies to the powerful G-forces of blast-off? They do it because the science shows that rituals like these actually work. But not in the way you might think. There's absolutely no evidence, for example, that these rituals work in a physical way. I mean, no one at NASA really thinks that playing poker will have a tangible causal effect on the physics of a launch.

SCOTT: I don't think if, you know, when I was the commander of the space shuttle, had I not lost that hand in my – the rocket would have blown up. [laughs]

LAURIE: But Scott says he still feels better after participating in these strange practices.

SCOTT: I was given the choice of having the blessing from the Russian Orthodox priest before getting on the Russian Soyuz. I was like, why would you not do that before you're getting on a rocket? I mean, I'm gonna take every advantage I could possibly get, regardless of whether I believe it might work, cuz if it does work, why would you not wanna do it?

LAURIE: And therein lies the power of these strange rituals. They take their effect, not through physical causes, but psychological ones.

[pause]

DAVID DESTENO: One of the benefits that rituals have is that they give us a sense of – of control.

LAURIE: This is David DeSteno, a professor of psychology at Northeastern University

DAVE: And that's really important when you're facing something uncertain like coming illness, loss of a loved one, or a potential of shooting yourself [laughs] into deep space.

LAURIE: Dave's the author of How God Works: The Science Behind Religion's Benefits. His new book explores how rituals, like peeing on a bus tire, can affect our minds and our bodies. He's found that many religions use rituals during situations that activate our anxieties and existential worries. Those big life moments that feel scary and out of control, like becoming an adult, as in the case of coming-of-age rituals like holy confirmation or bat mitzvas. Or another big life transition, one that Dave focuses on a lot in his book: having a new baby.

DAVE: You come home from the hospital and you're carrying this thing that you love and cherish but that depends entirely on you for its needs. And beyond that it can't really tell you [laughs] what its needs are. And so you're dealing with uncertainty no matter what.

LAURIE: Dave remembers feeling this uncertainty first-hand when he became a father.

DAVE: In western society, it's like, you leave the hospital, you're home, many of us are far from family and friends, and we've got this new little one and it's like, oh my gosh, what do I do? [laughs]

LAURIE: Dave has found that many religions seem to deal with this uncertainty through the use of a ritual. In Islam, fathers recite the adhan, or Muslim call to prayer, into a baby's ear just after it's born. Families also place a small piece of softened date into their infant's mouth, symbolizing the fact that the child's life will be filled with sweetness from that moment on. In Shinto, the national religion of Japan, the family of an expectant mother ties a sash around her belly to symbolize all the support and protection that will be available for her new baby. And in Catholicism, the religion I was born into, babies receive their first sacrament of baptism soon after birth, which symbolizes a sort of vaccination against

sin. Each of these religiouss practices comes with an accompanying set of beliefs about why such rituals are supposed to work in a spiritual sense. But what's perhaps most surprising is that we engage in very similar practices outside of a religious context. Think putting on your lucky shirt, or crossing your fingers, or telling your theater buddy to break a leg on opening night.

DAVE: We call them superstition, we call them good luck charms, but they're all accomplishing the same purpose. That is, they're giving us a sense of control.

LAURIE: When we get back from the break, we'll learn about the mind glitch that makes rituals like these so powerful. We'll see that these seemingly weird superstitions can have a surprising confidence-boosting benefit just when we need it most. The Happiness Lab will be right back.

[pause]

[sounds of a tennis match – tennis ball bouncing, then serving. Crowd cheers]

MIKE NORTON: So, one of the biggest points in life when all humans across cultures perform rituals is when they're called on to perform.

FRANCESCA GINO: So for example, tennis start Serena Williams bounces the ball exactly five times before a first serve, and two times before a second serve.

LAURIE: This is Mike Norton and Francesca Gino, a pair of Harvard Business School psychologists. You may remember from a past episode of The Happiness Lab that Mike and Francesca study the psychology of rituals, including all the superstitious behaviors that people engage in ahead of a stressful event. Think: interviewing for a job, going on a first date, or stepping out at Fenway Park

[sounds of Fenway Park – crowd cheering, crack of a baseball bat hitting the ball]

FRANCESCA: Former third baseman for the Boston Red Sox, his name is Wade Boggs, he used to eat chicken before each game and he also used to write the Hebrew word chai, which means life, in the dirt every time he went to bat.

LAURIE: There are a ton of sporting examples just like this. My favorite one is used by British cyclist Laura Kenny. Legend has it that she was trailing at a big meet when she accidentally stepped on a damp towel between races. Even though her sock got all wet, she went on to win the championship. Now, she ritualistically wets her sock before every competition.

FRANCESCA: And this is not just about sports. You can find this type of rituals across other type of performances. So, for example, before every show, ballerina Suzanne Farrell pins a small toy mouse inside her leotard, crosses herself exactly twice, and pinch herself exactly twice before going on stage. Singer Beyoncé listen to the same playlist of song, says a prayer with every member of her band, completes a specific set of stretches, and spend exactly one hour meditating.

LAURIE: Why do so many successful people create these odd rituals before high stress performances? Mike and Francesca hypothesized that practices like these may help performers calm their pre-event jitters.

MIKE: The worst thing you can do is tell yourself to calm down [laughs] because when you tell yourself to calm down, you can't, because that's not how humans work. And then, not only are you anxious about the performance, but now you're anxious that you can't calm down [laughs] and then it's even worse.

LAURIE: It's one thing to hypothesize that Wade Boggs eats a chicken before a game because it calms his nerves and makes him play better. But it's also pretty hard to test that empirically. So Mike and Francesca decided to use an experiment with ordinary folks. They figured out a way to simulate a high stress performance situation under laboratory conditions. They recruited some test subjects and had them sing Don't Stop Believing by Journey.

MIKE: Which is not only a terrible song, but an incredibly [laughs] difficult song to sing, and they had to sing it in front of other people.

LAURIE: Here's how the study worked:

[sound of door opening and closing, footsteps]

LAURIE, ACTING AS SCIENTIST: Okay, welcome to the study, um, so in this experiment you are going to sing Don't Stop Believing, and we're gonna track how well you do.

LAURIE: All the subjects had to sing into a computer, which marked exactly how good they were at hitting the different notes. And to make the situation even more nerve-wracking, subjects were faced with an unforgiving audience. A stern-looking scientist watched them throughout the entire performance. But before the scary karaoke experience, half the subjects took part in a ritual.

LAURIE, ACTING AS SCIENTIST: Okay I want you to do the following: draw a picture of how you're feeling right now. [pause] Now sprinkle salt on your drawing. [pause] Count up to five out loud. One, two, three, four, five. Crinkle up your paper. [paper crumpling sounds] Okay, now throw the paper into the trash. [sound of paper falling into trash can]

LAURIE: So what happened?

RECORDING OF MALE PARTICIPANT SINGING DON'T STOP BELIEVING, VOICE STRAINED AND OFF-KEY: He took a midnight train going anywhere. [voice breaks and participant laughs on the last word]

LAURIE: The singers who didn't participate in a ritual scored around sixty-six out of a hundred for accuracy. They sucked.

RECORDING OF TWO FEMALE PARTICIPANTS SINGING DON'T STOP BELIEVING, ON KEY: Just a city boy [one participant giggles] born and raised in south Detroit. [continue singing with volume low underneath Laurie's next words]

LAURIE: But participants who had drawn a picture, put salt on it, counted to five, and balled it up scored higher. They averaged seventy-eight percent accuracy. That's like jumping from a D to a C+.

MIKE: Now, are rituals magic and you're an amazing singer? Not at all. But they do seem to help people a little bit. They're kind of one tool that we have to help in these situations.

LAURIE: But what really explains the performance gap between the ritual and the no-ritual subjects? To figure out, Mike and Francesca monitored the singers' heart rates and asked them to describe their emotions and anxiety levels.

FRANCESCA: And what we also found is that their level of anxiety was lower when they engaged in the ritual. And that's why they ended up performing better.

LAURIE: On a seven-point scale, the ritual participants rated their anxiety around a four out of seven. But those who had to sing without a fake ceremony to calm their nerves were significantly more scared. They reported anxiety levels of six out of seven. That's a pretty major shift. Mike and Francesca had discovered that rituals allow us to feel better and do better. It's almost like getting a performance enhancing drug. But the effect of rituals isn't limited to quelling stage fright, or pre-game nerves. Rituals can also help us when tackling challenges that take place away from the public eye.

FRANCESCA: One interesting aspect of rituals that we discovered in our research is that rituals can also be quite helpful as we're trying to have self-control.

LAURIE: There are lots of things that we wanna do that take commitment and effort. Think habits related to our health and fitness, or a desire to learn a new skill. To succeed, we need to show discipline and persistence, and that's not always easy. So could a ritual help us with these tough private habits, too?

FRANCESCA: For one of our studies, we recruited people who were interested in losing some weight.

LAURIE: All subjects were asked to cut their calories by ten percent, but half were also asked to do a ritual. Before every meal, they had to cut their food into tiny pieces, arrange the pieces so that they were perfectly symmetrical, and press their utensils on top of the food pieces three times. What happened? On average, participants in the ritual condition ate around two hundred calories less than the people in the no-ritual condition.

FRANCESCA: They were in fact better able to keep their weight under control, simply because they add this routine of engaging in the ritual on day-to-day basis.

LAURIE: So once again, ritual is shown to have a powerful effect. But Mike and Francesca are quick to point out that there are better and worse ways to pick a ritual.

MIKE: It seems like the key thing that makes rituals work is that you have imbued it with some sense of symbolic value or meaning.

LAURIE: This is one of the reasons that religious rituals are so common. Lots of people have faith backgrounds that give meaning to ritualistic acts. Like saying a prayer before a challenging or scary event. But scientists like David DeSteno have found that our personal rituals also work better when we're really convinced they're going to work

DAVE: Belief really matters, especially when we're talking about situations where there's uncertainty. I mean, uncertainty in life is one of the major causes of stress that we have.

LAURIE: Dave has found that there are a few ways that people come to really believe in the weird rituals they use. One comes from a ritual's rich history, like cosmonauts following in the footsteps of Yuri Gagarin. We tend to believe rituals more when they've worked in the past. Especially when they worked for us personally in the past. Take cyclist Laura Kenny's wet sock ritual. Her own experience of wet socks

before a major victory convinced her that wetting her socks was the way to go for every subsequent race. Those accidental connections can have a big effect on our beliefs.

DAVE: You know, it worked. Let's keep doing it.

LAURIE: But Dave has also found that an authority figure telling you what to do can boost a ritual's believability. Mike and Francesca's weight lost subjects probably bought the foot chopping practice in part because they had an official-looking scientist implying that this pre-eating ritual might help.

DAVE: You have to believe that this works and in the person is giving it to you, and it works better if you feel comfortable and connected to the person who's giving it to you.

LAURIE: And once a belief about a ritual and its effectiveness is in place, our bodies have a clear mechanism to start behaving differently.

DAVE: One of the ways by which rituals can work is the placebo effect.

LAURIE: Dave argues that ritualistically peeing on a bus tire or wearing a wet sock works pretty much like getting an inert dummy pill and thinking it's a real medicine. If we believe peeing on a bus will make a launch go smoothly, our bodies automatically react differently. They show less of a stress response, which can help us perform better. And much like so-called open label placebos, in which a fake drug can still reduce our symptoms even when we know it's fake, our bodies still react to weird rituals.

DAVE: It works just the same. Even though you know it's a placebo. Which to me is just amazing.

LAURIE: But: Dave also finds that you can't scrimp on performing the ritual itself.

DAVE: The person can't just say to you, you're healed. There has to be some action. Without that, there's nothing for the brain to latch on to.

LAURIE: Dave's work has shown that even you skeptics out there can benefit from rituals, as long as your brains have something to latch on to. Which begs the question: which new rituals are you going to dream up? And which ones are most likely to work best? After the break, we'll meet someone who creates effective rituals for a living, and whose own personal ritual for reducing anxiety is a bit strange. In fact, it involves Tom Hanks.

CASPER TER KUILE: There was this one scene where Meg Ryan's character is like, writing after this kind of heartbreak moment, and it felt like she was speaking to my soul.

LAURIE: The Happiness Lab will be right back.

[pause]

CASPER: Great, okay, I am recording at my end. Um, and I am all ready to roll.

LAURIE: This is Casper ter Kuile. Casper is a ministry innovation fellow at Harvard Divinity School, author of the book The Power of Ritual, and a founder of the Sacred Design Lab. Casper has his own ritual practice, but the ceremony doesn't involve any special candles or incantations. [pause] When most people think about a sacred ritual, they don't necessarily think about watching some bad rom-com movie.

CASPER: Bad rom-com, Laurie? [both laugh] I'm kidding, sorry.

LAURIE: Is it not a rom com?

CASPER: No, but it's good! [still laughing] I'm sorry to interrupt.

LAURIE: Casper's ritual is to watch the 1998 Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks film, You've Got Mail.

CASPER: I was, I think, thirteen maybe fourteen. I grew up in England and I was a little gay boy in a boy's boarding house with fifty testosterone-fueled teenagers and feeling very much outside of my comfort zone. And I remember this movie coming on, maybe late on a Saturday evening or something. And there was this one scene where Meg Ryan's character is like, writing after this kind of heartbreak moment, an email out to this man who stood her up who she thought she was in love with. And she says, like, very earnestly, like, "Good night, dear void. Even if these letters don't reach anyone, I still wanna say them." And it felt like she was speaking to my soul.

LAURIE: As an adult, Casper returns to You've Got Mail whenever he's in a bad emotional place. But Casper doesn't treat the film like other movies he loves. For him, You've Got Mail is special. Watching it includes all the hallmarks of a sacred ritual.

CASPER: This is a movie that I always watch on my own. One of the things I really like to do is to watch it on DVD, like the physical item of it is still kind of important to me. Just the physicality of like putting in that DVD into the DVD player, the music of the menu and the options, like, there's so much that just takes me right back to that feeling of being a young teenager who's kind of lost in the world. And then you know, I will say the lines with the movie as it runs. You know. "I'm going to the nutshop where it's fun!" [laughs] It's just one of these little – these little quotes where I will literally say out loud as the movie plays. And so it's kind of like a conversation that I feel like I'm in with the movie.

LAURIE: Casper's You've Got Mail practice also includes another important element in so many rituals. Food. In his case, a full pint of Haagen Dazs.

CASPER: With other tubs of ice cream, I promise myself that I won't eat the whole thing, even though I eventually do. With this one, I just fully accept that we're going all the way in with the whole tub, and like, don't pretend otherwise. So, it's just a spoon and a tub of pralines and cream. [laughs]

LAURIE: Now, to many of us, downing a tub of ice cream over a chick flick might seem like a relatively mundane event. The kind of thing many people do when they're feeling blue. But as Casper spoke more about You've Got Mail, it was clear that his experience of watching the movie and the benefits he received from the practice were something much more profound.

CASPER: It's just one of those movies that I turn to, to kind of speak to the – the feeling of emptiness and – and it – and it takes me into a place of joy and I – I feel like that's one of the beautiful things about rituals, is that they can help us change the state of being that we're in, right? From one state into another. And so I'm very fierce about like not letting anyone watch it with me, because like this is a sacred space for just me and this movie.

LAURIE: When people think of a ritual that's particularly sacred, they don't necessarily think of like a cheesy nineties movie, but you've argued that this is exactly the kind of thing we can turn into a ritual

CASPER: Yeah, that's right. Like, so often when we think about a ritual, we think of something that's really complicated or – or maybe even kind of exoticized. Right? Monks on some distant mountain, or a very complex religious ritual. And I'm really passionate about finding ritual in the day-to-day habits and routines that we have. The places that we already have a glint of meaning can become the kind of fountain from which a ritual develops. And so, this movie had such particular meaning for me, and – and I started to realize, like huh, if I think about the way in which we add a layer of meaning onto a habitual practice, there's an opportunity for me to really think about this in a ritual way, and to take more seriously the role that it plays in my life.

LAURIE: Casper thinks that you should develop a similarly sacred ritual. But he's not going to insist that it involve Tom Hanks or Meg Ryan. At the Sacred Design Lab, the startup Casper co-founded, Casper and his colleagues have researched centuries of human culture to figure out how to create a meaningful ritual for today.

CASPER: So, the way I think about how to do that is really this tryptic of having an intention before you start, paying attention while you're practicing, and then repeating it over time. So: intention, attention, repetition.

LAURIE: Let's break that down. First, intention. Intention means that you have to mark out the practice you're about to embark on as being special or holding a particular meaning. Think cyclist Laura Kenny preparing her socks. When she places down that dampened dowel, she intentionally recalls her victory at the junior championship years before. The next part of the practice is attention. Attention means focusing your mind on the ritual and being present and mindful during it. For Laura Kenny, that must mean noticing and attending to the water soaking through her socks. I mean, it's hard to think about anything else when you have wet socks, right? The final part of the ritual tryptic is repetition. Casper says you gotta perform the practice over and over and over again so that your brain recognizes that something significant is taking place.

CASPER: I mean, one of the beautiful things about ritual is that it really is like time travel. Because when you practice something really intentionally as it has been done before, it feels like you're falling through time into each of those previous experiences.

LAURIE: So what kind of ritual should you pick when you're feeling the need to reduce your anxiety and perform better? Do you just pluck something out of thin air? Casper thinks the most powerful rituals have meaning, often because they're deeply rooted in our personal or family history.

CASPER: So many rituals become meaningful because they're not created out of nothing, but they come out of something that we recognize. Maybe it's a story that we were told as a kid. You know, maybe it's something that we saw happen to our parents or – or we know that it's a tradition in our family. That's where so much of the meaning comes from. Sometimes people who wanna create cool ritual will start from you know a blank canvas. And it always feels a little empty, honestly, like a little thin. Because they're not engaging with tradition in some way.

LAURIE: For Casper, there's a truly spiritual element to these mundane or even odd rituals. He argues, we shouldn't be ashamed of our personal customs. Just because they aren't endorsed by a particular church or faith.

CASPER: When we can see the sacred in our everyday, that's really what meaning making is all about. It shouldn't be reserved just for professionals at retreat centers, or you know, two or three days a year when we feel like we're making a real effort. Like, the – the sacred is within and between us all the time. And of course, you know, on the face of it, these rituals look a little silly. But when we really engage with them, with a sense of reverence, it's amazing how powerful they can be. Whether they're placebos or not, these are tools for our psychology that can be incredibly powerful in helping us get to a kind of metal state that – that we wanna be in.

LAURIE: This is usually the point in the show where I give you some specific ideas about how to adopt a happiness tip into your daily life. But picking a ritual to reduce your anxiety and perform better whether that's in school, in the office, on the sports field, or the karaoke stage, that's something you have to do for yourself. The science shows that a ritual can help a lot, but the particular ritual you pick for you requires the right personal combination of meaning, history, and significance. The good news is that you don't need to get too hung up on the specifics. A wet sock, a special breakfast, a favorite movie, any act that's meaningful to you can turn into a ritual that makes you feel and perform better. I began this episode talking about how modern cosmonauts ritualistically copy Yuri Gagarin's urination practice. But when I was working on this episode, I learned that the Russian space program recently announced that they'd soon be unveiling a new, lighter spacesuit, one with a ton of new scientific bells and whistles. Which might sound like a good idea, except no one thought to tell the designers about this all-important pre-flight leak practice. Tragically, the new and improved Russian spacesuit, it has no zipper. Which means the days of Yuri Gagarin's bus stop ritual might be numbered. Which is a real shame. Losing out on this time-horned ritual won't just erode an important present-day link to the pioneering bravery of Yuri and other early spacemen, I also worry it could compromise future cosmonauts' performance. Because no matter how dumb and slightly yucky this and other rituals may sound, the science shows that they may be contributing more than we think to all of our missions' successes.

[pause]

The Happiness Lab is co-written and produced by Ryan Dilley. Our original music was composed by Zachary Silver, with additional scoring, mixing, and mastering by Evan Viola. Joseph Friedman checked our facts. Sophie Crane McCibbon edited our scripts. Marilyn Rust offered additional production support. Special thanks to Mia Label, Carlie Migliori, Heather Vane, Maggie Taylor, Daniella Lucarn, Maya Kenig, Nichole Morano, Eric Sandler, Royston Bazer, Jacob Weisburg, and my agent Ben Davis. The Happiness Lab is brought to you by Pushkin Industries and me, Doctor Laurie Santos.