

© Erica Helm Meade, MA, LMHC, 07/21/2015

This article does not substitute for medical, mental or behavioral health care and is not intended to diagnose or treat medical, mental or behavioral health conditions. If you have concerns about such conditions, please consult a medical, mental or behavioral health professional.

CEREMONY AND RITUAL: Celebrating Life Cycles, Activating Meaningful Change

It's hard to imagine life without baptisms, graduations, weddings and funerals, and without seasonal holidays to punctuate the year. Such rituals mark time and energize important transitions. They honor life passages and make sacred the seasonal cycles, accentuating completions and new beginnings. Whether we're partaking of established rituals, or making new ones, we come together in a shared recognition of what matters.

The word *ceremony* shares roots with *Ceres*, the Roman goddess of agriculture and the growing cycle. Tilling, sowing, tending and harvest have long represented the cycles of life to the human community. This still holds true whether we're tilling actual soil, or sowing metaphorical seeds for a generative new chapter of life.

Before creating our own ceremonies it helps to look at what's gone before. Ritual has occupied much of human energy since the dawn of measured time. Some of the universal components of ritual include spoken word, particularly in praise and in giving thanks; rhythm from instruments of all kinds, including the human voice; procession and dance; symbolic gesture; fasting and feasting. These elements help groups resonate as one. They spark our emotions, benefit our brains and nervous systems, enhance our focus, and heighten our intention and commitment. They help honor forces greater than ourselves, adding poignancy to our experience and securing meaningful moments into long-term memory.

Like many people I first experienced ritual as a child in church. Easter Sunday and Christmas Eve offered especially rich music, processions and pageants, as did weddings, baptisms and funerals. For a while my mother directed our choir and led a folk mass. I relished the anticipation and excitement of these events and will never forget their magic.

As a young adult, my interest in indigenous life took me to the highlands of Guatemala, where I interviewed players of the folkloric ritual, *The Dance of the Deer*. The ritual was meant to unite all creatures (including humans) in expressing their conviviality with one another and with the mountains, forest and forces of nature. Each member of the village had a role in the preparations—there were props to be gathered, costumes and

musical instruments to be made, rehearsals, and cooking for the feast that would follow the ritual. The ritual itself was a passion play of sorts, full of bawdy humor propelled by shared strife and camaraderie. It culminated in a scene of affectionate reverence for the patron saint of the village. The indigenous world view and the local catholicism seemed to find a happy coexistence in the event. What struck me most was that everyone, young and old, got involved and all expressed joy and solemnity.

Indigenous peoples seem to be at one with such experiences. Sobonfu Some, of Burkina Faso Africa, has for decades brought her Dagara tribal rituals to her students in Europe and North America. In Dagara, Sobonfu's name means "Keeper of Rituals." Her work focuses on grief, rites of passage and healing. (<http://www.sobonfu.com>) Ritual is an integral part of life in the village where she grew up. Sobonfu and I worked together for many years, weaving ritual and traditional myth together in events geared to transformation and healing. Sobonfu encourages us Westerners to understand the elements of ritual and to use them to focus our intention for healing and meaningful change. If a need arises, and there is no ritual for it, Sobonfu encourages her students to create one.

Thanks to Sobonfu and other indigenous teachers, this approach is catching on in many communities. Parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts now organize rites of passage rituals for young people coming of age. In place of baby showers we now get invited to "baby blessings," that bring a ritual focus to the wonders of life-in-the-making. End-of-life memorial ceremonies have become more personal and less formulaic now that loved ones of the deceased have a hand in the design of such rituals.

In creating rituals we may sense that some events call for established customs and solemnity, while others call for more whimsy and spontaneity. These days it's not hard to find a pastor, priest, imam, Rabi, monk or shaman with an open mind who is willing to officiate your wedding or to bless your garden or home in a tone and style that befits your sensibilities. We can also commemorate special events with home-spun self-guided rituals of all kinds. Examples in our neighborhood have been back-yard pet burials and the blessing of a beekeeper's bees.

Elements for a ceremony can be drawn from one's own ethnic heritage. My husband and I chose an Irish village custom, "the casting of the pebbles," at our small wedding set on a lake. Our procession began with a walk around the lake, my family walking counterclockwise and my husband's walking clockwise, to meet in the middle for the thanksgiving and exchange of vows. We asked our loved ones to each pick up a small stone from the path as we walked and imbue it with good wishes for our marriage. After my husband and I had said our vows, our loved ones voiced their good wishes

aloud. These were more delightful and deep than any prewritten script might have been. When finished, we cast the pebbles into the lake in one unified shower. Their splash followed by overlapping concentric ripples held meaning for all and drew celebratory hoots and hollers fitting the spirit of the moment.

Below are a just few of the many resources available for aiding in the design of rituals.

Luisha Teish's JUMP UP: Good Times Throughout the Seasons with Celebrations from Around the World provides seasonal rituals from many traditions.

Shea Darian's LIVING PASSAGES FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY: Celebrating Rites of Passage from Birth to Adulthood offers over twenty rites of passage rituals as well as ideas for adults who wish to reclaim missing passages from their pasts.

Faith Moore's book, CELEBRATING A LIFE: Planning Memorial Services and Other Creative Remembrances helps in the making of rituals and events to honor and commemorate those we care about.

Spirituality and Health magazine offers cleansing rituals, one for home and one for self:
<http://spiritualityhealth.com/blog/celebrant-institute/cleansing-ritual-making-home-feel-good-again>
<http://spiritualityhealth.com/articles/ancient-art-smudging>

Deepak Chopra offers a therapeutic letting-go ritual, "Release the Past and Return to Love." <http://www.chopra.com/ccl/how-to-release-the-past-and-return-to-love>

There are countless books on designing wedding ceremonies both religious and secular. Here a wedding officiant gives ten tips for getting started on creating your own :// [www.huffingtonpost.com/judith-johnson/ten-secrets-to-creating b 840510.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/judith-johnson/ten-secrets-to-creating-b-840510.html)