

"Thank You for Your Loving Hands"

Thank you for your loving hands, your loving heart, your loving ways—
Thank you for the gifts you bring into the world each day.
And if you ever doubt yourself, remember us, who love you well—
We know all the gifts you bring into the world each day.
So thank you for your loving hands, your loving heart, your loving ways,
Thank you for the gifts you bring into the world each day.
—by Judy Fjell and Lisa Bregger

The Covenant

I commit myself:

- to come to meetings when I possibly can, knowing that my presence is important to the group
- to honor the group by letting the leader know if I will be absent, and to come to the group one last time and say good-bye if I need to quit
- to avoid cross talk, giving feedback or trying to fix anyone
- to share with the leader the responsibility for good group process by watching how much time I take to speak and noticing what is going on for others
- to not gossip about what is shared in the group, and not tell other people's stories
- to listen to what others share with an open heart, and to share deeply in my turn

Covenant Groups

Ritual



Rituals are the formulas by which harmony is restored.
—Terry Tempest Williams

Ritual

Chalice Lighting

We light the candle so it can illuminate our surroundings.
We also invite it into our experience by opening our eyes.
May we use our time together to illuminate our spiritual experience
And use this ritual to invite illumination in our hearts.

—Mary Morell

Sharing of Joys and Sorrows

Silence

Silence, holding ourselves and each other in silent support.

Shared Readings

[Celebrations]

I keep a notebook and I write the date
and then I write about the celebration.
I'm very choosy over what goes in that book.
It has to be something I plan to remember
The rest of my life.

You can tell what's worth a celebration because your heart will POUND
and you'll feel like you're standing on top of a mountain
and you'll catch your breath
like you were breathing some new kind of air.

—Byrd Baylor

Easy for all to offer in worship a green leaf to the Lord.
Easy for all to give a mouthful to the cow.
Easy for all to give a handful when sitting down to eat.
Easy for all to speak pleasant words to others.

—Tirumantiram (Hindu text)

(Hindus use tulsi, a basil plant, in a symbolic daily ritual.)

He poured water into the basin and started washing his students' feet
and drying them with the towel around his waist. So he comes to Peter
who says to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"

Jesus answered, "For now you don't know what I'm doing, later
you will know."

—Gospel of John

And thou shalt take the anointing oil, and anoint the tabernacle, and all
that is therein, and shalt hallow it, and all the vessels thereof; and it
shall be holy. And thou shalt anoint the altar of the burnt-offering, and
all its vessels, and sanctify the altar; and it shall be an altar most holy.

—Exodus (Hebrew scriptures)

In ancient China tortoise shells were used for ritual divination—a way of
holding conference, so to speak, with Heaven. The shells were fired
until they cracked, and the patterns then revealed (conferred) the
meaning. Chang-tzu, a good Taoist, saw all this as a bit too forced and
preferred to remain aloof from such aggressive conferring. When real
conferring comes, it comes peaceably and with certitude.

—Aaron Zerah

Deep Sharing and Deep Listening

So what do we do in a circle of trust? . . . we speak our own truth; we
listen receptively to the truth of others; we ask each other honest, open
questions instead of giving counsel; and we offer each other the
healing and empowering gifts of silence and laughter.

—Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness*

Round 1: Briefly share a ritual that you already perform.

Round 2: Please share your thoughts and stories related to any of the
quotes or questions in the homework or bulletin.

Round 3: Share anything significant to you that came up during the
second round.

Closing Words

We extinguish the chalice here that it might glow gently in our hearts.
May it light your path as you leave this place. May it guide your way
until we are together again.

—Martha L. Munson

Closing Song

"Thank You for Your Loving Hands"

Group Business

Homework for the next meeting.

Homework: Ritual

Crossing the field, I always walked in the same place. I wanted to wear a path. I wanted to make a mark so others would know I had been there.

—Wallace Stegner

Repetition is the heart of ritual. It is so important that ritual is occasionally used as a synonym for a repeated act, as in “he poured his ritual morning coffee.” But it goes beyond repetition into the much wider field of using repetition to access meaning and goals. Every known religion has rituals. A belief system without rituals is more likely to be described as a philosophy rather than a religion. Ritual is very important to identification with a group even if the group has nothing spiritual about it. Thus “secret handshakes” bond groups of boys whether in fraternities or street gangs.

The breadth of usefulness of ritual is rather amazing. Almost any goal can bend ritual to its purpose. From the banality of morning coffee to the heart-rending sound of “Taps,” repetition has power. It creates habits, often habits of emotion. When ritual is linked with symbol, its power increases exponentially. Sensory impact also increases the power of ritual. Incense, music, oils, and vibrant colors are often associated with ritual because they work.

When the KKK organized they did not create new rituals. Instead they adapted ones they already knew from their Scottish roots. St. Andrew’s guild was a group of handlers of draft horses. They used white garments with white hoods and had ritual fires, and so on. Often religions borrow from one another. Prayer beads, used by Buddhists in 500 BC and by the Hindus in 150 BC, later became rosaries in the Christian faith.

A strong connection to the natural world is another multiplier for ritual strength. Time (such as change of season) and location have an honored place in many pagan rituals. Chaco Canyon is a very large complex of buildings, and many archeologists are now convinced that its sole purpose was to house rituals that were connected with certain days of the year such as the solstices and equinoxes.

Ritual establishes sacred space as a crossing-over point between the spiritual and the mundane so that the participants can move beyond the confines of ordinary reality.

—Michelle Belanger

We have not forgotten the old ways
How could I say that I do not know how to dance?
We still know how to dance
We have forgotten nothing
We know how to call rain.

—Kogi tribal song (Native American)

Rituals are a good signal to your unconscious that it is time to kick in.

—Anne Lamott

Questions to Ponder

- Describe a ritual that you already perform. Do you use ritual objects to enhance the experience? How do they add to its effectiveness?
- Consider rituals that you have been a part of. Have any affected you very deeply? What was it about the ritual that got to you?
- Think of a time when ritual helped you bridge from the mundane to the transcendent (the earthly to the sacred).
- What ritual would you recommend to others and why?
- What rituals in your life are you questioning the validity of?

Exercises

Try at least two of these exercises.

Exercise 1

Most people in the U.S. find their life very cluttered. Empty your sock drawer next to where you are sitting. Form the intention of de-cluttering your life with a ritual of examination and rejection. Pick up a pair of socks. Tell it that it is going to be tested for its place in your life. Develop a repetitive phrase, such as “I examine you,” which you will say to each pair in turn. After you have said this phrase, examine the socks, pass judgment, and either return them to the sock drawer or toss them in the trash. This is no time for mercy. When you are done, say to the socks in the drawer, “You are worthy of the space you occupy. Thank you for your service.” Pick another area of your life that needs a ritual cleansing. Go for it!

Exercise 2

Imagine that you have lost a beloved pet. Devise a ritual to mark its passing. Consider what your goal is in this ritual. Include elements that are likely to accomplish this goal. Write a eulogy for the pet. What ritual objects could be included, and how would they be used?

Exercise 3

Identify an area in your life where you would like to see change. Devise a ritual that might help you create change. Give it a try. Would an altar help? Use pictures, statues, fabric, toys, natural objects, or crafts to create a place for meditation, reflection, or inspiration (much like the altar we create at each covenant group meeting, with a cloth and candle, where we light the chalice).

Leader's Guide: Ritual

Chalice Lighting (2 min)

Ask someone to read the chalice lighting reading found in the bulletin.

We light the candle so it can illuminate our surroundings.
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May we use our time together to illuminate our spiritual experience
And use this ritual to invite illumination in our hearts.

—Mary Morell

Sharing of Joys and Sorrows (10 min)

Ask group members to tell in one or two sentences: “How you are today?” Share information about absent members.

Silence (3 min)

Give your group the gift of three minutes of silence. Time it!

Shared Readings (5 min)

Go around your group, letting each person in turn read from the shared readings found in the bulletin until all the readings are finished.

Deep Sharing and Deep Listening (65 min)

Ask someone to read the Parker J. Palmer quote in the bulletin.

Do your rounds of deep sharing and deep listening. Pay close attention to the time allotted each person to ensure that all get to share at least once.

Round 1 (10 min): Briefly share a ritual that you already perform. Be prepared to go first to model.

Round 2 (40 min): Please share your thoughts and stories related to any of the quotes or questions in the homework or bulletin. Go first to model.

Round 3 (15 min): Share anything significant to you that came up during the second round.

Closing Words (1 min)

We extinguish the chalice here that it might glow gently in our hearts. May it light your path as you leave this place. May it guide your way until we are together again.

—Martha L. Munson

Closing Song (1 min)

“Thank You for Your Loving Hands”

Group Business (5 min)

Pass out the homework for next time.