

Preparation for Ritual

The Cambridge Dictionary defines “ritual” as “a set of actions or words performed in a regular way,” often as part of a religious ceremony. The Wikipedia article on ritual suggests that rituals are part of all human societies and include many kinds of events that carry significance, including coming of age, marriage, and even political occasions. Some UUs, however, might be uncomfortable with the idea of rituals, considering them associated with religions they don’t believe in or indigenous cultures to which they don’t belong. We may feel that ritual doesn’t have a place in our lives, except for that “ritual” morning cup of coffee. But rituals are powerful and meaningful, and it is worthwhile to consider what kind of role they might have for us.

Ritual defines us. When a child matures into adulthood, ritual is used to communicate the importance of a person’s life. Coming of Age rituals lay out what will be expected in adulthood as well as setting positive intentions for the person’s future.

Ritual connects us to our cultures and our history. When we take part in a birth ceremony or a marriage, we can look back and feel the history of a ritual weaving us into an extensive fabric of time and persons who have previously performed the same rites and ceremonies.

Ritual connects us to the places we are from. Many indigenous nature-based religions have rituals that take their cues from natural occurrences – the changing of seasons, the migration of animals, or the blooming of flowers that might mark a time of year; often in thanks to nature for providing the gifts of the Earth that allow us to live.

Although the dictionary says “actions and words,” ritual is much more. Words, tastes, smells, sounds, colors, motions – all contribute to the immersive sensory and emotional experiences that make up rituals. The sound of chanting, singing, or our own prayer can help to focus our thoughts and emotions, while the fragrance of burning incense can create a sacred space that seems to clear negative energy. Tasting and eating the bitter herbs that are part of the traditional Jewish Passover Seder remind participants of the bitter suffering that Jewish ancestors have historically endured. For Hindus, throwing vibrantly colored chalk at each other during the Holi festival can bring people together in joy and laughter. The body itself can be the medium of ritual, whether in the physically active Sufi “whirling Dervish” form or in the stillness of a sitting meditation. The tastes, smells, sounds, colors, and motions of ritual are immersive and emotion-filled, but they also carry deep symbolic significance.

What rituals are available to us as UUs? We often use rituals in services because they carry both meaning and emotional power. We celebrate coming of age and we perform child dedications, even anointing children with water. Our Pagan members often guide us in seasonal rituals.

Some modern spiritual leaders suggest that we are free to create our own rituals to embody meaningful life transformations. If you wish to create your own ritual to lend deeper significance to a family tradition or to mark some significant event – celebrating a season, commemorating a loss, or honoring a transition in your life – consider the sources of rituals’ power: sensory experience, repetition and immersion, the association of words, actions, and sensations with symbolic meanings. Ritual does not have to be “lost” to us; we can find its power for our lives.

The purpose of ritual is to wake up the old mind in us ... The old ones inside us, the collective unconscious, the many lives, the different eternal parts, the senses and parts of the brain that have been ignored. *Zsuzsanna Budapest*

Rituals are not fixed – they are constructed and reconstructed over time, to fit people’s needs.
Dr. Gleb Tsipursky

Ritual is able to hold the long-discarded shards of our stories and make them whole again. It has the strength and elasticity to contain what we cannot contain on our own, what we cannot face in solitude.
Francis Weller

A ritual is an organization of mythological symbols; and by participating in the drama of the rite one is brought directly in touch with these, not as verbal reports of historic events, either past, present, or to be, but as revelations, here and now, of what is always and forever. *Joseph Campbell*

We learn through ritual that the church is not just made up of individuals, but is a corporate body ... bound to one another and to the faithful through the generations. *Peter Enns*

This world owes its life to the unseen. Every hunt and every harvest, every death, and every birth is distinguished by ceremony for that which we cannot see, feeding back that which feeds us.
Toko-pa Turner

He loved the darkness and the mystery of the Catholic service – the tall priest strutting like a carrion crow and pronouncing magic in a dead language, the immediate magic of the Eucharist bringing the dead back to life so that the faithful could devour Him and become of Him, the smell of incense and the mystical chanting. *Dan Simmons, from The Terror: A Novel*

When humans participate in ceremony they enter a sacred space. Everything outside of that space shrivels in importance. Time takes on a different dimension. Emotions flow more freely. The bodies of participants become filled with the energy of life. *Sun Bear, Wabun Wind, and Chrysalis Mulligan*

Questions to Ponder

1. Did your family take part in any rituals growing up? Describe some sensory aspects (seeing, hearing, tasting, feeling ...) of the ritual(s) and how those sense memories make you feel today.
2. What kind of intent, or mindset, is needed to bring something to the sacred level of a ritual vs. simply a tradition?
3. Has ritual played a part in understanding the expected roles in your family, religion, ethnicity, or community? Do you think the lessons taught stayed with you in a deeper way because of an accompanying ritual?
4. In the book *Eat, Pray, Love*, author Elizabeth Gilbert says, “... I do believe that if your culture or tradition doesn't have the specific ritual you are craving, then you are absolutely permitted to make up a ceremony of your own devising.” How do you feel about this idea?
5. How would adding ritual to your life ground you? Connect you to your spiritual side? Focus you?

Words of the Day

Ritual brings focused intent to a part of life that we want to make sacred. Is there a part of your life where you’d like to focus energy as a sacred priority? For the Gathering, you will complete this sentence: “I’d like to bring the sacredness and focus of ritual to... (this part of my life)”