Making It Through, Together:
Ritual Collection for Life-after-Loss
This collection was created by The Dinner Party with generous funding from Lippman Kanfer Foundation for Living Torah.

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INTRODUCTION:

Why ritual for navigating life after loss?

“We thought we could cure everything, but it turns out that we can only cure a small amount of human suffering,” says doctor-healer Rachel Naomi Remen in an OnBeing interview with Krista Tippett. “The rest of it needs to be healed, and that’s different.”

Fixing is not a sufficient strategy to deal with loss. Major losses fundamentally change our world. Rather than defaulting to curing, we can, as Remen says, “[realize] that our loss, whatever it is, has become a part of us and has altered our lives so profoundly that we cannot go back to the way it was before.”

Healing that does not insist on fixing means embarking on a process of integrating our losses into our new lives and identities. For many, this involves the revisiting of cultural and spiritual beliefs and practices—or even a reimagining of our spiritual paths altogether.

Wherever we are in our journeys—and whether or not we identify as spiritual or religious—rituals can serve as crucial guideposts.

While grief often feels like something we get stuck in, that saps us of the energy to figure out how to move into a new physical, energetic, mental, or emotional space, ritual offers a charted course for making it through.
Traditional mourning practices conjure images such as the funeral rite, the weeklong Jewish mourning period of Shiva, and rituals to guide our ancestors’ spirits to the afterlife. These practices, steeped in centuries of wisdom and experience, provide time-honored ways of observing loss that lend a way forward when we are left wondering, “Holy s***. What do we do now?”

Grief rituals can also involve sacred embodied experiences — movement, tearing, screaming — that by nurturing our bodies’ rest-and-restore systems bring us much needed physical relief.

When we were 26 and 32 years old, our fathers died by suicide, catapulting us into worlds we weren’t prepared to encounter. For the last three years, our group with The Dinner Party in Washington, DC has been a space for us to unpack our grief, bringing profound solace and understanding — and helping us extend these to others.

In addition to our Dinner Party group, we’ve found some of our deepest healing and meaning-making in rituals involving everything from dance to yoga to meditation. We hope that this collection of rituals, co-authored by spiritual leaders from across the world, bring you and those you’re grieving alongside comfort, connection, and healing, just as these rituals have held and nurtured us.

It’s never too late to discover and determine what we hold as sacred. As we find our ways, individually and collectively, religiously or not, may this collection help us all to journey together, carving out space and witnessing our fellow travelers at our sides.

With love,
Jonelle Lesniak and Lindsay Bigda
The Dinner Party participants
What am I reading?

This collection of rituals was developed by The Dinner Party (TDP) in partnership with Lippman Kanfer Foundation for Living Torah to elevate spiritual and cultural rituals and practices that people throughout time have used to navigate loss and life after.

The Dinner Party brings together people in their 20s, 30s, and early 40s to combat the isolation that so often comes with grieving the death of someone significant. To create this collection, we worked with 10 spiritual leaders across the world to co-author rituals that could offer healing to those who have experienced loss.

While many of these rituals are translated from the author’s spiritual or cultural tradition(s), others fill a necessary gap — like what to do in the face of losing someone you’re estranged from, or with whom you had a complicated relationship.

Before you dive in and see what resonates with you, we’d like to offer some additional context on the values that ground this collection and how it can best be used:

1. **Collective healing is at the center of this collection, but you may want to experience these rituals alone.** Dominant culture fools us into believing that we can be well without each other, that we can heal from loss in isolation. The Dinner Party strives to debunk this myth, so you’ll notice that each of the rituals in this collection is designed with at least the option of grieving with and alongside other people.

   At the same time, we know that sometimes you just need space to grieve alone, so most of the rituals can be done solo, too!
2. This collection was developed during the COVID-19 pandemic. This context impacts the collection in a number of ways.

- Each ritual was adjusted so that it can be done virtually, given that, at the time the collection was published, it was unclear when in-person gatherings would be safe again.

- Each ritual was designed to be inclusive of those who may, for health reasons or otherwise, be confined to their homes.

- This collection was created at a time of immense personal and collective loss. Some of our authors lost family members to COVID-19, were afflicted with COVID-19 themselves, were impacted financially by the pandemic, and more. The individual and collective trauma of this time cannot be understated. We are so grateful to everyone who contributed to this during such a trying time.

3. A word on cultural appropriation. Cultural appropriation is the adoption of an element or elements of one culture or identity by members of another culture or identity, especially without permission or compensation. This can be a problem when members of a dominant culture appropriate from a non-dominant culture and don’t take the time to educate themselves or practice humility in exploring what others hold sacred.

Each spiritual leader has offered their ritual as a gift to support those who are grieving. If you are performing a ritual in this collection that is not part of your culture, we ask that you take the time to educate yourself by reading the “About the Ritual” section, grounding yourself in the specific perspective and positionality of
the author, and doing any pre-homework that is requested (i.e. watching a video to understand the history of the ritual, etc.).

We all have much to learn from how cultures and traditions outside of our own grieve (hence why this collection exists!). But we cannot ignore power or perform any ritual without the knowledge that we are mere visitors, not experts, in cultures and traditions outside of our own.

4. Not spiritual or religious? Think rituals are woo-woo? That’s okay too! Not everything in here needs to feel sacred to you. This collection is meant to be a diverse, multiple-voices-and-perspectives selection of rituals. As Jonelle and Lindsay shared in the introduction, we believe “it’s never too late to discover and determine what we hold as sacred.” But we also believe that everyone is their own best expert, and we recognize that what one person finds healing, another may not. This collection is designed with that in mind.

Finally, we ask that you take a moment of gratitude for each of our 10 incredible spiritual leaders who contributed to this collection.

Each of your voices, wisdom, creativity, and curiosity is love and light. Thank you.
Want to host or lead a group with rituals from this collection?
Here’s how!

- Share the collection with your group and encourage them to check out the Table of Contents to see which rituals they’re most drawn to.

- Once you’ve decided on the rituals you want to try, make sure that you commit to reading through what the ritual entails the week before your gathering and learning about the context and tradition that the ritual comes from.

- Make note of any supplies you might need (i.e. mug, water, a suggested playlist, etc.) to do the ritual — almost all supplies are things you can very easily find in your home!

- If the ritual calls for a leader, a reader, or some other role, decide who from your group would like to play this role! As host, you’re welcome to lead, but this can also be a cool opportunity for others in your group to step up and try something new.

- You can either do the ritual together as a group in real-time OR do the first part of the ritual alone and then come together to reflect and talk about what the experience was like.

- We’d love to hear about your experiences with these rituals. If you have reactions, thoughts, feelings, suggestions for improvement, etc., tell us here! We always love to hear from you.
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This ritual involves pouring libations in memory of the dead - on an altar or elsewhere, calling the names of the dead, and sharing stories about those who have died.

Meditation Ritual for Estrangement
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This ritual involves meditation and acknowledging those from whom we are estranged.

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By Michelle Scheidt | Catholicism

This ritual involves sprinkling water and asking the questions: Where in your life do you feel like you’re drowning? What helps you come up for air?

Stories of Remembrance
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This ritual involves reflecting on what you’ve learned from the dead and listening to and affirming others who have experienced loss.

Community Guestbook: Closing Ritual
By Becca Bernstein | Judaism + other religions

This is a closing ritual for any groups that have grieved together. It is a chance to share what you’ve noticed and learned from others in your group and their relationships with the dead.
Visitor’s Stone

Rabbi Elan Babchuck

JUDAISM
ABOUT THIS RITUAL

A version of this ritual first appears in the 15th century, when funeral attendees would pluck grass or small pebbles and place them on the grave of the deceased. The intention behind the ritual was to demonstrate to the dead that they were visited, that they were remembered, and that they were beloved in death just as in life. The Hebrew term for this intention is “Kevod Hamet” - respect for the deceased.

Today, you can visit a Jewish cemetery anywhere in the world and find piles of small stones placed upon gravestones. In fact, as you enter the cemetery, you are likely to find a small bowl filled with stones, along with an invitation to take one and place it on the grave of those you’ve lost.

While the ritual is very broad in practice - there’s no one, prescribed way to do it or liturgy to accompany it - the placing of the stone tends to be the last thing one does before ending one’s visit. After all the prayers are said, the conversations had, the tears shed, that’s when one gently places the stone atop the marker, as a way of sealing the visit and leaving something tangible behind.

To say: “I was here for you. With you.”
What does this ritual mean to you?

As my father was preparing for his impending death back in the spring of 2003, his doctors encouraged him to help with the funeral preparations, as a way of taking back some control in the face of what was becoming an increasingly out-of-control disease.

As part of the instructions he would eventually leave for us, he asked that his gravestone be inscribed (along with his name and the appropriate dates and such) with a very simple phrase: “It’s been fun.” He knew how painful his death would be for all of us, but what he wanted most was for his loved ones to eventually be able to visit the cemetery and be lifted up by the immense amount of sheer joy and unadulterated fun we each experienced with him throughout our time with him.

My memory of the first few times visiting his grave is spotty at best, clouded by the downpour of tears I shed each time. I was - and still am - devastated by his absence in my life. But over time, the sharpness of the
pain began to dull, and the message he most wanted to remind us of - the “fun” - began to break through.

The family road trips we took, packed in the wood-paneled minivan and ready to explore the world, near and far. The Sunday afternoons at Halibut Point, leaping from boulder to boulder until we found the perfect, sunny spot for a picnic of juicy summer fruits and salt water taffy. The animated movie festivals at Coolidge Corner movie theater, where we’d buy popcorn but smuggle in Mike and Ike’s because they never had the good candy there. Early mornings out in the backyard, where he and my mom would tend to the sizable vegetable garden while my siblings and me would pretend to help, but mostly focus on scavenging for berries and cherry tomatoes.

If you were to visit my father’s gravestone today, you’d find scattered among the many unique deposits there a sizable rock from Halibut Point, which I retrieved after becoming a father myself and bringing my family with me for a day trip to the beautiful, rocky beach. You’ll find an ordinary-looking pebble, dug out from my backyard during a recent visit to my childhood home, where my mother still toils fruitfully in the garden every spring and summer. You’ll even find a piece of chipped concrete from the sidewalk outside the Coolidge Corner theater, where they still run an animation festival each year.

This ritual, for me, has become a piece of connective tissue between my memories of my own father and my life as it is now.

It’s a way to invite him out of the past and into the present. As I visit each of these beautiful places to make new memories, I leave just enough spaciousness in my mind to search out a keepsake stone and once the right one appears, I pick it up, rub it between my fingers, and tuck it away until my next visit to the cemetery, when I can tell my father all about it.
The Ritual

RETRIEVING THE STONE

If you’re able to travel to any of the places that bring back memories of times you spent with the person or people you’ve lost, find your way to one of those places.

If you’re unable to physically travel to one of those places, try to find a local analog (like a local park as a substitute for the one near your childhood home, etc.). And if you’re unable or choose not to leave your home, then imagine this as a guided imagery exercise, and when you are prompted to search for a stone, open your eyes, walk through your home, and pick up any item of substance that can serve as a “stone” and most draws your attention.

As you make your way to this spot, leave some spaciousness in your heart/mind to wander into a memory of your time in this place.

What comes up for you? What was the weather like on the day that comes to mind? How old were you? What did you talk about? What did you do there, if anything notable?
Let your consciousness settle into the memory slowly, as these stories tend to unfold in a piecemeal fashion until the full picture emerges.

And as it does, allow yourself to sit with any emotion that arises, be it sadness, wistfulness, pain, anger, an overwhelming sense of grief, or something else. Notice the emotion(s), and stay with it (them) for as long as you are called to do so.

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**Once you arrive (physically or virtually) at your destination, keep your eyes open to a stone that yearns to be picked up.**

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In my own experience, I never look for a particular type; the one that’s ready to be retrieved makes itself known to me. Once you pick it up, if you feel comfortable speaking out loud, or to someone who has accompanied you, or even just in your own heart, share the story that came to mind about a time you were in that place with the person or people you lost.

I find that this practice helps me solidify the connection between the stone, the memory, and the place.

When you feel ready, make your way back home, carrying with you the memory of the past, the experience of the present, and the stone that connects them both.

It seals the first part of the ritual, for me, and I hope it will do the same for you.
To share this ritual with a group, go through the first part of the ritual (“Retrieving the Stone”) and bring your stone to your next gathering with your small group. In the small group, each person is invited to:

- Show their stone and share anything about the process of selecting it
- Share the memory they had of the special place they shared with those they’ve lost
- In a second round of sharing, share the experience of visiting that place again to retrieve the stone either in person or in their mind - and what it brought up for them
- To close, if it feels right, write down, draw, or share aloud, “I was thinking of you. I was here.”
Healing Dance and Communal Movement

Lahronda Welch Little

AFRICAN/AFRICAN AMERICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGIONS
The tradition and practice of African drumming and dance exceeds recorded history. The history of African traditional medicine and ritual reaches back thousands of years with Egyptian medicine and the writings of Imhotep c.3000–2500 BCE. Traditional healing, which includes drumming and dance, is a far-reaching and complex web of cultures, religions, and peoples, scores of whom were dragged through the Middle Passage bringing with them centuries of remedies, modalities, and rituals for the sick soul and community.

From Africa to the Americas, dance as a healing modality has been essential in “relieving and treating symptoms of psychological distress, as well as neutraliz[ing] and lessen[ing] the impact of psychological trauma.” Just as the soul of a person, the community, and the spirits are conjoined in traumatic times and healed through dance, the suppression of this ritual and others may result in disparity.

In the African tradition, the ritual of dance can last anywhere from 4–10 days and may include incantations and singing. The communal nature of the ritual creates a space that allows for the community to come together to ward off the feeling of vulnerability and isolation.
What does this ritual mean to you?

The art and ritual of drumming and dance enliven my own rhythm and movement of hope, resilience, and healing. Rhythm and movement are integral to my spiritual practice and my first experience of its power occurred in church - a little Baptist church in Riverdale, Georgia.

As a young teenager, that church was my refuge during the difficult years of adolescence and my parents’ divorce. I grieved the loss of a “normal” two-parent home; I grieved in the confusing, liminal space of puberty; and I carried deep empathy for my mother, which contains its own grief. Yes, that church with her melodious voices, pulsating sounds, and emotive shouts was my safe haven.

Oddly, I didn’t know that the feelings I experienced during my formative years at the Little Church were grief until some time later when I lost my paternal and maternal Grandmothers. Those two women were - and remain - powerful influences in my life. They are the bridge between my place in the diaspora as an African-American and the ways of African spirituality. They were “church women” and pillars in their
communities, respected by people of many cultures. Their transition to ancestorhood reminded me of the pain I felt as a young girl. I discovered, in my grief of their deaths, that on those Sundays at the Little Church when I swayed and danced to the singing and drumming, I was swaying and dancing my feelings and my circumstances. Through dancing, I was grieving, and able to find my way through life.

Five years ago, I took the courageous step to leave a nearly twenty-year career to go back to school and pursue my call to ministry. Or so I thought. The bigger purpose of the transition was to get in touch with my true self, to explore the depths of consciousness and spirituality. It was during this time that I met traditional Ifá practitioner, Iya Omolewa O. Eniolorunopa, known as Mama Omolewa.

Ifá is a West African tradition that utilizes a divination system in which specially trained interpreters (diviners) diagnose, explain, or predict present or future circumstances. In Ifá, the ancestors are highly respected and consulted.

When I attended my first Ifá service at Mama Omolewa’s temple, I was immediately enthralled by the drums and the dancing. The staccato reverberations and communal movements were energizing and salvific. I felt an immediate sense of belonging. When I heard the drums and songs and everyone was invited to congregate in the middle of the Ilé, I felt free - like I did in the Little Church of my childhood. According to Dr. Malidoma Somé and the Dagara tradition, “ritual is inevitable and necessary if one is to live.”

Drumming and dancing have helped me to heal and I hope they help you on your journey as well.

Through dancing, I was grieving, and able to find my way through life.
The Ritual

PRE-RITUAL

Select a few songs or musical artists from the list below and have them queued up and ready to go:

- **BABATUNDE OلاتUNJI:**
  [https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=babatunde+olatunji](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=babatunde+olatunji)

- **DRISSA KONE:**
  [https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=drissa+kone](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=drissa+kone)

- **WOMEN OF GIWAYEN MATA:**
  [https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=Women+of+Giwayen+Mata](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=Women+of+Giwayen+Mata)

- **YOUNG DUTCH GIRLS – NORAH, YARAH, ROSA:**
  [https://www.instagram.com/p/B0giKfdlfQx/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link](https://www.instagram.com/p/B0giKfdlfQx/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link)

To educate yourself more deeply about the history of African-American dance, you are invited to watch this 5 minute video by Camille A. Brown: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dpCBMwAweDI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dpCBMwAweDI)
CENTER YOUR BREATH

Create an open, sacred space. You may sit on the floor with your legs crossed or in a chair with your spine straight. Rest your hands loosely in your lap and close your eyes.

- Begin to take deep, full breaths - inhale for 4 counts, exhale for 4 counts.
- Allow any tension to melt away as you gradually relax more and more deeply with each breath.
- Bring your awareness to your body. From head to toe, assess and acknowledge your state of being. Continuing to breathe, release the tensions held in your body.
- Now it’s time to leave the external world behind and go on a journey to a place of deep inner stillness. As you sit in stillness, allow your body to carry you into a place of inner peace.

ACCESS MEMORY

Allow yourself to access a memory or series of memories that come to you of the person or people you’ve lost. Hold these memories gently and stand up in the awareness of your body.

PLAY YOUR SONGS

Start playing the songs that you selected from the recommended artists in the pre-ritual.
MAKE YOUR MOVE

Allow the rhythm to wash over your body and carry you.

Let your body move, close your eyes if you wish.

Move for as long and as freely as you are guided – for at least a few songs.

Dancing is not for everyone so you may feel more comfortable drumming. All you need are your hands to clap, your fingers to snap, and/or a flat surface to strike.

RE-CENTER BREATH

As you bring your time of movement to a close, come back to your spot for centering breath and breathe. At this point, you may want to journal your thoughts or simply lie on the floor. Be guided by your being.

REFLECT ON YOUR OWN OR WITH A GROUP:

What did you dance or drum out today?

REFERENCES


Cheer as if They Were Here/‘Scream it Like You Mean it’

Sanderson Jones

TRADITION OF LIFEFULNESS
This ritual is from the tradition of Lifefulness.

Lifefulness is the practice of adapting the wisdom and techniques of spiritual communities in a way that everyone can take part. If you’re very intelligent, you might have noticed that Lifefulness sounds a bit like ‘mindfulness’ and that is deliberate!

The practice of Lifefulness was developed at Sunday Assembly - a worldwide movement of secular and inclusive congregations - that I co-founded in 2013. Me and my friend Pippa wanted to do something like church, but which everyone could come to. Instead of hymns, we sing pop songs. Instead of a sermon there’s an inspiring TED-style talk. Instead of prayer, there’s a moment of contemplation or mindfulness. But there’s still all the volunteering, small groups, community building, and support you’d find in other religious or spiritual communities.
What does this ritual mean to you?

‘Scream It Like You Mean It’ is a ritual that has been performed at the two funerals at which I’ve been a celebrant. It originated because people wanted their end-of-life ceremonies to be joyous occasions and genuine celebrations.

No matter how well-intentioned organisers can be, it can be hard to make any showing of grief a genuine celebration. It came to my attention that one of the key differences between a show and most funerals is... clapping.

Clapping is a powerful, embodied tool... evidence base. Look I could dress it up in all the research in the world but you already know the impact that clapping and cheering makes. You do it at weddings, at concerts, in comedy clubs or sports. Cheering gets our bodies in the event. Your hands release some endorphins. Your voice is in the room. You are heard, and you are part of the crowd.
It is my belief that expressions of grief don’t have enough clapping.

At the start of one of the ceremonies that I was leading,

I asked the friends and family to imagine that Richard – the fully alive Richard – was standing in front of them, not just his coffin. Then, to give a cheer to let them know they loved him.

An almighty din was made. A cathartic cry that rebounded off the walls of the Brompton Chapel.

My previous life as a comedian meant that I had to add: “Seriously, I think if he was here and you wanted to let him know you loved him by the volume of your cheers, you’d do better than that.”

And they did.

So that’s the ritual: to release the love, loss, hurt, joy, and whole tangled mess of emotions not in words, or precision, but as a joyful roar.

To scream it like you mean it, to cheer as though they were here.
The Ritual

GET RELAXED + SCREAM IT OUT

Do what you need to do to get calm. Maybe it’s finding somewhere cosy to sit. Maybe it’s lighting a candle. You might want to pour yourself a coffee/tea/wine/kombucha. Does incense float your b.? Then smash one of those.

You’re nice and relaxed. On a piece of paper, write down 3 things about the person that you loved: What was worth celebrating? What did you adore? What was worth cheering for?

Read them back. Reflect on them. Notice how that makes you feel.

Now for the fun part. Picture them in front of you. Imagine they’re there. And now scream and cheer as though they were there. Really go for it. Give it a red hot go.
SHARE WITH A GROUP

To share this ritual with a group, go through the first part of the ritual (“Get Relaxed + Scream It Out”), then as a group:

- Give each person in the group time to share at least one of the things they loved about the person or people lost. It can be a quality, an accomplishment, or a moment in their lives that was truly worth celebrating.

- After each person shares, everyone in the group will cheer.

- For the person who’s shared, they will have a moment to feel the energy and support of the group, as well as unleash their joy for having loved and been loved by the dead.

- For the group, they get to cheer for someone who shaped and molded the life of the sacred person in their group who sits in front of them today.

- Everyone in the group should really encourage each other: party hats, noisemakers, costumes are all welcome. Go all the way the fuck out.

SOME CHEERS YOU MIGHT USE:

“Oh, my gosh, they sounded incredible.”

“I would love to have met them.”

“Tell me something else about them.”
Remember: it will be very easy for each person to cheer when they are cheering the person or people *they* lost, but people might find it a bit trickier when they are letting it all out about a stranger. When you cheer for someone else, you are supporting them, you are connecting to their love and your energy is feeding everyone else. Really try to connect to that feeling. Let yourself go. Get out of your head and feel that love.

Every griever in the group should share, if they feel comfortable.

When the last griever has shared, each person will get a moment to say thank you to everyone in the group who contributed to the ritual.
For Complicated Grief, Where Care and Hurt are Both Present
(for you. with love)

Chris Davies
Liberative Christian Traditions and Paganism
ABOUT THIS RITUAL

This is a ritual of planting and growing, taking grief from seed to sprout to flower or harvest.

It holds the complexity of trauma and love, where they are co-mingled in grief.

It is for a community gathered in solidarity and witness to the messiness of the human condition, and the ways in which our own collective wounds rub up against each other and cause harm. Hurt people, hurt people.

This is a ritual of holding the wholeness of the human you are grieving. This is a ritual of healing your own hurts and choosing another way forward. It can be done once, or seasonally. Grief is ongoing.
What does this ritual mean to you?

My paternal grandmother dedicated her life to helping people who experienced childhood trauma and abuse because of her own life experience.

My maternal grandfather came from a line of Irish farmers and left home when his father’s abuse was too much. My own experience of family holds complexity within it, but like so many, it’s deep, and often held quiet. My maternal grandmother, when she was living, would often tell me I am the third generation of strong women who represented a change in her family line and broke the cycle.

And yet, even with the echoes of generational trauma, my own childhood represents a turning point in both of my parents’ lines, toward love, care, and healing. I am who I am because they made a choice and a turn.
I wrote this ritual imagining some of those choice points, holding the reality of complicated grief for so many people, and conjuring into a world of healing for us all.

It has the earth, because generations of farmers have sowed into it hoping for future health and healing. It is communal because sojourners along the Way of healing can reflect our own experiences back to us and re-mind us who we are, when we spiral into the depths alone.

It tenderly holds space for the way trauma takes root in our bodies and emotions, and offers one way of growing into hope.

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I wrote this ritual imagining some of those choice points, holding the reality of complicated grief for so many people, and conjuring into a world of healing for us all.
The Ritual

Gather your fellow griever around you and open yourself to the care of your community.

Invite them to come together with the intention of marking the complications of grief and naming the realities of the human experience... both of those who have passed, and those who are present with you in the healing.

Choose any two leaders from your group to guide the ritual and read all italicized text aloud.

For this ritual, you will need: a meaningful mug in which to plant, soil and small pebbles from outside, and plant seeds for beginners - marigolds or zinnias— or pick your own.

**Suggested Soundtrack to play during the ritual:**

- Unspoken Words by The Soil
- Praying by Kesha
- Out of Range by Ani Difranco
FOR THE FIRST LEADER TO READ ALOUD

Even past the well wishers and rose colored glasses, even past the services and flowers and shock and shared food of grief, even past the memories that linger and the moments where hope shown through the shadows and the rock in the throat that still comes up in reaction to certain situations.

FOR THE SECOND LEADER TO READ ALOUD

Hold your mug. Maybe you’ve chosen it because it belonged to those who have passed. Maybe you’ve chosen it because it doesn’t mean a thing, or you like the color, or you’ve been collecting more mugs than you know what to do with. Imagine all that it has contained, and all that it will. An impermanent, fragile, container of possibility.

As the journey continues past That Day where the shock of passing fades, and the reality of Thereafter sinks into your awareness, gather up your tender parts.

Pull in the memories that have left scars and the ache of potential of how you wished your relationship had gone.

Where the ragged edges of pain still ache in your soul, allow yourself the space to see the flaws and the hurt that are real within you.
Turn the mug in your hands and place within it some pebbles and stones for the bottom. Each pebble a memory: a laughter, a joy... A pain. A scar. Each dropped pebble an offering to the honest memory of one who has left. Each valid expression of recovery for you, beloved. Let them fall and cover the bottom to about an inch deep.

Even as the waves of grief overcome you and your journey twists and winds past memories that still have clouds over them, give yourself permission to be where you are.

Where care has fallen short and now you have the pieces of your tiny self aching within you, offer care inward.

Let them weep. Let them rage. Let them pound fists into the ground with unresolved issues and conversations that were never offered.

Fistful by fistful— with your hands— add soil atop the pebbles. Bit by bit. Soil is helping to mark your work involved, for all the tiny moments of healing, all the compassion offered in community, all the composting of the old memories and Yesterdays that have contributed to the making you who you are today.

Cradle your own self in the mourning, hugging your body tight. Offer your beautiful soul the grace clumsily or rarely offered abundantly on earth; and now filtered through a divine understanding of love beyond limits of life. Let the air in your lungs be reminiscent of Spirit and the deep awareness of the One who Knows you in your precious uniqueness and wonder divine.
Once the soil is placed, until about a half an inch from the bottom of the rim, push your finger into the center, as far down as the seed’s instructions say. Let the dirt get under your fingernail. Healing is messy.

Place the seed into the hole you’ve made, and cover it again with your own hands. Pat it gently. Pour just a few tablespoons of water over the fresh dirt.

Honor your frustration, your anger, your grief.
Honor the reality of relationship; what is said and left unsaid.
Offer yourself peace.
And breathe.

Over the days to follow, witness the seed sprout and grow. Witness the becoming, the blossoming. Be sure not to OVERwater— use a mister when the green parts come, for soft tending. And tend to the care of this tiny being, as you tend to the care of your own grief. One day at a time. With gentleness.

Let yourself delight in knowing that growth is happening, even without immediate and constant direct attention. Let it remind you of hope— healing in loss, wholeness with scars. Offer gratitude each time you pass your growing plant, blessing her growing and your own.

Find hope.
Grow.
Be.
AFTER THE RITUAL

Journal or discuss with your group:

- What came up for you as you did this ritual?
- How do you hold space for the complexity of your relationship with those you are mourning?
- What still echoes across time, waiting to be said or heard?
- As you gather yourself in, what is the most compassionate thing you can say to yourself?
- What brings you healing?
Inspired by Janaza Prayer: A Meditation on Forgiveness

Edina Lekovic

ISLAM
The Janaza Prayer is a short, standing prayer with four parts, traditionally conducted by an imam and mourners at the cemetery in front of the body of the deceased person before the burial takes place. Unlike all other forms of prayer in Islam, it is conducted exclusively standing up, a departure from the forehead-to-the-floor prostration which is a central feature of ritual prayer (salah).

It also holds a unique content structure, which leads to (and ends with) a personal plea from each mourner to God to shower forgiveness on the person who has passed. It is these two unique qualities that can form the basis of a meditation process for both Muslim mourners and all others.

These days, many people are not able to attend the janaza for their loved ones or community members. This can stunt grief and mourning for those we’ve lost, near and far. There is a way to perform the Janaza in absentia (without the body present) and it is from this tradition that this ritual is formed.

By centering forgiveness, we have a way of connecting to those who have passed and connecting to ourselves as we think about how to live, now. To watch a video of the Janaza prayer in full, see here: Get to Know Your Prayers... Janaza.
What does this ritual mean to you?

When my mentor passed away in 2015, I found myself at the cemetery participating in a Janaza Prayer that felt like no other I had been part of before.

He was a beloved man and a pioneer of the American Muslim community, which meant his funeral was attended by at least 1,000 people and the energy was palpable. And also, while I stood in prayer shoulder to shoulder with friends and strangers alike, I experienced the stages of the janaza as a story.

After the first “God is greater” (Allahu akbar) was uttered and the mourners raised their hands to their ears and then settled them right hand over left upon their chests, we all recited the first chapter of the Quran as was the tradition. Called The Opening, it is the foundation of Islamic faith that reminds us our purpose is to walk on the “straight path” in this life through a combination of faith and service. I could feel my connection to God and myself all at once, saying these words.
After the second Allahu akbar, we recited the final portion of the prayer which invokes Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham) as the father of monotheism. I could feel my connection to all of humanity in that moment. After the third Allahu akbar, my hands settled on my chest once more and this time, the ache of loss hit full force. I poured out my own words to God, which were full of gratitude for his life before they moved to the intention of this section -- asking God to forgive him for his mistakes and shortcomings, and shower mercy upon his soul for eternity.

As I said my words quietly to myself, I felt a desperate awareness of the finality of death. That my mentor had no more time to do good in this world, that there is an end to it all.

And it hit me, maybe truly for the first time, that my own end would come and the people I love would be standing in lines asking for my forgiveness one day.

Then, the final Allahu akbar was uttered, and we all stood simply in silence for a few moments as this final section can either be spent in silence or to make a prayer for Muslims everywhere. It felt like before I could even take a breath to honor his life one more time without words, the imam was already calling out his “As-salaam alaykums” as he turned his head left and right to end the prayer.
And it was THAT moment when I sensed deep inside that this is a reflection of the speed of life...

We acknowledge God and ourselves, we acknowledge our ancestors, we ask forgiveness for the deceased, we hold a moment of silence and then we are DONE.

The finality of that split moment left me feeling that the heart of the ritual was the process of acknowledging what is, honoring what was, affirming our fallibility, and holding all those truths at once.

And I felt in every pore of my body that if I spend time asking God to forgive others, I should also take this time of loss and grief to examine my own relationship to forgiveness and check in with myself. Ever since, I have dedicated time after someone dies to spend time checking in with myself about forgiveness as a connection to the deceased, to God, and to my living self.
The Ritual

To start the ritual, stand facing Mecca (or home, wherever you are called to and wherever that may be, if that feels better).

Acknowledge that the goal of this ritual is to make an inward intention to acknowledge the lives of the person or people lost, to honor your relationship with them, to forgive them for their shortcomings, and to ask for forgiveness for our own mistakes.

In honor of the four parts of the Janaza Prayer, this ritual centers on four questions for thought and meditation (whether it’s sitting quietly with your eyes closed or writing it down).

I suggest using a timer for 3 minutes for each question, but if a certain question is stirring you, you are welcome to sit with it for as long as you like.

If you are by yourself, we invite you to journal and reflect on these questions.

If you are grieving alongside others, we invite you to discuss your answers to these questions as a group:

1. Where do I seek forgiveness from the deceased?
2. Where might the deceased seek forgiveness from me?
3. Who do I need to forgive?
4. Where do I need to forgive myself?
Kriah (קריאת)

Rabbi Jessica Minnen

JUDAISM
Kriah, or tearing in Hebrew, is a visceral expression of grief. The practice is rooted in narratives drawn from the three sections of the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible: Torah, Nevi'im (Prophets), and Ketuvim (Writings).

יָמִים רַבִּים׃ וַיִּקְרַע יַעֲקֹב שִׂמְלֹתָיו וַיָּשֶׂם שַׂק בְּמָתְנָיו וַיִּתְאַבֵּל עַל־בְּנוֹ
Jacob tore his garments, donned sackcloth, and mourned for his son for many days.
— Genesis 37:34

וַיַּחֲזֵק דָּוִד בִּבְגָדָיו וַיִּקְרָעֵם וְגַם כָּל־הָאֲנָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר אִתּוֹ׃
David took hold of his clothes and tore them, and so did all the men with him. They lamented and wept and fasted until evening for Saul and his son Jonathan...
— II Samuel 1:11

Kriah is incredibly powerful in its origins. It is also powerful as a physical act, one that invites us to expose our brokenness; our grief may be hidden but kriah is not.

Kriah is always performed standing, and done just before the funeral service begins using a black cloth or ribbon that is then pinned to the outer garments. If the deceased is a parent, the ribbon is pinned on the left side of the chest, over the heart. For other losses, the ribbon is pinned on the right side. The kriah ribbon is then worn during the seven days of shiva with some continuing the practice for 30 days.
What does this ritual mean to you?

Kriah is a very old ritual, and its continued practice today connects me to the pain of the past.

When I have experienced my most harrowing losses, I have felt entirely alone; kriah gives expression to that individual pain while at the same time making it visible, communal.

I think of the modern verse, Separation, that W.S. Merwin wrote in 1962:

Your absence has gone through me
Like thread through a needle.

Everything I do is stitched with its color.

In the moment, kriah is pain made palpable – the startling rip of the fabric, the visible streak of black over my heart. As time passes, I keep my kriah ribbon. I wear it when I need to feel close to you. And slowly, slowly, though everything I do is still stitched with the color of your absence, I am no longer torn apart.
The Ritual

Find - or cut off - a small piece of cloth, ribbon, or square of fabric, black if possible. If it feels meaningful, you are welcome to find or select an item to cut from that is connected to the person or people you’ve lost (i.e. a blanket they gave you or an old shirt).

Choose a reading, poetry, lyrics, or a prayer perhaps that recall the person or people you’ve lost or where you are in your grief now. If in a group, you can invite a few people to share an excerpt from their reading, lyrics, prayer, or poem.

Take a moment to slowly rip or tear the cloth. Hear the sharp sound of fabric rended.

Pay attention to how the tearing makes you feel. Sit with that feeling.

Once the tearing is complete, pin the kriah cloth or ribbon to your chest and wear it.

If in a group, you’re welcome to share - how did it feel to tear the cloth? What’s coming up for you?

You’re invited to wear the torn fabric over your heart for the next week, on days you find particularly difficult or when you’re thinking of those you’ve lost, or when you want to acknowledge a part of your healing.

If in a group, you can wear the torn fabric on days when you meet as a reminder of the visceral experience of loss and that you have each other to make it through.
Pouring to Remember

Karen Georgia Thompson

AFRICAN TRADITIONS AND CHRISTIANITY
ABOUT THIS RITUAL

I am grounding this libation ritual in the African traditions and the framing of Christianity which are the two primary places that currently inform my spiritual identity and spiritual practices.

A libation is a ritual pouring of a liquid or grains as an offering to a deity or spirit, or in memory of the dead. A variety of substances can be used for pouring, including alcoholic beverages, water, oils, etc.

Libations are poured onto or into something that is considered sacred. A libation can be poured into a vessel located on an altar, into another vessel of any kind, into the earth, or a planter, or a flower pot with earth.

Many communities also believe in the power of calling the names of the deceased. Calling their names is a way of remembering and honoring the lives of those we have lost and can help in facilitating grief and healing.
What does this ritual mean to you?

Honoring the Ancestors, or the spirits of those who have gone on before, is an important part of my daily spiritual practice.

My altar holds an important space in my life. My mother died in April 2018 and my father in March 2020. On both occasions, I found myself unable to grieve for a variety of reasons.

I was the primary caregiver for my Mother who started showing noticeable signs of dementia in 2015. As she got progressively worse - forgetting to turn off the stove or a light transformed quickly to forgetting where she lived - I understood her in ways others in my family and her circle of friends did not. We were particularly close and were psychically connected my entire life.

Her decline was rapid and painful to watch. She lost her vibrant spirit and loud laughter along with her ability to care for herself. I learned to hold her hand when we walked
down the street and to carry her purse for her. I made her meals, doled out her medications, and I was at her side in a hospital room when she died. In the end, I realized it was hard to grieve because I watched her die over and over again with each cognitive loss. I cried the day she no longer remembered my name. I listened to her tell stories of years gone by as if they happened the day before.

When she was gone, there was a well of sadness that lingered. I had no words. There was an empty space nothing could fill.

While my Mother’s death was slow, my Father’s was sudden. He died in Brooklyn, New York, one of the many victims of the COVID-19 pandemic. He was very active. He went to the gym weekly. He ate right. I was not prepared for him to go less than two years after my Mother died. I got in my car when the ambulance took him from his home and drove eight hours through the night from Ohio to Brooklyn, New York.

When I arrived at his bedside in the hospital at 6:00 AM, he was already deceased. Four days after he died, I started showing symptoms of the virus and became severely ill.

Arranging the funeral was challenging. With death rates escalating and funeral services inundated with bodies, each day passed with the ambiguity of disease and trying to make arrangements.

Fourteen days after he died, on a rainy afternoon, we watched from the car as he was lowered into a grave by men in hazmat suits. We were not allowed to leave the car. We planned a graveside funeral for him which did not happen.

When I was recovered enough to get out of the bed, one of the first things I did was create an altar.
The altar included pictures of my Ancestors - my parents, my paternal Grandmother and my paternal Uncle. I added flowers, a glass of water, and - just like this ritual - a glass of rum for libations. I wrote the names of all my known Ancestors including my parents, and placed them on the altar. For the remainder of my stay in Brooklyn, I called their names every day.

At the altar, I light candles and remember the Ancestors, including my parents and others who have crossed over. I call each of their names across generations and time. I remember them every morning.

I find that the libation ritual of pouring water or rum (which I pour based on my heritage and culture) into a glass on my altar creates sacred space for remembering and honoring my parents - and all those who I have lost over the years.
Each person is asked to bring their own beverage or grain for pouring. Creativity is invited for the choice of beverage. One could bring the favorite beverage of the deceased - coffee, tea, milk for example. Or perhaps there is a special drink connected to one's culture or the culture of those who were lost.

Prepare the space or vessel that will receive the libation: an altar or area with photographs, letters, and items of significance. A potted plant or flower pot with soil. Or a vase, mug, or other vessel. (If using alcohol, do not pour into a pot with a live plant).

Each individual is invited to call the name(s) of the person or people they have lost, tell a story or share something special about the deceased, then pour the libation in honor of the spirit that has gone on.

**Sharing about those we have lost can take a variety of forms:**

1. Something inherited from the person or people who died.
2. A thought one wishes they could have shared with the person or people who died.
3. A question one wishes they could ask of the deceased.
As a closing for this ritual, I would like to offer a poem I wrote in the wake of my Father’s death:

**unshed**
by Karen Georgia A. Thompson

today maybe
the day they will fall
the day the mist clears
moments of grief will lift
and I will be me again

day may be
when relief visits
when joy returns
my smile will emanate from the haze
the stranger in my house will be no more

healing is coming, they say
from the heart break
from the pain of loss
I will remember you
beyond the unshed tears

KGAT
22:19
30 June 2020
Olmsted Township, OH

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Meditation Ritual for Those Who Have Experienced Estrangement

Abel Arroyo

LUTHERANISM
About This Ritual

The author of this ritual is an ordained Pastor in the Lutheran tradition.

While this ritual was originally inspired by the Christian practice of Lectio Divina (a form of meditation that dates back to early monastic communities), this particular ritual was created because there were, to the author’s knowledge, not sufficient grief rituals rooted in his tradition that centered on estrangement.

It was important to him to create something that speaks to this reality so he developed this ritual with the guiding practice of Lectio Divina in mind.
When my father decided to distance himself and eventually completely estranged himself from my life, I felt a lot of different emotions: sadness, grief, anger, loss, guilt, relief.

I remembered my relationship with him as a mixed bag, and now I can see that same entanglement through my grieving process. That is not to say that I don’t have good memories with dad, even if the relationship was ultimately toxic.

Relationships of any kind are complicated, intimate, life-changing, and when we lose them, that grief is just as complicated, intimate, and life-changing. When I started practicing this ritual, it happened in a very organic way. To get inspired, I just had to look in the mirror to see dad staring right back at me, and yet not
dad, but something of him, his character and looks, for better or for worse.

Then, this became a mourning practice of recognizing that yes, there were things that I shared with him, that have shaped me into the person I am today, but there is also a whole crowd of other people who have shaped me and continue to do so.

That turned into wondering how I have shaped - and keep shaping - other people’s lives: a reminder that my mere breathing is part of a larger reality, of creation itself.
The Ritual

This ritual was intended to be done in a community or group. Select any leader from your group to read the ritual aloud.

Leader instructions and cues are in italics. These instructions are not to be read out loud, but for the ritual leader’s awareness. All non-italicized text should be read aloud to guide the rest of the group.

Remind participants that there will be moments to share what is stirring in them and during this time of sharing, there should be no cross-talk or conversation. This is a time to just be present to one another.

Silence is hard, even intimidating sometimes, but it is in this silence that we allow ourselves to be immersed in this experience. Be intentional about holding silence. Let you and the group sit in it with a purpose.

Invite participants to take some time to become fully present in the moment. Follow the ritual and read it out loud for the group, or if you are doing this on your own, read it out loud to yourself.

Close your eyes and shift your body so you feel comfortable. Become conscious of your breathing.

As you inhale, and then release, be present in this moment. Set your distractions and worries aside.
Take a few moments to be aware of this rhythm within you.

Think of your breath, its rhythm, of how your body moves while you breathe.

As you breathe, think about how you are part of a larger reality.

As you live, you shape the world around you. Every story, memory, experience, feeling, the people you carry with you also shape the world around you.

Breathe.

Gently allow your breath to draw your awareness from your thoughts to your hands. Look at them. Look at their creases, scars, marks, folds. You have shaped your story with those hands, and have impacted other people’s lives, as much as they have shaped yours.

Think of your hands, the things they have done, the people they have touched, the people they have been touched by.

The people you can no longer touch.

Pause, breathe, and remain present in your body.
As you think of the people you carry with you, remember those who have been estranged from you.

Think of those relationships.

Acknowledge how complicated and multidimensional those relationships were and are.

Hold silence for 30 seconds.

In this encounter with your breath, your hands, and the memories of people who are no longer in your life, listen to your mind and the words that come up. Pick one. This is the word or phrase that beckons you, addresses you, unnerves you, disturbs you, stirs you, or seems especially heavy with meaning.

Identify the word or phrase that calls to you and repeat that word or phrase to yourself in silence.

Allow for about a minute of silence and then invite participants to share their word or phrase with the group if they so desire.

Now, take a moment to imagine the faces of the people who are estranged from your life. This may be because of disagreements, neglect, abuse, because you outgrew the relationship, because they decided to walk away, or because you needed to walk away from them.
Dwell in the memories and feelings that stir in you in response. Make space in your heart to welcome these in.

Allow another minute or more of silence and then invite participants to share a feeling, memory, or image that is moving in them. After everyone who wants to has shared, move to the next step.

Finally, we turn our minds to how the word, image, feeling, or memories in your mind connect with your life right now.

What kind of awareness is this inviting in you?

What kind of actions is this inviting you to?

Notice how your heart wants to respond to your memories and know that in this group, you are witnessed, seen, and held.

Allow 1 to 2 minutes of silence, and then invite participants to share any insights they received in this time of reflection. After everyone who wants to share has done so, invite participants into a final time of silence and contemplation.

Let us release all of the words, images, and memories that have been moving inside of us. Take a few moments to simply be present in this moment.
Allow yourself to be filled with gratitude for what has been revealed and experienced in this time. Connect again to the rhythm of your breath, exhaling, and release it into this moment. Look at your hands and remember how they shape and reshape your story.

Slowly and gently allow your breath to carry your awareness from your internal space back to this room.

Move from this experience into a time of personal reflection, inviting anyone in the group to take about 5 minutes to meditate or journal about what they experienced.

Let the group know when there is about a minute left and then gather back together. Allow time to move into whatever conversation emerges from this time.

You can close your time together by offering spontaneous blessings or positive wishes either to the group or to yourself as you move back into the world.
Cleansing Our Grief: A Water Ritual

Michelle Scheidt

CATHOLICISM
Sprinkling of or immersion in water is a central ritual in the Christian tradition and dates back to the earliest days of the Christian community.

Water is a potent symbol representing both life and death: a core element of all living things, Earth, and the human body. Living beings cannot survive without water, which is nourishing, refreshing, cleansing, and life-giving. At the same time, water is also a danger; floods, storms, and the sea can destroy life in an instant.

The Christian tradition of Baptism embodies this paradox, with immersion of the body under water originally understood as a threat to life, near to drowning.

Coming up out of the water and gasping for air is an embracing of life, a symbol of entering into a new phase of life.

The practice embodies the death and resurrection of Jesus, which is the core narrative of the Christian tradition: Suffering and death are always followed by flourishing and new life.
What does this ritual mean to you?

Two family stories embody the symbolism of water rituals in my own life. These two stories illustrate the duality of “life and death” and the ways that water can be an element of both.

The first story is about my niece Molly, the first member of the next generation of our family. When Molly was four months old, I took her to the sea for the first time at a small beach in the Florida Keys where my family had spent a lot of time over the years. I held Molly in my arms, waded out into chest-deep water, and gently lowered her up and down in the water as she giggled. My spouse called it “the Scheidt family baptism.”

Today, Molly is a junior in high school and avid member of the swim team, and this year I’ve enjoyed teaching her to sail on Lake Michigan. That first dip in the sea was a ritual beginning of a lifetime of water connection for Molly and me. That same
week, I held her in church as a priest poured water on her head in sacramental baptism.

The second family story is a water ritual at the end of life. When my brother-in-law, Drew, died unexpectedly in his 50s, his family asked me to plan and lead the funeral services.

While Drew was no longer strongly connected to our religious tradition, Catholicism was very important to the family. I looked to the Catholic funeral rituals for clues about what practices might hold meaning. At the start of the traditional Mass of Christian Burial, the casket or urn is carried into the church, followed by the deceased person’s loved ones. The minister greets them at the door, placing a white cloth (called the pall) over the casket or urn and then sprinkling it with water that has been blessed.

Both the water and the white cloth are symbols of baptism, and the accompanying prayer reminds us that this person was baptized into the Christian community and now experiences death and resurrection.

I incorporated this element of the ritual as part of Drew’s prayer service, inviting his children to sprinkle his body with water that we had taken from a small creek in a natural area that was one of Drew’s special places.

This ritual and prayer were meaningful for the entire family, who had experienced the rite many times during traditional Catholic funeral liturgies and now performed it for someone they loved outside of a church context.
The Ritual

This baptism/water sprinkling ritual may be done anytime as you mourn, heal, and move through the different feelings and stages of grieving, trauma, and loss.

It may help support your process at specific times such as a birthday or beloved anniversary of the death of someone you’ve lost. The ritual might also help you at a time when you feel like you’re moving into a different stage of your grief or any time you feel the need to formalize your own healing.

Preparing for the Ritual

- Select a bowl, jar, or other vessel that can hold water, perhaps using an item that has special meaning or history or beauty for you or for the person/people you lost.

- Fill the vessel with water. The water might be from the tap or from a place in nature that is meaningful to you and/or those you’ve lost.

- Create a ritual space with the vessel of water as the focal point. Use a cloth such as a scarf, placemat, or tablecloth as the base. You’re welcome to add photos of those you’ve lost, a candle, and any symbols or artifacts that call to mind those you are remembering - or include meaningful natural items such as a rock, flower, feather, or leaf.
HOLDING THE RITUAL

→ Begin with a few moments of silent reflection, using the ritual space as a focus. Take several deep breaths. Allow yourself to take in each of the items and memories of those you are remembering to surface.

→ Take the water vessel into your hands. Hold the vessel and raise it or lower it in any way that feels meaningful. Ask that the water be a source of nourishing and healing.

→ If you are in a group: Anyone who wishes may share an intention that they are setting for this ritual with the group. As you share, you can hold up your bowl for the group to see.

→ If alone, journal. If in a group, share aloud:

→ Where in your life do you feel like you’re drowning?

→ What is it in your life that’s helping you come up for air?

→ Cleansing: Use the water on your body. You can rinse your hands, sprinkle it on your head, or touch the water to any parts of your body that feel meaningful such as the heart, throat, or feet. If you’re needing a space for play, you can splash the water on your body. If you’re needing a space for soothing, you can rub the water slowly along your skin.

→ Release where you’re drowning and give gratitude for what helps you come up for air.
Stories of Remembrance
(oral storytelling + affirmations)
LaDonna Williams
BAPTISM AND HOLINESS
ABOUT THIS RITUAL

This ritual is based on Black Traditions of truth-telling, storytelling, Naming and Affirming.

The author of this ritual is a womanist and ordained Baptist minister with a Master’s Of Divinity degree who grew up experiencing two church traditions: Baptist and Holiness, both of which have uncovered opportunities for growth and discovering wholeness.
What does this ritual mean to you?

There is power in remembrance and shared history. This ritual is rooted in my family’s love of story-sharing.

We hold our lost ones in love.

We affirm each other through everyday conversation and in acts of care. We check on each other and say, ‘I love you’ often. When you visit, you never leave empty-handed; there’s always a plate of food, a book, a drink waiting on you.

I remember my cousin Clarence, whose laugh and conversation brightened our day. Clarence had a zeal for life that is unmatched. I am reminded of our last outing. Him singing Dorothy Moore’s “Misty Blue.” With such joy and longing for adventure... Our whole world is misty blue without you, Clarence.

And our love for you is unchanging.
The Ritual

**PRE-RITUAL**

Take a moment to yourself to journal about what you’ve learned from the person or persons in your life who you’ve lost.

What have they taught you? How do you wish to embody these teachings in your own life?

**RITUAL**

There are three roles in this ritual. Each person will have the chance to be a sharer and an affirmer. Pick who from your group would like to be the reader.

**Reader(s):** Assists with all readings for the group, can be done by one or more people.

**Sharer:** Shares their story and lessons learned from the person or people lost.

**Affirmer:** For each sharer, there will be someone in the group designated as the affirmer. This person will listen very closely to what the sharer shares and name afterwards what they heard and what they saw.
**Reader:** We gather here to celebrate those who lived and impacted our lives. We acknowledge the presence of our ancestors. We thank you for your shared wisdom and acknowledge that you lived.

*We speak our ancestors’ names*

Pause so anyone from the group who would like can state the name of the person or people who have been lost.

*We thank you for the life you lived. You are still here in the very fibers of our DNA. We keep with us your light.*

Pause and take a breath.

*As a group, you can move into sharing the lessons that your lost ones have taught you.*

*Select someone from the group who’s ready to share and someone who will play the role of affirmer for that person.*

**THE SHARER WILL:**

Share a story about those you’ve lost who bring you here tonight. The story can be about something they taught you that celebrates the life they lived or something you’ve learned from their mistakes. Whatever story comes to mind and feels alive in you.
THE AFFIRMER WILL:

- Listen deeply to the Sharer as they share what they learned from the person or people lost
- Listen for things that stand out
- Take notes if it helps them stay present.

Once the sharer is done, pause and take a breath. Give the affirmer the opportunity to share what they learned and what they witnessed in the sharer.

- I heard you say... (What stood out to you? What gave you hope?)
- I admire... about you (What in their story or about their person do you want to honor?)
- I see in you... (What characteristics do you see?)

| All (once the Affirmer is finished): You are seen. You are heard. |

Select another sharer and affirmer from your group and continue until everyone who would like to share has done so.

It’s totally fine for someone to play the role of affirmer but not sharer if that’s what feels good to them.
When stories are done, come back together and take another breath as a group.

**Reader:** As we leave this space, we honor and take with us the stories that were shared here. We have gained newfound wisdom, we shared laughs, and shed tears. Through all that we’ve learned and all that we’ve affirmed, we are because you are.

**All:** We are because you are.
Community Guestbook

(A closing ritual to complete after a group has developed rhythm and trust)

Becca Bernstein

Judaism and Other Traditions
All sorts of traditions - religious and secular - rely on the funeral guestbook to give the close family and friends of those who have died a record of those who attended the service.

As we know, that day is bleary-eyed and confusing - in many ways, a total blur. So to commemorate: I was here. I witnessed this ceremony and participated in your family and friends’ loss is incredibly meaningful.

Beyond this, though, the funeral guestbook is also a way for those who sign the book to express the ways that the person or people lost impacted their lives.

“I worked with your dad for over 20 years.”

“Your friend didn’t know it, but she saved my life.”

“Your brother played at our house when he was just a kid. I remember the mischievous look on his face like it was yesterday.”
What does this ritual mean to you?

After my mom’s funeral, on the first night of the Jewish tradition of Shiva, my siblings and closest cousins and aunts and uncles piled into a sideroom at my Aunt Lizzie and Uncle David’s house.

After a day of endless hugs and handshakes and peoplepeoplepeople, it felt so good to be a little separate - surrounded by the people who were most important to my mom’s life.

I snuggled up next to my siblings and we read the Funeral Guestbook aloud. My family loves storytelling and we also love gossip. “Whoa, THAT person was there?!?!?” “I didn’t see them!”

There were also too many touching moments to count. Teachers we’d had when we were kids, my mom’s former overnight camp boyfriend, caregivers at the memory care facility where she lived the last year of her life. It was a reminder: today and as you grieve, you are not alone.
The Ritual

If you’re reading this, you may have participated in some of the rituals in this collection with a group of fellow grievers - strangers that now hopefully feel like friends. And if not friends, then at the very least witnesses to your story and the stories of the people you’ve lost.

To commemorate this experience, we want you to create, together, a virtual Community Guestbook... not a funeral guestbook per se, but a book to commemorate your group and each person in it. What your rituals and conversations have revealed about them. What you’ve learned about the people they’ve lost.

It can be as simple as this: open up a Google doc and title it “Community Guestbook.” Then, put in bold each person in your group’s name, followed by the name(s) of those they’ve lost.

For example:

Mark (Dad, Alan)

Becca: Mark. I am so happy that I’ve gotten to know you. You are - and always will be - the first person I met who also lost a parent. You have made me feel less alone in the world, merely by just existing. I’ve loved learning about your dad’s career as a fireman. I love being able to connect stories about who your dad was with who you are. It has been one of the great privileges of my life.
After each name, put your own name and tell that person what “meeting” them (even if you’ve only met virtually!) has meant to you.

- What have you learned about them? Noticed in them through the rituals you’ve shared?
- What have you learned about the people they’ve lost?
- How, through the stories or memories they’ve shared, do you see them reflected (or not reflected) in the person/people they lost?
- What do you want to honor about who your fellow griever are today?

By the end of this exercise, everyone in your group should have a little note from everyone else and will hopefully feel seen, witnessed, held, and heard.

**For extra credit:** put together a playlist of songs that remind you of those you’ve lost and listen while you note-write