

# Making It Through, Together:

Ritual Collection for  
Life After Loss



**This collection was created by The Dinner Party, a platform where 20-, 30-, and early 40-somethings who've experienced a major loss can connect to one another, either one-to-one or in small, peer-led groups. For more: [thedinnerparty.org](https://thedinnerparty.org)**

**It was made possible by generous funding from Lippman Kanfer Foundation for Living Torah, which works to repair and enrich the world through thriving Jewish life. For more: <https://lkflt.org>**

*The* DINNER PARTY *labs*

# Executive Summary

**In early 2020, The Dinner Party (TDP) teamed up with Lippman Kanfer Foundation for Living Torah to launch a pilot project aimed at increasing the accessibility of spiritual and cultural rituals and practices.**

We began working with a dozen spiritual leaders from across traditions to curate a set of rituals and practices that people throughout time have used to navigate loss and life after. The result is this collection.

**Our goal was to free religious wisdom from religious institutions,** and to make those practices — and the insights they contain — accessible to any and all looking for a flashlight as they wandered grief’s dark tunnels. We wanted to explore the intersection between grief and spiritual practice, and to give people permission to adapt, adopt, and remix those practices, adding in elements of their own, in order to spread the wisdom they contain.

**Our longing reflects a larger cultural undercurrent:** When it comes to modern spiritual practice and belief, we are witnessing a process of “unbundling” and “remixing,” says Casper ter Kuile, author of *The Power of Ritual* and founder of The Nearness. \*

“Unbundling” refers to the process by which we tease apart specific elements from a larger collection of offerings, and keep only those that feel meaningful and relevant. We can continue to hold on to particular beliefs and practices that serve us, while letting go of the pieces of a tradition that feel outdated — let alone any that are outright harmful. Simultaneously, the increase in mixed-religion households has led to a “remixing” of religious traditions, as we suddenly discover two people can practice one another’s traditions without diminishing the integrity of one or the other.

“But as we benefit from unbundling and remixing traditions that allow us ever more personalization, we find that we share less and less with one another,” writes ter Kuile. “We’re left isolated and longing for connection.”

We lose the sense of belonging that comes of hearing our voice amidst a chorus of others, and the feeling of being part of something bigger than ourselves. How might we unbundle and remix, and simultaneously feed our hunger for connection?

\*Ter Kuile, Casper. *The Power of Ritual*. New York, HarperOne, 2020, pp. 19-22.

**Our work at The Dinner Party is not about solving grief** — indeed, grief is not a problem to be solved. Rather, it's about addressing the isolation that so often comes with it. We were thus particularly interested in seeing what happens when we performed those rituals collectively, rather than alone.

We enlisted researchers Dr. Tobin Belzer and Dr. Laura Brady to design a study exploring how **practicing rituals as part of The Dinner Party shapes people's experiences of grief and spirituality, their understanding of self and their** relationships with others.

Participating Tables collectively chose and practiced three rituals (including one Jewish ritual) over the course of four months and completed two brief surveys: one before and one after using the ritual collection. A multi-method, quasi-experimental approach was used to examine the emotional, social, and spiritual impacts of using the ritual collection from the perspective of Dinner Partiers.

**The results were profound.** Drs. Belzer and Brady found that “making the rituals more explicit...influenced, enhanced, and deepened respondents' experiences at their Tables in **nine** powerful ways.”\*

## Among the findings:

- Using the ritual collection positively impacted participants' sense of well-being.
- It empowered them with a sense of emotional agency, and prompted them to express greater depths of emotion.
- It enabled them to feel more connected to the person or persons they lost.
- It enabled them to deepen their relationships with one another.

In other words, the study confirmed what science has repeatedly shown to be true: **classifying certain practices as rituals adds to their potency**, and calling a particular set of behaviors a “ritual” enhances its psychological impact.\*\*

**In the pages that follow, you'll find those same rituals, with a few snippets on how they were used, shared by our pilot users.** Each ritual includes a description of its origins and usage through time, a story from the author about the role it has played in their own journey with grief, and instructions on how to use it.

**We're thrilled to be able to share it with you.**

\*Tobin Belzer and Laura Brady, *Making It Through, Together: Ritual Collection for Life-after-Loss Exploratory Outcomes Study*, The Dinner Party, August 4, 2022.

\*\*Tami Kim., Ovul Sezer, Juliana Schroeder, Jane Risen, Francesca Gino, & Michael Norton, (2021). Work group rituals enhance the meaning of work. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 165, 197-212.

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# Icon Key

## Can be done virtually



Visitor's Stone  
Healing Dance And Communal Movement  
Inspired by Janaza Prayer  
Kriah  
Pouring To Remember  
Meditation Ritual For Estrangement  
Cleansing Our Grief  
Stories of Remembrance  
Observing a Death Anniversary (Yahrzeit)  
Community Guestbook

## Can be done in person



Healing Dance + Communal Movement  
Meditation Ritual for Estrangement  
Cleansing Our Grief  
Stories Of Remembrance  
Community Guestbook

## Great for groups



Visitor's Stone  
Cleansing Our Grief  
Healing Dance and Communal Movement  
Scream It Like You Mean It  
For Complicated Grief  
Inspired by Janaza Prayer  
Kriah  
Pouring To Remember  
Meditation Ritual For Estrangement  
Stories Of Remembrance  
Observing a Death Anniversary (Yahrzeit)  
Community Guestbook

## Can be performed alone



Visitor's Stone  
Healing Dance And Communal Movement  
Scream It Like You Mean It  
For Complicated Grief  
Inspired by Janaza Prayer  
Kriah  
Cleansing Our Grief  
Observing a Death Anniversary (Yahrzeit)

## Requires materials



Community Guestbook  
Healing Dance And Communal Movement  
For Complicated Grief  
Kriah  
Pouring To Remember  
Cleansing Our Grief  
Observing a Death Anniversary (Yahrzeit)

## Well-suited to new/recent loss



Scream It Like You Mean It  
Inspired by Janaza Prayer  
Kriah  
Cleansing Our Grief  
Pouring To Remember  
Stories Of Remembrance

## Well-suited to loss that occurred long ago



Visitor's Stone  
Observing a Death Anniversary (Yahrzeit)  
Cleansing Our Grief

## 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 Dr. Rachel Remen in an OnBeing interview with Krista Tippett. “The rest of it needs to be healed, and that’s different.”<sup>14</sup>

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.

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.

**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.**

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. Since 2017, 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 around the world, brings 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  
*TDP Hosts, Washington DC*

# About This Collection

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. You'll find icons listed next to each ritual, noting which ones lend themselves especially well to being performed alone or with a group.
- 2. This collection was originally developed in 2020, in the early days of 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. Still, certain rituals are especially conducive to either virtual or in-person usage, so take a look at the icons appearing next to each to see which ones are right for you.
  - 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.”\* All too often, members of a dominant culture will adopt elements from cultures outside their own without permission, acknowledgement, or compensation, and without taking the time to educate themselves in exploring what others hold sacred, or to acknowledge the history or traditions from which they come.

\*[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural\\_appropriation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_appropriation)

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-reading or homework that is requested (i.e. watching a video to understand the history of the ritual, etc.).

**4.** **You’ll notice several of the rituals stem from Jewish tradition.** There are a few reasons for that. Jewish tradition is rich in ritual, offering structures and containers to mark significant moments in time. That includes experiences of grief and mourning, with traditions ranging from Shiva, to Sheloshim, Kaddish, Yahrzeit, Tisha b’Av, Shabbat, and Neshama yeteira, an “extra soul” we welcome in through the breath.

Since 2020, our partner in this undertaking has been the Lippman Kanfer for Living Torah, a foundation anchored in the belief that Judaism brings with it a powerful vocabulary of accumulating wisdom with very real application to what it takes to live a meaningful life. They call that “Living Torah”. Much like this project itself – whose goal is to free religious wisdom from religious institutions – the foundation invites Jews and non-Jews alike to adapt and remix ancient rituals in ways that feel relevant and authentic.

In the end, we didn’t find a particular ritual – Jewish or otherwise – that was more impactful than others, and neither did we find a distinction between Jewish ritual and those of other religious and non-religious traditions. After all, there is no one way to heal, and what speaks to one person may not speak to another: There is no secret elixir or cure for grief, or any set of ingredients that are more impactful than another. We found that it was not the impact of any one ritual that made the biggest difference, but the impact of the collection as a whole and the act of practicing rituals with others.

**5.** **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. 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 12 incredible spiritual leaders who contributed to this collection.

Each of your voices, wisdom, creativity, and curiosity is love and light.  
Thank you.

# Hosting Tips:

Want to perform these rituals as a group? Here are some tips.

**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.

**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!

**Do whatever's convenient.** We've had Dinner Party tables practice all of the rituals as a group, and others who did the rituals on their own and reflected with their group.

**Wary of feeling like a group leader or facilitator, especially among a group of friends?** Share the load! Discuss as a group what appeals to you about the ritual, and what you're curious about. Take the time to learn about its history and context together. It can be difficult to both lead and participate at the same time, so look for ways to share responsibilities, and to ensure no one voice is facilitating the whole time.

**As always: You do you.**

# 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?

*Rabbi  
Elan  
Babchuck*



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.

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**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.**

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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 : On Your Own

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.

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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**Think back on a memory of your time there:** 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?

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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.

## The Ritual : As a Group

To share this ritual with a group, bring your stone to your next gathering with your small group.

### Reflection questions:

- *Tell us about the place you chose. What's meaningful about the place, and what memories arise when you think of it? What was it like to visit that place again? What did it bring up for you?*
- *Where did you decide to place the stone? Has it continued to hold any meaning as you hold it now?*

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#### TIP: CONNECT YOUR RITUALS

We've heard from folks who created an altar (or added to an existing one), by placing the stone alongside the vessels they used for **Pouring to Remember (51)** and **Cleaning Our Grief (p66)**, and the seeds they planted in **For Complicated Grief (p32)**

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# Healing Dance and Communal Movement

Lahronda Welch Little

AFRICAN/AFRICAN AMERICAN  
TRADITIONAL RELIGIONS



# ABOUT THIS RITUAL

**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 sin-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?

*Lahronda  
Welch Little*



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.

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

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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.

Learn more about the history of African-American social dance in this terrific 5-minute TED-Ed video by [Camille A. Brown](#)

\*Somé, Malidoma Patrice. *Ritual: Power, Healing, and Community*. Arkana: Penguin Group, 1997.

# The Ritual :

## PREP:

Select a few songs or musical artists you can move to, and have them queued up and ready to go. A few of our favorite artists:

- [BABATUNDE OLATUNJI](#)
- [WOMEN OF GIWAYEN MATA](#)
- [DRISSA KONE](#)
- [YOUNG DUTCH GIRLS - NORAH, YARAH, ROSA](#)

## 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 through your nose for 3 or 4 counts, exhale through your mouth for 3 or 4 counts.
- **Allow any tension to melt away** as you gradually relax more and more deeply with each breath.
- **Bring your attention to your body**, beginning with your toes and moving up through your legs and hips, into your spine, through your shoulders, and finally up to your head. Note where there's tension and release it, continuing to breathe as you do so.
- 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.

## HIT PLAY

- 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.
- For dance move inspiration, check out this vid from [Norah, Yarah, & Rosa](#).

## RETURN TO YOUR 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?

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Montiero, N. M., PhD. (2011, September). African Dance as Healing Modality Throughout the Diaspora: The Use of Ritual and Movement to Work Through Trauma. *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 4(6), 234-252.

# Scream It Like You Mean It

Sanderson Jones

TRADITION OF LIFEFULNESS



# ABOUT THIS RITUAL

**This ritual is from the tradition of Lifestfulness.**

Lifestfulness 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 Lifestfulness sounds a bit like 'mindfulness' and that is deliberate!

The practice of Lifestfulness 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?

*Ganderson Jones*



‘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 organizers 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 yada yada spiritual traditions yada yada 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,

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**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.**

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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: On Your Own

Do what you need to do to get calm. Maybe it's finding somewhere cozy 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.

# The Ritual: In a Group

Cheering is like dancing: good on your own, better in a group.

Similar to the above, each person should write down 3 things about the person/people they lost that they really loved. What was worth celebrating? What did you adore? What was worth cheering for?

Each person in the group will have the time to share at least one of their lovable things – a quality, an accomplishment, a moment in their lives – that was truly, truly worth celebrating.

And after sharing, 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 deceased. For the group, they get to cheer for a stranger, sure, but one who shaped and molded the life of the sacred person in their group who sits in front of them today.

**Depending on the size of the group you can have multiple cheers per guest. Really encourage each other:**

- *“Oh, my gosh, they sounded incredible.”*
- *“I would love to have met them.”*
- *“Tell me something else about them.”*
- *“I think we can give them a bigger cheer.”*

Party hats, noisemakers,  
costumes are all welcome. Go all  
the way the fuck out.

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.

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.

By the end of the ritual, you will have screamed, clapped, listened, shared, received love and given it. And if you want to do one final roar as a group, as a collective, we welcome you to do that, too.

# 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?

*Chris Davies*



*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 paternal 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.

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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.***

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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 remind 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.

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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**“Doing the rituals was more meaningful because it was with the group. I’ve journaled a lot on my own, but this was special. The way people phrased things helped me think differently, and I realized that was the case for me, but I hadn’t realized it.”** - Pilot participant, Making It Through Together

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# The Ritual

## PREP:

Gather your fellow grievers 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.

If you're doing this ritual together as a group, have everyone read a section popcorn-style. If you're doing it alone, summon a person in your mind who's a source of comfort to you, and imagine that person guiding you gently through each step.

*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 peeks through the shadows or the rock in the throat appears in reaction to certain situations...*

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### SUGGESTED SUPPLIES:

- Plant seeds for beginners – marigolds or zinnias – or pick your own
  - Small pebbles
  - Soil
  - A meaningful mug in which to plant
- 

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### SUGGESTED SOUNDTRACK:

- [Unspoken Words by The Soil](#)
  - [Praying by Kesha](#)
  - [Out of Range by Ani DiFranco](#)
-

*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



# ABOUT THIS RITUAL

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?

*Edina Lekovic*



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.

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**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.**

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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

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**“The meditation on forgiveness felt like a conversation with the person I lost, and like I had a space and opportunity to directly speak to them. It was comforting but also felt like permission for anger, fear, and frustration alongside love.”** - Pilot participant, *Making It Through Together*

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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:

- **Where do I seek forgiveness from the deceased?**
- **Where might the deceased seek forgiveness from me?**
- **Who do I need to forgive?**
- **Where do I need to forgive myself?**

# Kriah

(קריעה)

Rabbi Jessica Minnen

JUDAISM



# ABOUT THIS RITUAL

**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).

וַיִּקְרַע יַעֲקֹב שְׂמֹלְתָיו וַיִּשֶׂם שָׁק בְּמִתְנָיו וַיִּתְאַבֵּל עַל-בָּנוּ יָמִים רַבִּים:

*Jacob tore his garments, donned sackcloth, and mourned for his son for many days.*

– Genesis 37:34

וַיִּחַזַק דָּוִד בְּבִגְדָיו וַיִּקְרַעֵם וְגַם כָּל-הָאֲנָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר אִתּוֹ:  
וַיִּסְפְּדוּ וַיִּבְכוּ וַיִּצְמוּ עַד-הָעֶרֶב עַל-שְׂאוּל וְעַל-יְהוֹנָתָן בָּנוּ...

*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?

Rabbi  
Jessica  
Minnen



**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

- Read aloud the piece you selected. Take a moment to let the words wash over you, reflecting on what they conjure. If in a group, you can invite anyone who feels so moved 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 - leaning into the pain, the way it sounds, the way it feels, the way it cuts through.
- Pay attention to how the tearing makes you feel. Sit with that feeling and, if in a group and you feel comfortable, you are welcome to share what is coming up for you. How does it feel to tear the cloth? To hear the sharp sound of fabric rended?
- Once the tearing is complete, each guest is asked to pin the kria cloth or ribbon to their chest and wear it.

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## SUGGESTED SUPPLIES:

- **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)**
  - **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.**
-

- You are invited to wear this piece of torn fabric over your heart – whether for the next week, or on days that you find particularly difficult or when you’re thinking of those you’ve lost, or when you need to access your loss or acknowledge a part of your healing.
- If in a group, you’re also welcome to wear the torn fabric on the days when you meet together as a reminder of the visceral experience of loss, and the fact that you have each other to make it through.

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**TIP: MAKE IT WORK FOR YOU!**

**“I didn’t have a piece of clothing from my dad, so I just bought a piece of fabric that felt right. I liked the physical act. I didn’t know what to do with the fabric so I tied it to something and I still have it.”** - Pilot participant, *Making It Through Together*

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**“I appreciated that I was able to do Kriah privately and then reflect on my experience with my Table. That ritual helped me deal with some emotions around my grief that I think I have been avoiding. I liked the sense of closeness I felt in sharing the experience with my table. I wore the torn fabric to the meeting. It was powerful to have a visual badge to say: I’ve gone through this.”**  
- Pilot participant, *Making It Through Together*

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# 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 a grain 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?

*Karen Georgia Thompson*



**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.

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**When I was recovered enough to get out of the bed, one of the first things I did was create an altar.**

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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 whom I have lost over  
the years.

# The Ritual

- 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, be sure to avoid using 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.

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## SUGGESTED SUPPLIES:

- A libation of some kind
  - A vessel to pour it into
- 

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**“We did Pouring to Remember as a group. I brought Coke, which was my friend’s favorite drink. It made us feel like we were all in the same room with all of our people. It felt light and not as heavy as I expected. I still have the bottle.”**

*- Pilot participant, Making It Through Together*

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# CONVERSATION STARTERS:

- What's something you inherited from the person or people who died? A treasured item, or something intangible: a trait, or a quirky mannerism.
- What's something you wish you could have shared with the person or people who died?
- What's a question you long to 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

this 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.

# What does this ritual mean to you?

*Abel Arroyo*



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.

Relationships of any kind are complicated, intimate, life-changing, and when we lose them, that grief is just as complicated, intimate, and life-changing.

That is not to say that I don't have good memories with dad, even if the relationship was

ultimately toxic.

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

**NOTE: Leader instructions and cues are in regular font. These instructions are not to be read out loud, but for the ritual leader's awareness. All 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



# ABOUT THIS RITUAL

**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?

*Michelle Scheidt*



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.”

Molly grew up, swam competitively in high school, and still enjoys sailing with me on Lake Michigan and jumping in the water together whenever we have a chance. 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.

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**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.**

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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.

## PREP:

1. **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.
2. **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.
3. **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.

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## SUGGESTED SUPPLIES:

- **A vessel that can hold water (bonus points if it's one with special meaning to you)**
  - **Water**
  - **Altar Items (options)**
-

# 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 for 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 nourishment 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 do you find yourself struggling, hurting, or feeling a sense of drowning in your grief?**
  - **Where do you see signs of hope, joy, or new life emerging?**
- **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.

**Allow yourself to release where you are drowning and/or give gratitude for what helps you in your life to come up for air.**

# Stories of Remembrance

(oral storytelling + affirmations)

LaDonna Williams

BAPTIST AND HOLINESS TRADITION



# ABOUT THIS RITUAL

This ritual is based in Black storytelling.

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?

*Ladonna Williams*



**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

## PREP

Take a moment to yourself to journal about what you've learned from the person or persons in your life whom 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.*

## THE 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. You're invited to say aloud the name of the person or people you've 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.*

# Observing a Death Anniversary (Yahrzeit)

Chaplain Dina Kuperstock

JUDAISM



# ABOUT THIS RITUAL

Regardless of the spiritual or cultural traditions influencing each of us, we all measure and punctuate our lives, and our grief, through the lens of the calendar. When a person with whom we have a relationship dies, their birthday, holidays, and milestones each take on new dimensions in the years that follow. One of the days which begins to resonate with greater intensity is the date on which the person died. For many people, anticipation of a death anniversary and figuring out how to navigate the day – emotionally, behaviorally, spiritually – can be daunting.

Jewish traditions offer some beautiful gifts of language and rituals for these complexities. In Yiddish the word *yahrzeit*, adapted from German, literally means “year’s time,” and is the Ashkenazi Jewish term that refers to an annual death anniversary. Sephardic Jewish communities also use two distinct terms for this idea. The first, *años*, means “years’ in Spanish. The second, which is my personal favorite, is the Hebrew term *nahalah*. *Nahalah* indicates a death anniversary, but also literally means “inheritance.” An inheritance is far more than the heirlooms or debt bequeathed to us in a will. It is everything tangible and intangible left behind when a person leaves this life, including their values.

This ritual is an invitation to engage a death anniversary to acknowledge and expand a legacy through acts of justice (*tzedakah*) in a person’s name. It empowers us to find light in moments of darkness and carves a sacred container for transmuting our grief over time.

# What does this ritual mean to you?

*Dina Kuperstock*



*Hot dogs. Sort of. Let me explain.*

One of my beloved heirlooms from my ancestors is their wisdom about marking time. Jews have a special time every week for an entirely different lifestyle (Shabbat). We have a monthly new moon celebration, annual holidays, and seasons of counting. Marking time's boundaries sets it aside and changes the texture of the moments inside. Rather than feeling like a victim of time passing, my tradition invites me to wield it as a tool of creation. Giving sacred intention (kavanah) to a death anniversary can empower us to reshape our reality.

One ritual for death anniversaries that has

always called to my heart is engaging in tzedakah in the name of the deceased. Tzedakah is often translated as “charity,” but a more accurate meaning is “act of justice.”

Tzedakah can mean volunteering for a service organization, aiding an individual in need, organizing community projects, or teaching a skill to help someone support themselves. Tzedakah involves giving your resources – time, skills, voice, money – because you believe it is right or fair. While some individuals hold greater privilege (i.e. capital, access), traditional texts that frame tzedakah as a spiritual imperative

call out equally to all, acknowledging that every person has gifts to offer. They also caution not to give beyond your own means or boundaries that risk self-harm.

This system of everyone enacting tzedakah envisions a world with ongoing mutual caregiving, on both a physical and spiritual level. By performing tzedakah in the name of someone who died, you enable that person to remain in this beautiful circle of care. Without a body, a soul can no longer participate in earthly acts of justice, but they keep contributing through their influences on us. As my beloved teacher Rabbi Anne Brener writes in *Mourning & Mitzvah*, “we become that person’s feet on earth.” A Yom Kippur prayer also teaches that tzedakah even has the power to reroute a Divine decree, acknowledging acts of justice as one of our most powerful tools as agents of change. From a mystical perspective, tzedakah in someone’s name is not only personal to you and the deceased - it contributes to a universal project called tikkun olam, healing brokenness in the world.

Infusing a death anniversary with interactive and embodied service reminds us that though the person we are grieving has died, we are very much still alive. From the darkness of grief, it rekindles belief that our lives have meaning, potential, impact, and hope.

So why hot dogs? My cousin Mike Rotman died from pancreatic cancer just before his 50th birthday. Mike was a big, boisterous dude, oozing generosity, who believed that gathering people together around food was the key to multiplying joy in the world. One of his dreams was to someday run a Maxwell Street-style hot dog stand, but he ran out of time. So now, one special day each year, Mike’s family and friends gather with big love and big appetites to do some joyful tzedakah in Mike’s name, inviting you and everyone you love to the pop-up restaurant “Rot’s Hots” in Deerfield, IL. All proceeds benefit organizations leading pancreatic cancer research and offering support to other families on journeys through disease and healing.

Rot’s Hots has become a festive holiday for our family, with music and laughter and memories

and generosity. And whether it's on the exact  
calendar anniversary, or whether I can be there  
in person, that's the day I use ritual to mark  
Mike's yahrzeit, his nahalah, his legacy.

# The Ritual

## PREP

**Identify the day you will observe the death anniversary and put in your calendar. Give it a name that is meaningful to you (i.e. Rot's Hots, THAT DAY, Giving Day)**

Aside from marking your calendar, you can also consider marking this as the anniversary according to the Jewish lunar cycle. Each day begins and ends at sundown, a moment that holds both darkness and light.

**Set aside some quiet time in advance of the anniversary to reflect on the deceased person's values.**

Think about what you have inherited from this person. What lessons or wisdom? What beliefs or behaviors that you admire? Think about what she hoped for about her definition of justice. Consider what he thought was right, fair, or important. Ask yourself about their contributions to family,

community, and the world.

If the deceased is a person with whom you had a difficult relationship or whose values were different than your own, consider how an act of service or care might bring healing to you, your relationship, or to others. Consider if you want this day to bring about greater forgiveness, peace, or understanding.

**Identify a single act of justice or theme that reflects the legacy of the deceased.**

Example of deceased friend's influence: *Taught biology. Donated money to wildlife conservation organizations. Vegan. Loved dogs.*

Example of a single act: *Volunteer at a non-profit dog rescue for the day.*

Example of a theme: *All participants do an act of justice related to ethical care of animals.*

**Decide if you will do this ritual alone or with others.**

**If inviting a group:**

- Clarify if it suits you to collaborate with others on the planning, or to only extend invitations to participate.
- Consider elements of inclusivity. For example, how can people of all ages, financial means, and abilities participate?
- Designate a ritual leader.
- Decide if you will gather in-person or virtually.

**Rolling solo:**

- Consider telling one trusted person of your intent to grieve through ritual on that day, in the event you need additional support in the moment.

**Purchase a 24-hour memorial candle.**

“Yahrzeit candles” can be purchased online through various vendors.

# Bring The Ritual To Life

**Mark Time:**

**Read:** “Today is not an ordinary day. Today is the [#] year anniversary of the death of [name of deceased]. Today, I/we recommit to remembering [name]’s life and acknowledging that it continues to have meaning. Today, I/we will continue to inherit and expand his/her/their legacy. Today, I/we will continue to grieve and strive to heal.”

**Go Inside:**

**Read:** “According to your own comfort and traditions, I invite you to close your eyes, bow your head, join your hands together, or just bring focus within yourself to a place where you feel connected to [name of deceased].”

## Be Still:

Take a deep breath and with your exhale, begin a minute of silence.

## Ignite Hope:

**Read:** “I/we light this candle to set aside this day from all others. I/we do this as a reminder that even in moments of darkness, I/we have the power to bring more light into the world. The spark within me/each of us lives on.”

## Light Up:

Light a 24-hour candle. If participants are in different locations, consider lighting a candle in each location at the same time. If safety is a concern, consider using an electric candle.

## Share Meaning:

Read aloud about the act(s) of justice that will be done in the name of the deceased on this day. Explain why you chose this project, including any memories, stories, jokes, photographs, or objects that contribute to

the meaning of the project. Consider ways to tie together participants during the day, such as all wearing something in common or everyone keeping the person’s name on a note in their pocket. Encourage personal touches to the observance of the death anniversary. Trust your unique relationship with the deceased and your own creativity as guides.

## Pursue Justice:

Get down to business. Give of yourself. Feel the presence of the deceased as you act. Take note of what you receive.

# Community Guestbook

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

Becca Bernstein

JUDAISM AND OTHER TRADITIONS



# ABOUT THIS RITUAL

**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 it's incredibly meaningful to commemorate it with something that says: "I was here. I witnessed this ceremony and participated in your family and friends' loss."

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?

*Becca Bernstein*



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 grievers 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

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**TIP:**

**Create a touchstone you can hold onto. For the Community Guestbook ritual, we’ve heard from participants who used various apps (like Google Docs and Jamboard) to collectively articulate and appreciate what they have learned about each other and those they lost. The document can serve as a tangible artifact you can revisit again and again.**

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