

Creating Simple, Sacred Ceremony
by Deborah Roth, MA

In the technically brilliant sterility of our modern society, there are too few places where we are encouraged, or even allowed, to plumb our deepest selves. We can often wind up over-intellectualizing the process, as we sometimes do in therapy, or dogmatizing it, as many of us have experienced in traditional religious services. The enactment of transformative rituals, performed alone or in groups, can provide the safe and sacred space to begin such a journey.

A ritual is more likely to move us deeply, to begin to propel us toward wholeness, if it contains several important elements:

1) **Clear intention.** What is the purpose of the ritual? What do you want to accomplish? The more focused we are, the more powerful and evocative the ritual is.

2) **Creating sacred time and space.** How do we set this enactment apart from our everyday lives? We must physically create the time and place away from the bustle of our daily routine -- in effect, constructing the "container" within which we may encounter the quieter, deeper parts of ourselves.

3) **Use of symbols.** Symbols are the language of the unconscious. If our intention is to make a shift in some area of our lives, superficial bandaids won't work. We must begin at the source, somewhere deep in our psyches, and tickle the core issues to the surface. Symbols serve to focalize our attention on the work of the ritual and to evoke powerful memories and emotions.

4) **Stimulating all five senses.** Some of us resonate strongly with visual symbols, while others respond more to auditory or kinesthetic stimuli, like music and dancing. Ingesting special "brews" or ritual food activates our sense of taste, while scented candles and incense tickles our olfactory sense and directly triggers our limbic system, the emotional center of our brain. By integrating all of these modalities into our ritual, each of us can find meaning, regardless of our sensory strengths or weaknesses.

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Once we understand the key ingredients of transformative ritual, how do we go about structuring it in a way that is both easy to enact and powerful in its experience? Clearly, there are as many ways to create meaningful rituals as there are people to produce them. The recipe I offer here is one I have worked with for several years, reflecting my first ritual experiences at the Women's Rites Center in New York City and my own research into the power and magic of ritual.

1) **Purification** -- cleansing the ritual space and ourselves. This can be done using incense, water, or essential oils, to name a few options. For instance, "smudging" is a common practice in many Native American traditions which involves using a feather or your hands to surround yourself with the smoke and aroma of burning sage. However it is done, it is the first step in creating sacred space.

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2) **Ritual invocation** -- stating the purpose or intention. This step is the essence of ritual magic. Verbalizing with clear intention what we wish to accomplish provides a solid foundation on which to build all of the ritual actions that follow. Whether our goal is to celebrate a rite of passage (birthdays, menarche, retirement), to heal an emotional wound or to honor our unique gifts (just a few examples), we must express that intent in order to begin to manifest it.

3) **Casting the circle** -- creating sacred space. This can be done in conjunction with the purification process, simply by walking the parameters of our ritual space with burning incense. Or, in a group ritual, we can also define our space and our purpose by inviting everyone in the circle to share who they are and why they are there. Whatever method we use, the intention is to create an energetic container which holds ritual time and space apart from our ordinary reality.

4) **Invoking the directions/elements** -- honoring fire/water/air/earth energies. When we face each direction and invite the energies of each of the four elements into the circle, we recognize and honor our connection to nature and the world around us. It reminds us also that we embody those same elemental archetypes within ourselves.

5) **Meditation** -- concentrating awareness inward. Guided visualizations, silent meditation, and focused breathing are just some of the ways we can move from outer space to inner space. It is a powerful way to deeply ground our intention on the internal plane.

6) **Body of the ritual** -- creating something tangible or sharing stories. Ritual "play" can be as whimsical as creating valentines for ourselves to promote self love, or creating a web of yarn within a circle to celebrate our connectedness. Or, it can be cathartic, like smashing an egg (outdoors, of course!) filled with our rage of abuse we have experienced, or perhaps simply sharing our feelings about topics that are often taboo in the rest of our lives, like anger or death. If we've performed the last three ingredients of our ritual recipe, this period of focused ritual magic-making will be profound and transformative.

7) **Raising energy** -- usually by sound and/or movement. We bring life to our ritual work in many different ways -- by dancing, drumming, chanting, toning. This is truly the part of the ritual when we most fully and literally embody the energy we have created up to this point.

8) **Grounding energy** -- renewing our connection with the earth. Once we have raised energy, it is necessary to ground it, otherwise we will leave the ritual feeling spacey and disoriented. We can do this simply by placing our hands on the ground and breathing deeply, visualizing our connection to the earth. Or, we could ingest some form of ritual food at this point, or clasp hands in a circle -- any action to tactically, physically feel firmly "planted". .

9) **Opening the circle.** Every ritual must have a clear beginning and ending. At this point, we can thank the elemental energies for supporting us in our ritual work, acknowledge the shifts that have occurred, and begin to reflect on how we can use these ritual gifts to make a difference in

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our lives. In a group ritual, this is also the time to engage in some final, fun grounding, in the form of hugs and feasting!

Through all of these stages, we see how the four key ritual elements -- clear intention, safe and sacred space, symbols, and sensory stimulation -- can be woven into the overall experience. Enacting ritual with a clear structure in mind should not stifle creativity, but rather enhance the feeling of operating within a safe, sacred energetic container. With those parameters in place, the magic woven during its enactment becomes a spontaneous and unique co-creation of everyone present -- even if it's only you!

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Creating Transformative Rituals

- 1) Have a clear intention of what you wish to accomplish.
- 2) Create an altar with meaningful objects and symbols.
- 3) Mark the beginning and end of the ritual with a symbolic action -- lighting/blowing out a candle, a moment of reflection, a simple prayer.
- 4) Honor the ritual time and space as sacred by purifying the area and invoking the elements and directions.
- 5) Allow time for silence and meditation on your purpose.
- 6) Activate all your senses! Move, sing, eat/drink special "brews" and food, play music, burn incense.
- 7) Practice positive magic -- for the "good of all and to harm none".
- 8) Be sure to ground the energy raised and thank the energies that have assisted you (elements, ancestors, spiritual guides, etc.)

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