

Using the Power of Ritual to Nurture and Inspire

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From Ordinary to Extraordinary: Exploring the Power of Personal Rituals

What is it that draws us to books, stories and movies like *The DaVinci Code*, *Harry Potter*, *The Celestine Prophecy*, and *Narnia*? On the surface one might say it is the desire to escape from our ordinary lives into the fantasy of extraordinary experience. Perhaps. And, perhaps it's something much more. What if it's a sacred calling, an ever-present, still voice that can be heard through these stories? This voice is neither pushy nor demanding. This voice beckons us not to escape but to enter more fully into the extraordinary experience possible in each of our "ordinary" lives.

What if we are compelled by the magic in great fantasy stories because a part of us knows we are capable of just as much magic, power and wonder as these stories illustrate?

Walk into any bookstore and you may find the proof that we do indeed want to touch and explore the magic in our own lives. The self help, personal growth, religious and spiritual sections are filled to overflowing. And even more is available online. Never before has the "fantastical" been more accessible. Books on practice, discipline, ritual, even spells abound, but is it necessary to have a "magic formula" to explore your own powerfulness? What about that still, ever-present voice within and its ability to inform, guide, and nurture?

Can you recall a time when you felt pulled towards some item, information or experience that connected you with anticipation or joy? Perhaps you traveled somewhere and had a feeling of being there before or of "coming home?" Or maybe you heard music that inspired a longing for something you couldn't quite define but wished to uncover somehow? Perhaps someone said something that gave you chills along your head or body as if to thrill you awake, to take notice of something larger and more inclusive than yourself? These are all just a few signs that your inner voice is inviting a deeper connection between you and the magic possible in your own life.

We truly do have the power to connect in with our own source and create a personal "magic formula" to mark special occasions, ease sometimes painful transitions such as death or divorce, and to redesign the next leg of our

journey. We heal and create our futures here and now through the artistry of our rituals -- planned or unplanned, conscious or unconscious.

Unplanned rituals may take the form of breaking something out of anger or frustration, thereby releasing energy and bringing oneself back to the present.

Unconscious rituals often take the form of joining with others in unhelpful dynamics or relationships in an unrecognized effort to resolve past wounds, fears or guilt. Planned rituals, on the other hand, may be as obvious as a funeral, graduation or wedding, or as subtle as pausing on the beach to pick up a rock or shell that calls to us, or making a wish upon the night's first star.

There is great power in planned, conscious rituals; ones that honor a rite of passage, help us shift to new beliefs, or pre-pave a desired future outcome. Rituals created with our full intention can answer our heart's longings and deepest secrets, unlock beauty and wonder, and connect us more fully to ourselves and others. These rituals can be shaped by external resources and ideas, but they can also be created purely out of the connection to that inner source of inspiration.

How does one access that creative resource within? Again, there's no set formula to follow, but we can offer some guidance.

- Pause. Slow down and listen - not to the chatter, but to your heartbeat. Then listen to your feelings and all the language, images and sounds that emerge from that quiet place.
- Ask, "If my life were being played out as a fantastic, magical story (and indeed it is!), what would this chapter be about?"
- Next ask, "What would support me most during this time?"
- Connect your answers to form an intention for the ritual. What do you hope to receive (or offer) from the experience? Are you marking a threshold? Healing? Seeking forward movement? Answering a question? Or, simply being present to yourself and Spirit?
- Imagine a symbolic way to bring your intention to life. Think of your ritual as a container that will hold the meaning of this particular moment

in time. What appeals to you and resonates with your unique needs?
Elaborate and overflowing, or beautifully minimalist; it's your choice.

You may want to incorporate a special object, or talisman, into your rituals. Interestingly, the word "talisman" comes from the Greek word "talein" which means "to initiate into the mysteries." It is said by some that the power of a talisman lies most strongly in the intention and faith of the user, not as much in the object itself. The same could be said for ritual - what you do is not nearly as important as your pure intention. The act of preparing for, and carrying out, a ritual will help to clarify, align, and strengthen your intentions.

Any ritual itself can be empty, lifeless, rote; or it can be vibrant, creative, impassioned, and fun. Rituals serve us, our life-spirit. We can use rituals to breathe life into our deepest dreams and thereby bring those dreams into our present realities.

So there's no need to conjure up mystery, magic, and awe. It's all here, ours to play with. We merely need a way to see it, feel it, and know it. We can engage in ritual as an initiation into ever deepening bliss and wonder, recreating our "ordinary" lives into "extraordinary" adventures.

Personal Rituals Spark New Life

Reclaiming After Divorce

Belinda Ryan

Danielle contacted me because she had been legally divorced for almost a year but didn't yet feel like a single woman. She wanted to combine clearing, releasing and closure with setting new intentions for her future good and partnerships. She told me she was drawn to creating a ritual for herself because of a suggestion made by her chiropractor that she might enjoy strengthening her feminine power through ritual, but didn't know how.

As we talked, I helped her see that she knew more about creating ritual for herself than she first believed. Danielle had, after all, created a wonderful wedding ceremony, years before, using elements that held meaning and authority for her. Together, we rediscovered the process of creating and designing a ritual that she'd already had success with, then used those same skills to inspire a ritual for closure and independence.

We started with candles. Danielle was drawn to light, to the quality of sacredness that light evoked for her. Every other possible component was then considered to see if it fit in with the intention of a ritual to release, close, bless, and initiate the space for new well being as a single, independent woman.

To Danielle's candles, several other components were added to complete the ceremony. Music was added to enhance the quality of peace. New clothing, a beginning piece of an entire wardrobe that signified Diane's change in taste and style was added to enhance freedom and comfort. A guest list of those who would stand as witnesses, not in physical form but in thought and memory joined the list to enhance the authority of the ceremony. The stage was set.

Preparing a letter of blessing and best wishes to her ex-husband, that she might burn to release felt good to Danielle; as did creating a treasure map to initiate her own blossoming future. A celebratory time with a close, long-time friend capped the event. Even the date to perform the ritual, Independence Day, was chosen to add to the depth, meaning, and uniqueness of this personal ritual.

Danielle expressed surprise at how easy and enjoyable the process was. But most of all, she came away feeling more confident and empowered in her ability to create a personal event, that could assist her in making her desire for realizing her independence real, meaningful, and sacred.

Inviting in New Love

Debbie Lacy

It was January of that year when my ex-boyfriend moved out. Even as I grieved the loss of this love, I knew it was a blessing. I was being offered the chance to experience new love again. Valentine's Day was rapidly approaching and I realized that I wasn't pining away, wishing that I had a man to share it with. I wanted to be more connected to *me*. I wanted to say goodbye to the person I was in the relationship with my former love. I wanted to celebrate new beginnings. Most of all, I wanted support from others to mark this transition. Thus, the *Be Your Own Valentine* party was born and it was the first ritual I created to shift my experience from that of someone recently dumped to someone with a new lease on life and love. I invited ten women friends to my home and requested that they each bring an object to symbolize blessings for me. I gathered them around and thanked them for coming to support me in this special way. They each shared the objects they brought and the meanings behind them. In typical girlfriend fashion we laughed, cried, and ate cake.

It was incredibly moving, and in the midst of opening my heart to take in all their love and well-wishes, I received an unexpected outcome. It was a true heart-opening experience during a time when I could have made the choice to shut down or mistrust men and relationships. Being able to receive love from my dear circle of friends showed me that not only was I capable of opening my heart fully, but that I would choose that level of openness from that point forward. This would be my gift to myself and ultimately, it is what made it possible for me to receive love when it did show up five months later.

I discovered a renewed energy and vibrancy, and soon found myself asking, "Now what?" Sooner than I expected, I was ready to date and enter that new

adventure. Around Valentine's Day, tickets went on sale for a Norah Jones concert that was scheduled for August. Romantic and beautiful, her music fit perfectly for the love I wanted in my life. My second ritual was born, and unlike the party with my friends, this one was simple and private. I decided to buy two tickets and I set the intention that someone special would be accompanying me to that concert. I pictured being there, and I trusted without a doubt that my intention would be fulfilled.

I had a possible prospect by April. Unfortunately, he wasn't good with emotions (his words). That brief fling dissolved quickly. I had been in a "just-have-fun-no-need-for-commitment" mode and had promptly manifested a man who would be good for fun and little else. Yikes. Time to regroup. I decided to create a third ritual. I sought out my buddy coach, Belinda Ryan. Belinda walked me through defining what I really wanted. Turns out I wasn't the type of person who was interested in casual relationships. The type of man I wanted to date was the type I could fall in love with. My criteria list was fairly short and focused on character traits. (Good with emotions was high on the list.) I wanted to be specific about a few "deal breaker" qualities, but leave it open enough to be pleasantly surprised. Creating this list and getting clear about the kind of man I wanted to invite into my life was the necessary third ritual I needed. The vision I had in mind was now much more aligned with who I was.

In mid-July, Charlie came into my life. Grounded, sincere, passionate, and yes, good with emotions, he was my date for the Norah Jones concert. It rained that night and lightning danced above the stage. Norah played on, and Charlie and I huddled under a blanket for shelter.

It's been three years since our first date. Our wedding is next year... the ultimate ritual. I can't wait.

These examples illustrate how accessible ritual can be in our daily lives. They require only some still, quiet time for reflection and a summoning of our truest intentions. They can be as involved or as simple as we need. Rituals are rich with possibilities. Beginning from a place of deep listening and inner guidance, these sacred acts tap into our creativity and our inherent power to choose the direction of our lives.

Rituals for Family Transitions

How many of you have wished to experience more meaning in your lives? How many desire to provide your children with their fair share of “magic moments”?

Well, it’s never too late for any of us. And it’s always the perfect time to encourage our children to lead us into creating their own individual magic during times of transition and change.

Whether the change involves moving to a new town and changing schools, losing a beloved pet, or entering puberty, creating a personal ritual can help your child through the process. Perhaps you’ve created some special rituals within your family over the years and you’ve seen how amazing it can be for your child to be celebrated and supported during an important transition. Creating these moments together can also ease challenging situations and encourage the development of skills that will no doubt be put to good use throughout their lives.

A Birthday Ritual to Manifest a Bright Future

Debbie Lacy

Beth contacted me about creating a special coming of age ritual for her daughter who was turning twelve. She said that Annie had been struggling with making friends after a recent move. Annie talked often about not fitting in, saying that the other kids didn’t seem to “get” her. Annie is very bright, sensitive, and intuitive. Beth knew this was an important crossroads for her daughter and wanted to boost Annie’s self confidence by helping her tune into her unique strengths and gifts. Annie viewed the ritual as a special time to share with her mom.

We gathered a few days before Annie’s birthday and started with a centering visualization to explore totem animals. (Annie was a huge animal lover.) Annie was deeply moved when a horse appeared to her and helped her navigate a shaky bridge. Annie communicated with the horse and asked for its assistance. This was the first time Annie experienced the ability to access guides from the animal world. She said she felt instant calm in the horse’s

presence and was excited about using this skill in the future. “It can calm me down when I get stressed out and help me with problems.”

Next, I had Annie do a “birthday scroll.” On a large piece of butcher paper using lots of markers, I asked her to describe how she wanted her year to unfold. What new activities did she want to try? What personal qualities did she want to develop? What kind of friendships did she want? Annie filled the page with her dreams and wishes and then shared the scroll with her mother. Beth told me later that she was touched by Annie’s honesty and her ability to articulate so many clear visions for the different parts of her life. I asked Annie if she could think of some actions that would make her vision a reality. She turned to her mom and said, “Can I take horseback riding lessons?” To her surprise, her mom agreed. Annie said it never occurred to her to ask before, because it seemed unattainable.

Our ending activity for the ritual involved small wooden treasure boxes. I gave Beth and Annie a basket of beads, charms and other small objects to choose from and invited them to pick symbols of (1) things they love about themselves, and (2) things they love about each other. They took their time and were both very intentional about the objects they selected. For her mom, Annie picked a smiley face, a heart with wings, and a house. “Mom, you make me laugh, you believe in me and are trying to help me fly, and you’ll always be my home.” They tucked their objects into the treasure boxes and I encouraged them to keep adding to them over time. Annie said, “Whenever I need to remember who I am, I can open this box.”

Family Rituals Help Ease Pains and Fears

Belinda Ryan

It had been a couple of rough days as my children and I watched our beloved older shepherd, Baronne, begin to decline. It started with her back legs weakening, and continued until she couldn't seem to get up off the floor at all even to relieve herself. I carried her out to the front lawn and held her.

I called the local vet to request a house call for the next morning. That evening my children and I sat quietly around Baronne and shared with one another all our favorite stories about her. We told her what her life had meant us. And we each told her that it was ok for her to go, (and it was ok

for her to stay). We just wanted her to know that we loved her.

Before the vet arrived the next morning, my daughter asked if we could light all the candles mounted about the fireplace to honor Baronne. It did, indeed, touch our hearts as we held the space to help her transition as peacefully as possible.

When the vet arrived, it was still hard on our hearts to instruct the vet to euthanize her. Suddenly, my daughter pulled me away to say that she felt something was wrong. She didn't know what, just that something didn't feel right. I asked the vet to wait a moment as my daughter and I went to another room. I sat quietly with her, any action suspended, unsure how to proceed. I wanted to honor her intuition and stay open to the possibility that she was in tune with something I was not.

The vet called to me, interrupting us. When I joined her again, she said that as she sat with Baronne and observed her more closely she realized that what she was seeing was not symptoms of a decline, but rather Baronne may have had a stroke. As a result, it seemed she was now suffering from something called vestibular syndrome, an inflammation of the nerves running behind the inner ear that resulted her inability to stay on her feet. This is a condition that responds to treatment.

A week later, after blood-work which confirmed that Baronne was in fine health internally, medication to reduce the inflammation, homeopathy to provide relief and support the healing; Baronne was up again, running on her own power and feeling good enough to attempt to sneak treats out of the kitchen!

Was it the simple act of ritual that led us to a solution not in our conscious awareness but attracted to us all the same? I think so. Perhaps too, it was the spirit of intention heightened through our simple rituals that created the space for my daughter to not only recognize, but honor her intuitions and alert us to more going on than we could initially see. For that, as a mother, I am most grateful.

Coming of Age for All Ages

Children aren't the only ones who can benefit from special rituals to mark different developmental milestones and ease transitions. As adults, we are forever in transition—coping with endings, forging new beginnings, questioning what's best for our children and ourselves, and trying to balance it all. After weddings and baby showers, there are few rituals in our mainstream culture to honor the milestones of adulthood. Some people create fabulous birthday rituals, but for many of us, this kind of deep intention and delight is missing. Where's the fanfare, mindfulness and deep acknowledgement that is called for by all we must do and be in the world?

When we allow ourselves the time and attention to create our own magic moments, we give ourselves a precious gift. And, we model something quite powerful for our children: lessons about listening to and loving themselves through all of life's journeys.

Belinda Ryan and Debbie Lacy are co-founders of Answering the Sacred, providing resources for people in transitions of all kinds through workshops, telecourses, individual coaching, and retreats. Belinda and Debbie are facilitating a retreat Oct. 20-22 in Ashland, OR, titled "Designing Personal Rituals to Nourish and Inspire." Visit www.AnsweringTheSacred.com for details on this and other offerings.

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