

Legacy Tips & Tools

Ritual 1 -- July, 2007

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The Importance of Ritual, Part 1 - Theory and Reflection

Just as our local Sunday papers suggest summer vacation reading, Legacy Tips & Tools suggests summer reflections and writing: About ritual. What is ritual, and why is it important in our lives and to legacies for future generations?

Ritual is a vehicle for expressing love and awe. Ritual elevates the everyday to the sacred, brings us closer to the Divine. For many of us traditional or inherited rituals (legacies received from our families, cultures & religions) were contaminated by life experiences, by personal or institutional misuse and abuse. Or rituals came to us as empty habits, devoid of purpose, even as superstitions. As modern women, unschooled in the need for meaningful ritual, we discarded them as outdated and useless, leaving a vacuum and an unrecognized yearning for spiritual connection.

Washing the dishes is like bathing a baby Buddha. The profane is sacred. Everyday mind is Buddha's mind.

– Thich Nhat Hanh

Women need to reclaim this connection, to seek rituals that are meaningful and satisfying. For some this will mean a return – with mature and deepened understanding – to the rituals of childhood faiths. For others it will be discovery of ancient women's practices. Still others will create their own rituals to meet specific needs, at times of birth, death, and the many occasions and transitions in between.

Rituals evoke a commitment of the heart. – Marianne Williamson

An example from my life: Lighting Sabbath candles, a Jewish woman's ritual for generations. When, as a girl of 10 or 12, I asked why we didn't light Sabbath candles, my mother told me they were a fire hazard to leave unattended. As an adolescent, I abandoned religion so completely that when I decided, at age fifty-five, to experiment with lighting Sabbath candles, it felt more than rebellious. It felt revolutionary – and terrifying. I began saying the ritual blessing, adding the words "Thank you, God, for the privilege and responsibility of ushering in the Sabbath." I used candlesticks my paternal grandmother brought from Russia when she emigrated over a hundred years ago. After a number of weeks/months I realized that I was, for the first time in my adult life, in relationship and dialogue with God. What a surprise!

Observing the Sabbath is like having a steady date with God. – Marianne Williamson

Reflect and write about ritual: Consider these 15 minute reflections an exploration to familiarize yourself with how ritual does or doesn't operate in or fulfills the spiritual needs in your life.

1. How did you experience rituals as a child, an adolescent, a young woman? Consider music and other aspects of your rituals that are beyond words. Which rituals did or do you practice alone? With others? In institutions or out in nature? Did you create these rituals or did they come from your faith or family tradition?
2. Make a list of things you do on a daily, weekly, monthly, seasonal, or annual basis that you already consider a ritual or a practice that you've not thought of before as a ritual. Arenas of your life to consider to discover rituals: rituals within family, with a love partner, with women, grandchildren, at holidays, within religion, at a death.
3. Reflect on your favorite ritual...describe in detail what you recall about its history in your family or your family of origin; describe its evolution (or devolution) over time until now. Muse about the elements of the ritual that touch you, or transformed you.

TO BE CONTINUED in August...

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