

## **RITUAL - A SEVENTH INNING STRETCH**

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### **Call to Worship**

We call on the earth, the sky, the oceans and the winds recognizing that we are a tiny but essential part of the natural world.

*All: We invoke this understanding to enrich our ritual.*

We call on our understanding of Buddha, and Martin, of Jesus, and Mohammed; of all our founding principles and the teachings of our ancestors.

*All: We invoke this understanding to enrich our ritual.*

We seek the wisdom of the aboriginal peoples who walk close to the land and the wisdom of our ancestors who hold us by the hand and have much to teach.

*All: We invoke this understanding to enrich our ritual.*

We look deep into ourselves to call on the wisdom from within each of us and the wisdom we find in our sisters and brothers, if only we would look.

*All: We invoke this understanding to enrich our ritual*

**A Seventh Inning Stretch**

I was in my mid-forties when I found that I had needed to have a hysterectomy. There would be no children, I would not be a mama, I would (in the words of my mother) never know how much my mother loved me because I would never experience knowing how much I loved my own child (I believe now that these are unfair words, nevertheless, I forgive Mom her sentiment). Well, I was devastated. The need for surgery was urgent and past time. But I was giving up an essential part of my femininity; an essential part of my being and I had no way to mark its passing. There is no ritual to mark this milestone. I needed a ritual to mark my passing from fecundity to wise crone (or at least a post menopausal power surge). I searched for a ritual that would give me closure and yet open me to the possibilities of what lay beyond. There wasn't one, I was going to have to invent it.

Ritual is to the soul what food and water are to the body...they give our life nourishment. Rituals are simply habits imbued with meaning. We do them not simply to accomplish something external to ourselves, but to move the intentions that rest internally. **We need rituals: they give us rhythm, meaning, and reminders of purpose.**

We live with ritual. Beginning at birth, pre-birth really with indecipherable sonogram pictures and gender reveal parties that have become all the rage. At birth, daddy cuts the cord; baby (in a cis-gender fury) is dressed in pale blue or pale pink to denote gender; some cultures save the precious after-birth; some insist mama and baby rest in a warm, darkened room for weeks with no visitors. There are tiny locks of saved hair; the briss with its ritual taste of wine; baby's first year assault on the birthday cake; the first day of school pictures; and the first communion or the bar/bat mitzvah that define the years of our lives. Graduation's are celebrated events by all the family. The bachelor/bachelorette party has become a long weekend out of town bacchanalia. Weddings mean something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue and a penny in her shoe. To be sure some rituals are big and meaningful; some slip away with hardly a notice. Hallmark has made a fortune on rituals in our lives. And if you think hard you will come up with family traditions or family rituals that pass down in your family. Perhaps there is a special recipe for egg nog at the holidays and a toast that everyone shares. Or maybe you use you grandma's tea towel to make bread because...well...she did. Is your family still spending a week at the lake and the

three legged races are required on Thursday nights? Maybe every kid at thirteen reads *A Tree Grows In Brooklyn*. These gems are treasured family rituals.

Why? Why do we have rituals in our lives? What do they give us?

Abigail Brenner, MD in *Psychology Today* suggests that *“By creating and performing personally expressive rituals for our selves we move freely into our own spiritual lives, taking charge of marking and honoring the transitions, the special moments in our lives that we find significant, in the ways we deem meaningful. **Rituals are tools that give us the freedom to take responsibility for the direction and purpose of our lives. Our task is to seize and shape this freedom...**”*

**Rituals serve as a bridge between our outer and inner worlds**, between the profane and the sacred, and between the ordinary and the extraordinary.

- I meditate: I sit quietly, in a specific pose, with music and scenes and candles and sometimes in absolute silence to focus on my breathing. I put all thoughts away and work to enter a meditative space. This transition, this bridge from the outer to the inner world is my ritual.

**Rituals provide us with a sense of renewal.** They offer us a time-out from our every day routine, habitual existence. They are a time to rest, replenish, and restore our selves on our long and winding path through life. Rituals help us to reevaluate our journey thus far and to reaffirm the path we are traveling.

- I sit on the beach: I bring my beach chair and blanket, cold beverage and hot novel and in the end all that matters is the sand crabs and the sound of the waves that take me to a special place of renewal.

**Rituals provide an ongoing way to structure our lives.** The ritual process provides a sense of stability and continuity amidst the ever-changing, hectic and often chaotic world in which we live. Rituals engender a sense of healing calm and a feeling of trust in life's flow and forward movement.

- Sometimes it is as simple as a warm bath, a glass of milk, two story books at bedtime, fresh sheets

**Rituals give us a way to connect to family, past and present.** Rituals tie us to our ancestors and to our heritage. Their creation and performance helps us to understand where we came from. As a bridge between past and future, they enable us to access, honor, and strengthen our own identity.

- Ornaments on the Christmas Tree are my connection to my family past and building on that tradition ensures that my present is part of the heritage of my ongoing life. I have ornaments from grandparents, parents, nieces and nephews and my husband and I collect a few special memories each year to continue our tradition.

**Rituals provide the essential tools for co-creating our own lives.** Creating and performing rituals that are personally meaningful to us. And help us set the intention that will ultimately enable us to manifest our aspirations.

When I was in the eighth grade I read a book called *A Member of the Wedding* by Carson McCullers. It has stayed with me for all these years. The story is about a young girl whose brother is getting married and she is being asked to be in the wedding. She balks. She does not want to celebrate the fact that her brother, her rock, the only one to whom she feels connection is now becoming united with a wife, someone else...and she is left out. She complains that she will no longer be part of "WE." I felt her pain, I did not feel I belonged to a "We" either for many years. And so, when it came my turn to marry, many years later I remembered this story. I chose to change my name. It was important to me to become a family with my new husband and to become Jane Carrigan. I had always said I would be Jane Spencer for life and would never change my name, but in the end it was more important to manifest the aspiration that was responsible for creating my new life as Jane Carrigan.

Rituals need not be elaborate or scary. Let's do one now. In the short clip we saw from Avatar we saw a sweet love scene between Jake and Neytiri. (<https://youtu.be/-u5SiCCmVv0>) Their simple affirmation to each other "I see you" is one part of a two-part Zulu greeting "I am here to be seen." "I see you." The Zulu people believe that when a person says "I am here to be seen," it invokes the person's spirit to be present. Saying "I am here" is a declaration of intent to fully inhabit this moment. It signals a willingness to engage with integrity. Saying "to be seen" emphasizes "no masks," "no editing," and "no defenses." It means "This is the real me" and "I will speak my truth." It means "I will be honest with you," and there will be no deception.

***Lets try this together: Find your partner, look at them intently, say "I am here to be seen" Your partner will respond, "I see you." No other words, please. Reverse the greeting. No other words.***

“I see you” is a powerful experience both for the person who says it and for the person who hears it. According to the Zulu tradition, to say “I see you” offers an intention to release any preconceptions and judgments so that “I can see you as God created you.” To hear “I see you” is an affirmation that you do exist, that you are both equal, and that you have a person’s respect. Many people say this is the most moving part of the greeting. Some say it strengthens their resolve to be more authentic and visible in their life. This greeting represents the Zulu philosophy of ubuntu, which translates roughly as “humanity toward all.” I propose that it also embodies deeply our first principle which honors the respect and dignity of every individual.

{Alternatively we might say: I am here to be known/I recognize you }

In closing, let me remind you of our most familiar rituals:

**Rituals that mark "rites of passage"**—major transitional turning points--- **help us 'connect the dots.'** They help us find and define the patterns and cycles in our individual lives that might otherwise seem to be random happenings if viewed separately. The Birthday, graduation, wedding or funeral are all examples we know well.

Which of these will be the basis of your ritual? You set an intention earlier, some of you will have determined something for which you need ritual in your life. OK, it might be hanging on a noodle poolside later, but seriously, I implore you to give some thought to the power of ritual in your life and take charge.

I never did find a ritual to mark my hysterectomy. But, some years later I had a life changing surgery that caused me to lose a considerable amount of weight. My world became different, doors were opened that had been closed and this time I was determined to find a ritual to celebrate that event. Before long a friend told me that she had walked the Marine Corps Marathon and a light bulb went off. I knew that would be my ritual. I began training in the early spring for a late fall event. I bought special clothes and shoes, I cut my hair so short I could shampoo it with a facecloth (since I often ran twice a day and showered and shampooed that often). I ate special foods, drank a quota of water, went to sleep and arose from sleep at specific times all to accommodate my training. I kept a journal which included running, swimming, kayaking and other activity totals. I calculated the miles on the shoes I would wear and rotated them daily. I rose at an ungodly hour to run before the heat and then spent the rest of the day Sunday celebrating the long run with ice packs and a nap.

I ran two marathons that year and while they remain a huge accomplishment I will always acknowledge that the ritual was NOT the marathon running...that ritual was preparing for the marathon. The discipline of making myself do it...making myself find a ritual, a ceremony, a celebration of this passage of life was the supreme ritual. I had found my ritual and in the end I found that post menopausal power surge that I had hoped to find had gotten me through those marathons after all.

As Abigail Brenner implores us: Let's embrace rituals as tools that give us the freedom to take responsibility for the direction and purpose of our lives and may we seize and shape this freedom—consciously, deliberately, and joyfully. Ashay Amen May it be so.