

Ritual

1 The word "ritual" comes from the Latin *ritus*, from the Greek *hroe*, meaning "to flow, run, rush, or stream." Ritual literally places you in the flow of things. **Robert Sardello**

2 Ritual, in a very real sense, is the wind that fans the spark of our intention. And that intention is in turn what allows us to uncover the deep meanings that lie along the twisted path from childhood to old age. . . .

Ritual can help us learn to harness the tension and pain that inevitably rolls through our lives and transform it into the positive emotional energy we need to gain new awareness and to initiate the delicate process of growth.

— **Kathleen Wall, Gary Ferguson**, *Lights of Passage*

3 Ritual and reverence in common life are so familiar that we scarcely notice them until they are gone. In sports, in entertainment, in the law court, the voting booth, the boardroom, there are ritual and reverence. We see them in the church whose members live in genuine awe of God, the community that votes, the department that meets well, the sports events that run with due ceremony. Most importantly, we see reverence in good leadership, in education, and in a home that is more than a place for eating, sleeping, watching television, and playing games. Home above all is the place where small rituals bring a family together into a family, where the respect they share is so common and familiar that they hardly recognize it as flowing from reverence.

— **Paul Woodruff**, *Reverence*

4 Ritual actions give expression to the desires of one's heart. They provide a bridge between physical reality and the reality of the spirit. **Jean Dalby, Wallace Clift**, *The Archetype of Pilgrimage*

5 Every historic religion has faced the problem of how to knead the vision of the sacred into the dough of everyday life. . . . Ritual invests ordinary acts and objects with symbolic meaning. . . . To play with ritual and to invent disciplines of awareness is to recognize that we have dual citizenship. We live simultaneously in two dimensions, the profane and the sacred, time and eternity. We remain most animated, most inspired, most fully alive, when we learn how to cross back and forth between the here and now and the Beyond.

— **Sam Keen**, *Hymns to an Unknown God*

6 Death rituals in the elephant family are eerily reminiscent of our own rites. It's ironic that anthropologists have long maintained that the first sign of our species' humanness was Neanderthal man's burial of the dead. What does this mean when we now discover elephants burying their fallen companions? These massive creatures show deep grief over a fallen family member. They recognize bones of their own kind, often staying by their dead for days, performing a haunting dance with their feet, flinging dirt over the carcass, and placing palm fronds over it as if in burial.

— **Brenda Peterson**, *Sister Stories*

7 A New National Anthem

Ada Limon

The truth is, I've never cared for the National Anthem. If you think about it, it's not a good song. Too high for most of us with "the rockets' red glare" and then there are the bombs. (Always, always there is war and bombs.) Once, I sang it at homecoming and threw even the tenacious high school band off key. But the song didn't mean anything, just a call to the field, something to get through before the pummeling of youth. And what of the stanzas we never sing, the third that mentions "no refuge could save the hireling and the slave"? Perhaps the truth is that every song of this country has an unsung third stanza, something brutal snaking underneath us as we blindly sing the high notes with a beer sloshing in the stands hoping our team wins. Don't get me wrong, I do like the flag, how it undulates in the wind like water, elemental, and best when it's humbled, brought to its knees, clung to by someone who has lost everything, when it's not a weapon, when it flickers, when it folds up so perfectly you can keep it until it's needed, until you can love it again, until the song in your mouth feels like sustenance, a song where the notes are sung by even the ageless woods, the shortgrass plains, the Red River Gorge, the fistful of land left unpoisoned, that song that's our birthright, that's sung in silence when it's too hard to go on, that sounds like someone's rough fingers weaving into another's, that sounds like a match being lit

in an endless cave, the song that says my bones
are your bones, and your bones are my bones,
and isn't that enough?

From *The Carrying* (Milkweed Editions, 2018) by Ada Limón.

8 The Flaming Chalice and Unitarian Universalist Identity

--At its most literal level of meaning, the flaming chalice signals Unitarian Universalist identity. But it has other registers of meaning as well. It suggests the transformations that take place when we are held within religious community. When we light the chalice in worship, we illuminate a world that we feel called upon to serve with love and a sense of justice. The flame is what one of our beloved congregational hymns terms "The Fire of Commitment."

--In its setting in worship, lighting the chalice signals the entry of the gathered community into a sacred space. As a minister, when I light the flame, I like to think of the thousand or more congregations doing so at the same time. This helps me to enter the spirit of worship, which is intended to break down apparent barriers of time and place so that we, the congregation, can establish larger connections to the sacred, and to all other people of liberal religious faith who are gathering in the present, have gathered in the past, and will gather in the future. The rhythms and concerns of our everyday life remain, but they come to be held in a much larger context.

-- **Susan J. Ritchie** excerpts from her pamphlet, *The Flaming Chalice*

Worship, Ritual and Ceremony

9 Music, whirling, chanting, and spontaneous poetry were the expression of the state of spiritual love in those early days, but gradually these practices were formalized and ritualized, becoming a means toward the state of spiritual love, rather than the spontaneous expression of it.

— **Kabir Helminski**, *The Knowing Heart*

10 All rituals take place in sacred space. Such a space may be dedicated to being a place of attunement, like a chapel or synagogue, or even the prayer rug of a Moslem. It can also be

created in the moment through setting up boundaries of time and space and performing an appropriate invocation. **David Spangler**, *Everyday Miracles*

11 Tribal people spend an immense amount of time making sure the feeling is right, either by sweats, rituals, dances, or feasts. There are anthropological studies that say tribal people spend about 30 percent of their time doing what we would call working and the rest of the time preparing and performing rituals, dances, and ceremonies. Why do they do that? They do that so their feeling is in right relation with the world they're in. **James Hillman**

12 Worship and ritual are a gift of human imagination to raise the community energy to a level where the angels are as interested as we are. This is a kind of gift we make to the angels, the gift of our art, the gift of our imaginations. **Matthew Fox**, *The Physics of Angels* by Matthew Fox, Rupert Sheldrake

13 Good ceremony makes room for all the dimensions of human experience in the hope that, together, we will discover something that transforms us. This is why I suspect that individuals can't create true ceremony for themselves alone. Ceremony requires that we work with others in the humbling give-and-take of communal existence. **Kathleen Norris**, *The Cloister Walk*

For Reflection and Discussion

A Is there a religious ritual that is especially important to you? What is the ritual and how does it work for you?

B Is there an everyday ritual that is especially important to you? What is the ritual and how does it work for you?

C Is there a holiday ritual that is especially meaningful to you? What is the ritual and how does it work for you?

D Is ritual now or has ritual ever been an important part of your family life? Have there been rituals that have arisen organically as opposed to being intentionally designed?

E Are there rituals that you participate in that no longer seem to work for you?

F Has thinking about ritual this month suggested any new intentions or practices going forward?

G How has your experience at All Souls informed your understanding of ritual? Is ritual an important element of your experience of All Souls? Have recent months changed your appreciation of ritual?

--Mary Beth Hatem for the use of covenant groups at All Souls Church, Unitarian

