

Atheopagan cleric

Introductory Guidebook

by

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Congratulations on your ordination!

This introductory guide will acquaint you with your rights and responsibilities, and provides guidance about pastoral counseling, as well as weddings, working with the dying and grieving, funeral rites, and other rites of passage you may be asked to perform.

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On Being an Atheopagan cleric

Being Atheopagan is good for us. It helps us to be happier, more kind and grounded, and to celebrate the remarkable fact that we are alive for the short time that is given us. It reminds us to look around at this magnificent Universe, and to revel in its wonders and cycles. We are fortunate, those who have found and chosen this path.

But there is a lot of suffering in the world. People can find themselves lost and searching, and at times like that, they may need us: need us to be kind in their moments of vulnerability, to be strong for them, to model rational, sensible, warm and open humanity. In such times, they need for us to extend the golden glow of our inner selves to help them to find their own. And in times of joy or grief or change, they need us to help them to create the rituals that mark the great moments in their lives.

And that is why some Atheopagans choose to be clerics.

It's not about status, because being a cleric provides none (which is why we don't capitalize "cleric"). We're just people. Ours is not a hierarchical religion, and so being a cleric doesn't mean being "higher" than anyone else.

It means, rather, that we have taken on a commitment to our fellow humans, to help them to have deep and meaningful and transformative experiences, to celebrate themselves and the Sacred Earth.

The path of the Atheopagan cleric calls on you to rise to your best and most generous self, and to be that self for others. To lead, if you can, for a better world. To sit with the sick, or the dying, or the imprisoned, and listen. To let the despairing know that it is possible to persist through hardship. To come to know joy.

To hear their stories and their pain. To listen.

Being a cleric is a serious commitment. Yes, it's joyous days of weddings and naming ceremonies. But it's also sitting with the suffering, and comforting the bereaved.

So be brave, and be kind. Remember the Principles, and live by them.

Represent us well.

Legal Entitlements

Being an Atheopagan cleric carries certain legal entitlements, as well as legal obligations in some areas.

In most states of the U.S., your ordination renders you legally able to officiate at a wedding and sign a marriage certificate as an officiant. There are exceptions; to see the laws in the state where you hope to perform a wedding, visit <https://getordained.org/state-marriage-laws> to research them. In some places, rules vary county-by-county, so be sure you know what is required in the location where you plan to perform a marriage.

Outside of the United States, your ordination as an Atheopagan cleric may or may not be recognized as a legitimate credential for officiating at a wedding. Research your local laws.

Legal Responsibilities

Being legally recognized as “clergy” may also conduct certain responsibilities, most particularly in being designated as a “mandatory reporter” of abuse. Clergy in 28 U.S. states and the territory of Guam (as of 2019) are required to report known or suspected child abuse or neglect; in many states additional rules apply such as mandated reporting of domestic violence and/or elder abuse. Specifics on a state-by-state basis relating to child abuse are covered in the federal publication *Clergy as Mandatory Reporters of Child Abuse and Neglect*, downloadable from childwelfare.gov.

While some states may allow clergy to avoid this requirement when revelation of abuse occurs during “privileged clergy-penitent communications” (as in Catholic confession), it is important to note that *Atheopaganism has no such thing*. Our priority must always be the victims of abuse: **if we learn of it, we must report it.**

Pastoral Counseling: A Sympathetic Ear

Being an Atheopagan cleric means that people may turn to you in times of crisis: when they have suffered a setback or loss and they are having a hard time dealing with it. So you, as a cleric, need to be ready to listen, sympathize, and support people in that condition.

But it's important to understand that—unless you're a therapist—you're *not a therapist*. If someone comes to us with a mental health condition such as depression or anxiety, or even something more severe, we must as responsible clerics listen attentively and with empathy, but then encourage the sufferer to see a professional.

Pastoral counseling boils down to the 13th Atheopagan Principle: *Kindness and Compassion*. Listen sympathetically. Provide what perspective you can, and encourage self-care. Make sure the sufferer is eating, drinking water, sleeping, taking whatever medications they have been prescribed. Avoid giving advice: generally, people don't really want it. If someone *does* want it, consider deploying your ritual skills and co-creating a ritual with the person in need: perhaps a Tarot reading you interpret together, for example.

Remember that pastoral counseling is fundamentally *religious and moral* in nature. So be aware of the four Sacred Pillars and the 13 Principles, of your own Atheopagan practice. Your role in pastoral counseling is to be a humane voice of Atheopaganism supporting a person in pain.

Use the tools our path teaches. Perhaps the person in need would benefit from building a Focus and conducting a ritual or a guided inward journey—alone or with you—to help them to move through what they are experiencing.

Above all, be gentle, and **be sure to observe your own boundaries**. It's fine to let someone lean on you, but only as far as you are comfortable being leaned on.

It's a good idea for you to compile and keep a list of local mental health resources in case you need to refer someone in crisis to them. This can include affordable counseling services, hotlines and warmlines, and numbers for emergency psychiatric services if necessary.

It should be noted that if working with someone who is having a mental health crisis, it is a last resort to call police—they are generally not trained in de-escalation techniques nor in counseling, and they are armed. Call them only if you feel someone's life is in danger and you see no alternative.

Officiating a Wedding

You've been asked to officiate a wedding! How wonderful! Here are some guidelines and suggestions for this important rite of passage.

Consultation Before the Wedding

If you don't know them, meet with those who plan to be married and get to know them a little. How long have they been together? What are their future plans?

It's important to do this because once in a great while, you will be presented with a couple¹ who clearly are incompatible. Trust your gut on this—you need to decide for yourself whether you think marrying these people—and entangling them in all the legalities they will need to untangle later if they divorce—is a good idea. If you choose to decline, be polite, of course, but you may want to suggest that you feel some friction and that the couple may benefit from some counseling to resolve this before marrying.

Pre-Ritual Discussions

Plan the ceremony with those who are marrying. Here are some key questions to ask the betrothed couple:

1. *When and where will the ceremony take place?*
2. *What are the elements you want to include in your ceremony (discuss ritual structure below and adapt as desired)*
3. *Who are the people you wish to be involved in the ceremony, and how?*
4. *Are there children to be involved in the ceremony, and if so, how? Who will be responsible for managing them? If creating a mixed family, will the children also be asked to say vows to the new family?*
5. *What do you want to communicate to the community you are gathering for your wedding?*

¹ Currently, legal marriage is limited to couples in the U.S., but if the ceremony is not meant to be legally binding and is meant to conjoin members of a polyamorous group, the practices and ritual described here can still be effective. "Couple" is used here as a convention, not to imply that groups of more than two cannot be engaged in legitimate and loving relationships.

6. (If the wedding is to take place outdoors): What is Plan B if the weather does not cooperate?
7. What are your email and cell phone numbers (all)
8. What will be the dress code for your wedding? (You may wish to wear Atheopagan insignia such as a ritual stole or a Suntree lapel pin for the ceremony)
9. Who will greet the cleric and hand off the marriage license?
10. What are the plans for after the ceremony? If there is to be a reception, would you like for the cleric to attend?

Ritual Structure

Pagan rituals generally happen in circles, rather than in the leader-and-audience model of the big monotheistic religions. In a circle, all are on the same level, and all are participants, rather than mere witnesses.

Of course, the people you are marrying may want something more mainstream, and you can work with that. But you might start by suggesting a circle-shaped ceremony, with the “action” taking place in the center.

In a typical Atheopagan ritual, there are five phases: *ARRIVAL*, *QUALITIES*, *WORKING*, *GRATITUDE*, and *BENEDICTION*. You don’t have to use this format, but you can if you like. It is effective and reliable. Consult the *Atheopagan Ritual Primer* (appended to this guide and downloadable from Atheopaganism.org), or the book *Atheopaganism: An Earth-Honoring Path Rooted in Science*, for details about each of these phases of a ritual structured in this manner. The below is a synopsis, for wedding planning purposes.

ARRIVAL is the phase when people settle into the ceremony, open their hearts and prepare for the emotional experience to come. *ARRIVAL* can include the declaration of a space of safety and love to enclose the wedding ritual, some welcoming remarks by the officiant (you), and possibly a *grounding* activity to help participants shake off the stresses and distractions of their travel to the ceremony and ordinary daily concerns. Often, those to be married don’t enter the circle until after this “cleansing” has occurred.

QUALITIES is the invocation of those emotions, characteristics and aspects that the participants in the circle hope to be with them as they conduct the transformative work, or “magic”, of the ceremony. In the case of a wedding, it may be an opportunity for the gathered community in the circle to shower the soon-to-be-wed with their wishes for love, kindness, patience, forgiveness, excitement, adventure,

sexiness, etc. The couple may wish for you to invoke certain qualities as well, to ensure they are mentioned. If the couple desires to “jump the broom” as a part of their ceremony, you can “concretize” these wishes by having each member of the circle tie a ribbon onto the broom while speaking their wish. The wedding broom will become a treasured keepsake for the couple to preserve.

WORKING (or “DEEP PLAY”) is the primary work of the ritual: the wedding ceremony. In most cases, this will involve such traditional elements as the speaking of vows and exchanging of tokens such as rings. Before any declaration of the couple as married, you may wish to ask for affirmation from the community that it is their will that the couple be wed. This can be a moving and affirming demonstration of the support among their loved ones for their union.

The wedding ceremony itself generally consists of

- A procession of the loved ones of each couple, escorting them to come together in the circle;
- A welcoming statement by the cleric, who describes the meaning of marriage and the sacredness of Love as one of the four Sacred Pillars of Atheopaganism;
- An invitation to the couple to speak vows to one another;
- An invitation to the couple to exchange tokens (such as rings);
- Binding of their hands together with a ceremonial cord, if the couple desires a handfasting ceremony;
- A “questioning” phase prior to the declaration of the couple, asking their intentions. The typical “Do you take this man..?” inquiry is an example, but you may ask other questions, such as, “Do you understand the gravity of this act? Do you understand the *levity* of this act?” (many couples simply won’t feel it’s a “real” wedding if they don’t have to say “I do” at some point, so don’t disappoint them);
- A declaration that marriage has been achieved: “By the power invested in me as a cleric of The Atheopagan Society, I declare you wedded in partnership!” (or wife and wife, or husband and husband, or husband and wife, or whatever the couple has requested they be called in your discussions beforehand);
- There usually follows a fervent public display of affection.

GRATITUDE occurs after the declaration of marriage. The couple each express their gratitude for whatever they feel is appropriate to recognize at this special time: people, circumstances, life and the Earth itself.

BENEDICTION closes the ritual and sends the participants and the newly married off into the world to live and thrive. Often, this includes:

- A presentation to the community of the circle of the newly wedded couple: “To this community I present, the wife and husband Eleanor Cumberbatch and Eliot Bandersnatch!” There will be much cheering.
- A kind word to the people of the community gathered there, to remember the joy that is living, and kindness, and to carry the love they have witnessed this day forward into the world.

After the Benediction, if the couple desires a broom-jumping, they can leave the circle by running to jump the broom as it is held by the Best Man and Maid of Honor (or other beloved community members as chosen by the couple). Be sure it isn't held too high, or they will trip!

OTHER ELEMENTS that can be introduced into a ritual at any appropriate point include poetry reading(s), songs or instrumental musical offering (s), a guided meditation, invocation of ancestors, and participation by children.

The circle is complete, the wedding is done. Time to have a party!

At the reception or party following the wedding, **be sure to corral the happy couple to have them sign the legal documents**, and you sign them yourself. It is YOUR responsibility to deliver these to the proper government office, so be sure you put them in a safe place in the meantime.

The Role of the cleric in Death and Dying

Introduction

An overriding factor which will likely affect your decisions for every part of this section is the mix of people involved, and especially the views of the dying or deceased person. There could be some in the extended family with very strong ideas of how they want you to orient to the death, regardless of the views of the deceased person or those closest to them. If you have to face this, know that you aren't alone and certainly aren't the first in that position. You can do this. Remember that in Christianity, death is an unnatural enemy (which they think they are "rescued from" by Jesus), and that recognizing death as a normal, natural part of a healthy world may be seen as a problem for those used to the Christian view. Many of these people are accustomed not only to that view being accepted without question, but also fully accustomed to seeing that view forced on anyone who would see it differently.

A summary explaining a scientifically informed view is [here](#). Also, many of the resources in this section are from the Great Story page on death, [here](#).

With all that in mind, one can think about what the main goals of funerary rites are. Common goals include honoring and preparing the body for disposal, fostering closure, acceptance of this death, the celebration of the person's life, honoring their accomplishments, expressing love for them and other loved ones, affirming community, and more. Each of these may be more or less important depending on the circumstances and the people involved.

The Atheopagan View of Death

Atheopagans understand that death is a natural and necessary part of living: it is the evolved strategy that allowed individuality into the world as we arose from single-celled organisms to much more complex multicellular ones. It is, as Mark Green has said, "the price of the ticket to this amazing world". It is the one truly universal human experience; even those who die before being born experience it.

And death is final. While everyone is entitled to their own opinions on the subject and no one knows for certain, there is neither evidence for an afterlife nor any reason why Life on Earth would have evolved one. Given Occam's Razor, therefore, we generally hold that it is unlikely that there is any sort of life after death.

Ours is a *monistic*, rather than a *dualistic* religion, meaning that we view the mind as an emergent property of the body (specifically the brain, mostly), rather than believing that there is a "soul" or spirit that exists independently of the body. So when the brain dies, Atheopagans generally believe we are gone forever, save for the works we leave in the world and the memories of those who knew us.

Atheopagans have varied relationships with the knowledge of impending death. Some are at peace with the idea, others are afraid. At the prospect of impending death, people are likely to cycle through Elisabeth Kubler-Ross' famous phases of coming to terms with death: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance. These may come in any order, and may not all manifest, but be aware that each of them is a normal and valid response to the prospect that one—or a loved one—is going to die soon.

The Roles

There are three elements to being a cleric in relation to a death. A cleric may be called upon for one, two, or all three:

- Supporting and consoling the dying and their loved ones;
- Consoling and supporting the grieving; and
- Conducting funerary rites.

Resources

In the name of not reinventing the wheel, it is recommended that Atheopagan clerics read and refer to *The Pagan Book of Living and Dying* by Starhawk and M. Macha Nightmare (ISBN 0-06-251516-0). Though this is a theist text and presents information from the worldview of theist Pagans of the Reclaiming tradition, it contains much valuable material about working with the dying and devising and implementing appropriate rituals after they die.

Information on home funeral care and green burials can be found at The Order of the Good Death (orderofthegooddeath.org), which is a great organization all around.

Another useful resource for Atheopagan clerics who work with the dying and their loved ones is available online is *A Guide to Hospice Volunteer Training in British Columbia*, downloadable from hospicebc.org.

Finally, we recommend *The Green Burial Guidebook* (ISBN 1608685233), a thorough planning guide for home funerals and environmentally responsible body disposal options.

Resources for ordering green burial supplies such as shrouds, cardboard caskets, etc. may be found at various sites online. Be certain that shrouds contain no artificial fibers. Decorating a cardboard casket after or while awaiting a death can be a cathartic and meaningful ritual of its own for loved ones; simple writing of wishes, memories and poetry, and drawing with markers can make a cardboard box into a work of funerary art.

Being With the Dying

In brief, when working with the dying, an Atheopagan cleric's role is to listen, to make them as comfortable as possible, to fulfill their wishes as best we are able within the limits of our own boundaries, to support their loved ones through the process, and to identify and work to bring about their wishes for their dying experience as much as possible.

Dying is a demanding process. Even when pain and discomfort have been minimized, the dying person is going inward, detaching from the world outside themselves. Sitting in silence for long periods is common in working with the dying. But there are often other, more lucid periods when a dying person may want to talk, or be able to answer questions about how best to help them. Sometimes they may want company, other times they may wish to be alone.

Key to the experience of being with the dying is *not to take anything personally*. Dying is a self-focused activity, and especially if they are in pain, the dying may be unkind. But it's not about you, nor should it be—this time is about *them*. Practice self-care and carefully observe your own boundaries, but try to forgive the dying if they hurt your feelings. You would want them to do the same for you.

Attending the Grieving

People vary widely in how they relate to death, and to crisis and stress generally. Some may want to talk, some may not. Some may just want someone to watch their kids for awhile so they can stay with the dying person. Some may want a focus for their anger. And some people simply will not accept that the dying person is dying. The needs vary as widely as do humans of the Earth.

Bear in mind that it is unlikely that the loved ones of the dying will all share the Atheopagan view on death, so you will need to be sensitive to other religious perspectives. If the dying person is an Atheopagan, be gentle but don't forget that it is *their* death, and it should be on their terms.

Remember your role. You (probably) aren't a part of the family, and you don't have to pick sides other than to advocate for what the dying person wants. Mostly listening, being helpful, and being sympathetic will get you through.

After a Death

While it is not the role of an Atheopagan cleric to tell grieving loved ones how to proceed with funerary rites and disposal of the body, you can be helpful to them by making certain that they understand their rights and options. Funerals can be a severe financial burden on many grieving families, especially if they allow themselves to be sold expensive options by a funeral home.

Grieving families should know that *embalming is not a legal or health requirement, and once the body has been released by the coroner's office, they may claim it themselves for a home funeral.* Families have the option of taking possession of the body themselves for washing, viewing, etc. prior to burial or cremation, and there are many "green burial" alternatives which are not only better for the Earth, they are better for the family's pocketbook. Resources referenced above go into more detail about these options, but you should be clear with families that if they do not want the involvement of a funeral home, they do not have to have it... *whatever* a funeral home might tell them. They may want to involve a funeral home for a cremation, but leave everything else to themselves and loved ones.

Funerary Rites: Considerations

In organizing funerary rites, there are several considerations to keep in mind:

- What kind of ritual is it? A small, intimate blessing of the body with the closest loved ones? A graveside or pre-cremation service? A community memorial ceremony with all the friends and loved ones of the deceased?
- How many participants will there be?
- Will the ritual be indoors, or out? If the latter, what if the weather doesn't cooperate?

Format of Death Rites

Your ritual honoring and commemorating a person who has died could take many formats, depending on the needs and details of the situation. As with all Atheopagan rituals, we strive to accomplish the goals for ourselves in this real world, leaving everyone better off. Also – outdoor locations can work well, helping us feel more connected to nature.

Pagan Format. A circular layout of your ritual space can emphasize the community aspects of the funeral, and help everyone see the community gathered here. It also makes ritual elements like calling the quarters easier, and may also reduce unease among some who have escaped from a fundamentalist Christian background. A Pagan type of program may be framed by “drawing a circle” or “quarter calls”, and will be more interactive than a sermon type service.

Church Service Format. A regular church layout is what many of us (especially older people) are familiar with. In addition to having a church type layout (with the chairs in rows all facing the front, where the podium is), the service might be similar to a typical church service (not all that different than the Abrahamic religions), with one main speaker (sermon type), etc.

Other Formats. Other layouts & orders of service may work better, such as a triangular layout or others, especially outdoors. This is especially important if the deceased has a cultural connection which can be a part of the funeral if appropriate in your situation.

Pagan rituals generally take place in circles, rather than in the audience-and-performer “church service” format of the Abrahamic monotheistic religions. But there are limits to how many people you can organize in a circle, depending on available space and location. Sometimes you can gather people in a circle more than one person deep, but if so, don’t plan for people to hold hands or pass objects around during the ritual, because they will never figure it out.

If the ritual will be really large—say, more than 50-100 people—it becomes more practical to use an indoor space with ranks of seats, though you can also do multiple ranks of chairs in a circle. As with all large rituals, keep it simple and remember that people are grieving. They mostly want to receive an experience, not to create one. But be sure there are roles for loved ones who want them.

Consider your participants. Don’t make them stand for long periods. Provide chairs so they can sit comfortably, and make a designated space for wheelchairs and for other people with accessibility needs.

Funerary Rites I: Body Blessings

Typically occurring shortly after death (or after the body is brought to the home where it will rest until the time for disposal), this is generally the smallest and most intimate funerary rite.

Elements of these rites often include washing the body, washing and brushing or setting the hair, anointing with scented oils (not necessarily all over), placing jewelry or other decoration on the body if desired, and (if there is to be no viewing/visitation) wrapping the body in cloth or a shroud. If the deceased wished to be buried clothed, this is the time to dress them.

If viewing and visitation are to take place, the body may be put in a bed with ice packs and/or dry ice atop and underneath it, to slow decomposition. The body can be maintained like this—particularly if there are air conditioning and cool conditions—for a day or two. Check with your local laws; many places require unembalmed bodies to be buried or cremated within three days of death.

A viewing chamber may be decorated with photos, mementos, etc., and so forth. You may want to burn a small amount of aromatic herbs or incense in the (unlikely) case of decomposition odors. A rolled cloth or small towel may be placed under the chin of the body to keep the mouth from dropping open, which some may find disturbing.

Funerary Rites II: Circle of Remembrance

This form of funerary rite may be conducted either in the presence of the body, at the burial or after the body has been buried or cremated. It is a ceremony for the loved ones of the deceased (recognition and celebration of life for the broader community is discussed below).

The celebrants gather in a circle (if a burial service, around the grave and shrouded/casketed body; if not, around the area where commemorative plants are to be planted and/or a monument is to be erected).

See the *Atheopagan Ritual Primer* appended to this guide for help with the structure and phases of the ritual you plan.

The Arrival phase may include a meditation on the gift of life, and the statement that now we return the remains of our loved one to the Earth from which they came.

Qualities invoked may include remembrance, love, grief.

Working may include activities such as:

- Lowering the casket or body by hand into the grave
- Burying the casket or body by hand (either completely or partially, leaving the rest to be done by cemetery attendants)
- Planting seeds, bulbs or a sapling
- Decorating the grave/erecting a monument

The Gratitude phase may acknowledge thankfulness for the loved one's life, for loving community, etc.

Benediction closes the ritual with a reminder of the rarity and preciousness of life, and the wish that celebrants may bear this grief with strength, self-compassion and warm remembrance.

Funerary Rites III: A Celebration of Life

This form of funerary rite may be conducted weeks or even months after the death, enabling all family and community members who choose to attend to plan for the event and travel to reach it.

Here is a general outline for an Atheopagan memorial service, following the format defined in the *Atheopagan Ritual Primer* appended to this guidebook:

Gathering/Arrival: play music that was loved by the deceased during this period (or as chosen by the parent(s), if this is a stillbirth or miscarriage memorial). It doesn't have to be sad music! A memorial is a celebration of a life.

Welcoming remarks by you, the officiant. Bid everyone welcome and ask them to be seated. Welcome the family in particular, and if there are any "dignitaries" or special friends to the family, welcome them, too. Have everyone take a deep breath, and blow it out: we are here, in this place today, in the presence of the profound reality that is death. In our sorrow, we come together today to celebrate the life of (Deceased).

Poem or prose reading *celebrating the magnificence of existence*: This is where the "Pagan" part of the ritual comes in. It is a reminder of the beauty of Life on Earth, in this extraordinary Cosmos. That we live here, surrounded by wonders, for a brief time, and then dissolve back into the Cosmos from which we arose.

Musical Interlude: A song or instrumental piece—guests may be invited to sing along if the organizers wish it. Be sure to provide music sheets to guests if you choose this option.

Eulogy: A prepared speech to memorialize and celebrate the life of the deceased. Usually delivered by a family member or close friend. May include description of the deceased's Atheopaganism and what it meant to them, and/or any final words the deceased left behind for their community.

Poem or prose reading: Some good nontheist choices are available at <https://www.bustle.com/articles/152207-16-non-religious-funeral-readings-from-poems>

Officiant invites guests up to share personal memories

Personal Memories: spontaneous memories shared by guests

Musical Interlude: another song or instrumental piece, possibly with guests singing.

Benediction: (Literally, "saying a good word"): a closing statement by the officiant acknowledging the love and respect that has been expressed for the deceased, gratitude for the deceased's life, with well-wishes for the family and loved ones, an adjuration to embrace our precious lives, and an invitation to the reception following the memorial (and/or burial service if that is to follow).

Restart gathering music as attendees stand and prepare to leave.

Funerary Rites IV: Another Celebration of Life

Welcoming

Leader: Let us hold hands. We have gathered here today to celebrate the life of (deceased). (Deceased) touched our lives and hearts. May our time today both offer support for us all in this time, as well as reminding us that everything alive will die, and that just as our world around us has been built by so many lives over the ages, our own actions will help build the world future generations will live in.

Calling the Quarters

Leader: We stand in a sacred place, hallowed by our presence and intent. The directions have been recognized by humans for millenia – let us recognize these directions, and invite their symbolic presence into our circle today.

(faces North) Spirit of the North, of winter, of contemplation, and of hidden life, please join us today.

Guests reply “Hail and Welcome”

(lights North candle)

(faces East) Spirit of the East, of Spring, of planning, and of emerging life, please join us today.

Guests reply “Hail and Welcome”

(lights East candle)

(faces South) Spirit of the South, of Summer, of work, and of full life, please join us today.

Guests reply “Hail and Welcome”

(lights South candle)

(faces West) Spirit of the West, of Autumn, of Harvest, and of waning life, please join us today.

Guests reply “Hail and Welcome”

(lights West candle)

Song: (a song can be sung here)

Invoking of our Ancestors

Leader: We are bound in the interwoven web of community, and beyond that, the wider web of life. (Deceased) has been a familiar thread in this web for us – one that has helped us grow, and which has now given us strength to weave the future. This web also extends back in time. Let us envision that web now to feel our connection to the depths of time and imagine these Ancestors joining us for this celebration of (Deceased)’s life.

Celebrating the Life

Leader: (Deceased) brightened our lives in many ways. (Loved one) would like to share some memories of (Deceased)’s life.

Are there others who would like to share memories?

(This continues until limited by time or volunteers).

Gratitude reading: *Life is a gift. Even in our sorrow, we are grateful for the gifts and joys Life bestows upon us. (reading continues)*

Offerings

Leader: Many of us may want to leave something, representing (Deceased)’s life as part of our own lives. If you’d like to write something, slips of paper and pencils are available around you. Others may have brought small tokens of their memories. I

invite you to place these in the basket at this time if you choose. They will be (burned, buried with the deceased, or other as planned by the ritual planner).

Readings

Choose a reading, or write your own

Song

(a song can be sung here; be sure to provide lyric sheets so attendees can sing along if desired)

Closing

Leader: Let us thank the directions for their symbolic participation in our circle today.

(faces East) Spirit of the East, of Spring, of planning, and of emerging life, thank you for joining us today.

Guests reply "Hail and Farewell"

(extinguishes East candle)

(faces South) Spirit of the South, of Summer, of work, and of full life, thank you for joining us today.

Guests reply "Hail and Farewell"

(extinguishes South candle)

(faces West) Spirit of the West, of Autumn, of Harvest, and of waning life, thank you for joining us today.

Guests reply "Hail and Farewell"

(extinguishes West candle)

(faces North) Spirit of the North, of winter, of contemplation, and of hidden life, thank you for joining us today.

Guests reply "Hail and Farewell"

(extinguishes North candle)

Conclusion

Leader: As we leave this sacred place, may we remember the joy that (Deceased) brought to our lives, and with (Deceased)'s memory, also remember that all places are sacred. Like the atoms which cycle through bodies and the Earth, the atoms of (Deceased) are also always around us, in the trees, air and soil – just as (Deceased)'s memories are always with us. May we remember (Deceased) at Hallows, and often throughout the year.

Officiating Other Rites of Passage

Though they are less common in Western cultures, rites of passage that can lend meaning and structure to a human life can also include:

- A Welcoming into Parenthood for pregnant couples or those anticipating adoption
- A Naming Ceremony held in infancy to celebrate the arrival of a child, or a Welcoming Ceremony for a newly adopted child
- A Passage into Early Adulthood for those entering their teen years
- A Passage into Full Adulthood for those turning 18 and/or leaving home to live independently
- A Transition into Elderhood (aka “Croning” or “Saging”² for those who feel they are entering that phase of life)

This section provides brief guidance for designing and officiating these rites. See also the posts at Atheopaganism.org under the “rites of passage” tag.

Questions to Ask Before Planning the Ritual

Plan the ceremony with those who are to experience the passage in their lives. Here are some key questions to ask:

1. *When and where will the ceremony take place?*
2. *What are the elements you want to include in your ceremony?*
3. *Who are the people you wish to be involved in the ceremony, and how?*
4. *Are there children to be involved in the ceremony, and if so, how? Who will be responsible for managing them?*
5. *What do you want to communicate to the community you are gathering?*
6. *(If the ritual is to take place outdoors): What is Plan B for uncooperative weather?*
7. *What are your email and cell phone numbers (all)?*
8. *What will be the expected dress code for your ritual?*
9. *What are the plans for after the ceremony? Would you like for the cleric to attend?*

² ... or “Curmudgeoning”

Ritual Structures

Pagan rituals generally take place in circles, rather than in the leader-and-audience model of the big monotheistic religions. In a circle, all are on the same level, equal, and all are participants, rather than mere witnesses.

Consult the *Atheopagan Ritual Primer*, appended to this guide, or the book *Atheopaganism: An Earth-Honoring Path Rooted in Science* for details on each of the five phases of a typical Atheopagan ritual: *ARRIVAL*, *QUALITIES*, *WORKING*, *GRATITUDE* and *BENEDICTION*. Note that this system is not the only way to structure a ritual, nor the only one that is effective: it is one among many, but it is dependable and a useful framework for ritual design—especially for those who are new to it.

Here are things to consider for each of the rites of passage listed above:

A Welcoming into Parenthood is focused on the parents-to-be, and is a welcoming into parenthood by the community surrounding them. It is a time for giving of both useful gifts for parenting and of useful advice by those who have been through new parenthood and have that wisdom to impart. A “wisdom circle” format may work well for the Working phase of the ritual, with each participant offering their knowledge and experience to the new parents.

A Naming Ceremony to celebrate the arrival of a new child is a time to congratulate the parents as they enter the challenging time of new parenthood. If gifts are given, they are usually items to be given to the child later in life, perhaps at a passage into early adulthood. More on Naming Ceremonies is available at <https://atheopaganism.wordpress.com/2018/09/12/rites-of-passage-1-naming-ceremonies/>

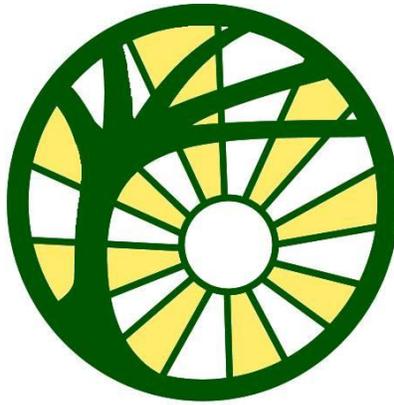
A Welcoming Ceremony for a newly adopted child may be very different depending on the age of the child: if the child is old enough to understand what is going on, the event should focus on the child and the happiness of the community that they have arrived. Otherwise, the ritual is very much like a Naming Ceremony, focusing on the parents.

A Passage into Early Adulthood for those entering their teen years is a time for appreciation for the degree to which the young adult has grown, and for celebrating them as they enter the transition into adulthood. It’s not a great time for wisdom-sharing and the like, as teenagers aren’t very receptive to this, but a word of caution or two is probably okay. As teenagers tend to be very group-oriented, this may be a good event to invite the young adult’s friends to attend.

An Initiation into Full Adulthood is a time for acknowledgement of the rights and responsibilities a legal adult receives, and for older adults to impart wisdom or experience that can help to guide them in the years when their brains are still forming (until about 25). Often, an “ordeal” of some kind is involved, such as staying up all night to greet the rising Sun of adult life (there are MANY other examples in cultures across the world³). If there is a community-created artwork or object in which each member has placed their mark, this is a good time for the celebrated person to place theirs (an example idea is available at <https://atheopaganism.wordpress.com/2018/09/14/rites-of-passage-2-into-adulthood/>)

An Initiation into Elderhood for those who feel they are entering that phase of their lives (at what age is up to them) is a welcoming into a time of wisdom, reduced effort (hopefully) and reflection on what life has brought and taught the person being initiated. This often takes the form of a “wisdom circle” of older friends and community members telling the newcomer what their elder status means to them. This is sometimes a time of *giving things away*, as in elderhood there is less focus on accumulation and the newly elder person may want to give gifts to the community members in the circle. For more information, visit <https://atheopaganism.wordpress.com/2018/09/17/rites-of-passage-4-elderhood/>

³ Be aware that some of them are dangerous, and can even be deadly. Avoid those.



An Atheopagan Ritual Primer

Guidance for Crafting Rituals by Earth-Honoring Atheists

by Mark Green



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Fourth edition

Introduction

Creation of a successful ritual is rather like cooking a delicious meal: it can be viewed in some ways as a science, in that it is possible to follow a series of repeatable programmed steps—a recipe—to do it. In this paper I will describe a framework which may be followed as one suggestion for how effective ritual may be enacted, and if you use it, it will work.

However, ritual is not *only* a science: it is also an art.

We all know that the best food isn't merely competently assembled—it is created by someone inspired and who has a deep, intuitive understanding of the processes that lead to delicious flavors and textures. Truly transformational and moving ritual, similarly, arises when inspired creators informed by deep understanding of how to work with human psychology work effectively and subtly to transport participants with the meaning, flavor and vivid reality of the experience they share with fellow celebrants.

And that is why this is not a “cookbook”. This work is not intended to provide a script—all the spoken words, songs, movements and other activities—for creation of a ritual on a particular theme.

Rather, this is a treatise meant to communicate key concepts which must be understood in order to be a good ritual “cook”: to understand processes and outcomes for successful ritual enactment instead of merely prescribing actions. While cooking can be done successfully merely by adhering to a set of instructions, ritual works best when it is largely improvisational, working from an outline of expected steps and *flowing* effortlessly, carrying its participants along from one phase to another. And one thing that can interrupt that flow is for leaders/facilitators of the ritual to be locked into referring back to written notes in order to know what happens next.

So think of this as a description of fundamental principles and ideas to inform your own creation of rituals. And then start doing them, and learning along the way. It is the only way to become good at it.

Because after all, it is far better to be a skilled cook than merely to have a good recipe book.

Mark Green

1. What is a ritual?

Rituals are *acts carried out in an intentional manner to evoke metaphorical or symbolic meaning in the celebrant or celebrants*. Purposes of rituals are often to celebrate a particular season or holiday and its metaphorical meanings, to observe a life passage such as a birth, wedding or death, or simply to offer awe, humility and reverence to the great Cosmos of which we are all a part.

Celebrating ritual enriches a life and helps to bring a sense of meaning to the passage of time. Rituals can reinforce devotion to values and bring renewed confidence in goals and interpersonal commitments.

As with all elements of Atheopaganism, we do this to enrich our lives and because it works: there is solid scientific evidence for the benefits and effectiveness of ritual in a person's life.

<http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/why-rituals-work/>

The goal of Atheopagan ritual design is to create a state in participants to feel both connected to the inner truth of themselves and the meaning they find in their lives *and to be able unselfconsciously to express this truth with authenticity*: to connect with one another, process transformative understanding such as healing or grief, celebrate gratitude, awe and wonder at the beauty and magnificence of the Universe, and otherwise to live and express, in that moment, the fullness of who they are as individuals.

2. INGREDIENTS: Concepts and elements for successful ritual

Authenticity is the felt sense that what is happening in the ritual is true and genuine rather than contrived or insincere. It is critically important to successful ritual—think of how easy it is to become detached and cynical when listening, for example, to the obviously insincere abjurations of a televangelist.

It is far better to speak briefly and from the heart in plain language than to read something lengthier that is written. While I won't say that rituals should never involve words that are read from paper or index cards, such presentation lacks the immediacy, authenticity and sense of *spontaneous creation* that are the desirable qualities in a ritual. Ritual is a living art, not a recital: it is about filling with richness the ephemeral moments within which it is created. If it is considered important that specific words be spoken, it is best if who must speak them memorize them and are able to present them as if spoken off the cuff.

Be careful, too, to avoid trite or excessively flowery speech: while poetic rhythms and imagery can be powerful, language that is obviously trying to be “poetic-seeming” fails more often than it succeeds. Modern people don't generally respond well to “thees” and “thous” or verse forced into rhyme schemes through awkward sentence construction; far better to speak normally in free verse, or simply as you would in a conversation.

Awe, Humility and Reverence are touchstone emotions for Atheopagan rituals and central to our view of the world. Although we do not worship, we know how small, temporary and precious are our lives, and how mighty, amazing and beautiful is the great Cosmos which gave rise to us. Honoring the Cosmos and the Earth are common aspects of our rituals which touch on a great truth of our existence of humans, and our practice as Atheopagans.

Being in the Body. Ritual is most effective when it engages not only the mind, but the body. Dance, movement, drumming or shaking a rattle, and singing all tend to bring the entire body into the experience of ritual and make ritual more satisfying and meaningful. Singing, particularly, is effective because it combines artistic expression with deep breathing, which enlivens the body through elevated oxygen and serotonin levels.

Creativity. Many effective rituals ask that participants bring something with them, do something to transform, imbue with meaning, or otherwise use that something in the ritual, and then take it home with them—perhaps charged to do yet something else with it when they go home. Various kinds of simple craft projects can make wonderful ritual activities, especially if they can be made collaboratively with others in the ritual. Artistic creation is inherently present and inherently self-affirming—it is an expression of the inner life of the creator and will lend personal significance and emotional power to a ritual.

Entrainment means *synchronization of participants with an external rhythm*, and it is accomplished through *repetition*. Drumming and rattling are common means to the entrainment of a group creating a ritual. In a broader sense, however, entrainment means getting all participants “on the same page”, or moving in the same direction: to create a shared state in which they can express, celebrate and act together. Entrainment is a critically important aspect of successful ritual; when true entrainment has happened, you can feel that the ritual is really cooking.

Establishing Connection. Often, those who gather for a ritual may not all know one another. Even if they do, reestablishing their individual connections helps to establish Presence, let down defenses and “set the table” for a successful ritual. Examples of common activities to encourage connection early on in rituals include having participants join hands, look into eyes of those adjacent or all around the circle, and/or exchange of an “icebreaker” introduction question or activity.

Grounding is a process which can help to instill both *Presence* and *being in the body*. Grounding uses *guided imagery meditation*, where a ritual participant talks the rest of the participants through a meditation “story” in which they become aware of their bodies, of the pressure of their feet against the Earth, of the physicality of where they are and that they are physical beings. Grounding is very commonly performed at or before the formal beginning of a ritual to help begin the process of arrival in ritual Presence.

Group Participation and Ritual Etiquette are a right and a responsibility. Rituals work best when many participants contribute to their content with music, spoken word, or other contributions. It is the responsibility of a participant to pick carefully her moment to come forward with an offering, and avoid stepping on someone else’s. Don’t hog the focus for too long. Be present and pay

attention to others when they are offering something. Know that there will be a moment for you, and wait for it to come.

Metaphor and the Poetic. Songs and spoken poetry can be profoundly moving in a ritual context. Poetry uses language in unexpected ways that tend to disconnect the cognitive mind and stir the emotions, and metaphor and symbolic allusions to meaningful concepts raise the spirits and can evoke contemplation of the stipulated theme, awe, humility and reverence.

No Spectators—All Participants. Atheopagan rituals are collaborative in nature. A ritual in which some are the “doers” and the rest observers is not going to feel very good to those in the latter category. Engaging all participants somehow—even if only by shaking a rattle or clapping their hands—is essential for the process of entrainment and in creating the feeling that all are participants. Make sure that there is a role for everyone—something s/he will do that contributes to the ritual’s success: join in a song, drum or rattle along with a simple beat, perform a craft activity, dance in a circle holding hands with others, etc.

Presence. The key quality of effective ritual is that it brings the participant into the *meaningful present*, as opposed to thinking about the past or the future, feeling self-conscious or worried. The felt sense of this state is a glowing, aware feeling of well-being, similar to the state of creating art or deep human interaction. Presence needs not always be quiet or internal: Presence can range from the hushed sense of holiness felt in a magnificent cathedral to the ecstatic joy of wild dancing, or keening grief. From a neurochemical standpoint, it is the experience of high levels of serotonin and dopamine: the activation of the limbic brain. It is also sometimes known as the *Ritual State*.

Structure is the order of phases or events in a ritual. Structure is useful because once learned, participants know what to expect and are thus more able to “lose themselves” in the moment of the ritual. Not all rituals are firmly structured. See p. 8 for an example of an Atheopagan ritual structure.

Theme is the intended purpose of a ritual. Often this is the celebration of a particular season or life event, but a theme may also be to align the participants with a hoped-for outcome, such as finding a good job or recovering from an illness. The theme determines what symbols, metaphors and symbolic acts will be incorporated into the ritual to imbue it with the desired meaning and emotional impact.

3. Ritual Technologies

Ritual technologies are sensory techniques which are used to help participants enter and stay in the state of ritual Presence. Effective rituals appeal to many senses at once, creating an *immersive* experience which facilitates participants' transition into the Limbic state: into Presence. To identify techniques which are effective in this, we need only look to traditions which have spent millennia refining their ritual techniques, like ancient sects of Buddhism or the Roman Catholic Church. In their rituals and temples, they use some or all of these techniques:

- **Dim lighting.** Flickering candlelight or firelight is best. Low light contributes to a sense of anonymity, which helps people to feel freer to express themselves, and firelight in particular appears to have an biologically hardwired attractiveness for humans: people will gravitate to a fire whenever they see one, much as they do to churning water such as a waterfall or the ocean.
- **Aesthetic and symbolism-laden beauty** embodied in such forms as stained glass, magnificent architecture, icons, ritual tools and altars contributes to a sense of joy and pleasure in living, as well as evoking the metaphors and symbols of the religion's mythology. In an Atheopagan context, this might mean images of nature, stars or a galaxy, seasonal symbols, beautiful rocks, shells, feathers, and even scientific symbols or instruments. The author, for example, keeps a Moebius strip on his Focus (see below), as a reminder of the surprising and wonderful mathematical nature of the Universe.
- **Rhythm and rhythmic repetition** such as drumming, rattling, chanting or playing of bells is the most effective way to establish entrainment for participants in a ritual. Rhythm speaks directly to the body, encouraging expressive movement and with it, a sense of being in the body and physically enlivened. Repetition of acts, words or activities in rituals tends to make them feel more effective and "real". This has been scientifically verified and appears to be linked to cognitive association of cause and effect: that is, we tend to believe that doing "more" of something makes it happen "more".
<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2012/07/120726135234.htm>
- **Singing and chanting** (often combined with rhythm and/or in languages unknown to participants, and thus effectively nonsense syllables) Beautiful ore compelling music, as well as singing by participants (often with rhythmic repetition of phrases or melodies) is powerfully influential over the emotions and can transport ritual participants into a trance state. Much of the most emotionally powerful sung music in the world was originally composed for religious services.
- **Movement and dance**, especially repetitive dance and movement in a circle, contributes deeply to Presence and being in the body. While this may seem to be a strange idea for those accustomed to Judeo-Christian "leader and audience" ritual formats, most cultures in the world have celebrated their religions with movement as well as the other technologies described here, from the ecstatic ritual dances of the Hindus to the "whirling Mevlevi" (dervishes) of Sufism.
- **Scents** such as incense and sacred oils can help to bring participants into Presence and a feeling of being in sacred space. "Smudging" participants with smoke is an effective way to

help them feel transformed as they enter the ritual experience, and is often done with incense, burning sage, sweetgrass or oak leaves. Scent is a powerfully evocative sense with a profound ability to alter mood; traditional religious incenses such as copal and frankincense have even been shown to alleviate depression and anxiety.

<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/05/080520110415.htm>

- Similarly, the **taste** of food and drink consumed during a ritual—such as bread and wine, a ritual meal such as a Passover Seder, etc.—can enhance Presence while also evoking a sense of religious tradition and continuity: of having done the same ritual at previous times. The circulation of “cakes and ale”—which can mean any kind of drink and finger food—is a common element of Pagan rituals, and usually takes place during the Gratitude portion of Atheopagan rites.
- **Touch and tactile experiences** are very powerful and contribute to participants’ inhabiting their senses and being in the body, especially when the sensations come as a surprise, as when the eyes are closed or in full darkness. I have seen tactile experiences used in ritual ranging from the sharp patter of water droplets from “asperging” with a water sprinkler to passage of soft fur across the face, passage of a chunk of ice from hand to hand, cloths damp with hot water given to each participant to cleanse the face, etc.

4. The Focus (altar)

A Focus is what Atheopagans call an altar. We choose a different word because “altar” implies worship—or even sacrifice—and we want to be clear that that isn’t what we are doing.

The Focus is a work of art, a still life assemblage of symbols and meaningful objects. It can be central to the enactment of a ritual, or it may be off to one side. Multiple Foci may be used if desired, designed around different themes. Building a Focus is a fun and creative activity and can itself be done as a ritual, in an intentional, Present and “focused” manner.

Typically, a Focus incorporates multiple elements of ritual technology: candles, incense, symbolic items, art, food items to be shared and/or items to be used during the ritual, etc. The creation of a Focus is a subtle art. A successful one will draw the eye and evoke fascination and curiosity when first viewed.

When building one, be sure to remember that you will need lighting of some kind if the ritual will take place under low lighting conditions: candles or oil lamps are the warmest and most welcoming light.

5. An Atheopagan Ritual Format

This ritual format was published previously in the essay “Godless Heathen”.

This format is not the only possible structure for an Atheopagan ritual; indeed, there are as many possible ways of doing ritual as there are individual practitioners. But this is a format that I have been successful in using for effective Atheopagan rituals, and it is the structure I use as a standard practice.

It has six phases:

Arrival. Establishment of Presence and entrainment; “grounding” to shake off prior irritations and worries about the future. Acknowledgement of the natural and human context of the place where the ritual is performed. Establishment of ritual space—some may do this by “drawing a circle” around the proceedings, but this is a matter of taste.

Qualities. A participatory phase wherein participants may call out, sing, invoke with movement or poetry, etc., those qualities they wish to be in the minds of the participants as part of the “mixture” created by the ritual.

Intentions. Sometimes the Intentions of a given ritual are stipulated in advance as a Theme (e.g., seasonal celebration, wedding, prosperity ritual, etc.); at other times, participants may call out or otherwise introduce their wishes for the outcome of the ritual: to align themselves with a particular outcome or “program” their minds with a particular attitude, for example.

Deep Play or “Working”. The hardest section to define, because it can be anything that brings the inner child out to play in meaningful celebration, be it singing, dancing, collaboration on a project, improvisational harmony or rhythm, etc. Whatever it is, this section is about *being alive* in the experience of the moment, and celebrating that living and the others who share it with you. The activity can be themed around the Intentions set earlier, may involve a particular craft activity or creation of a ritual object, or the Deep Play can be more free-form, with participants spontaneously offering songs or poems, inviting others to join them in drumming or dancing or other activity, etc. Generally speaking there is an effort to rev up the metabolism, to stimulate the body so there is a feeling of energy and vitality, but sometimes it can be a mental journey of guided imagery or other more tranquil activity. If there is a time limitation, the time to end Deep Play may be signaled by a bell or other auditory cue.

Gratitude. When Deep Play has wound down, it is time to give thanks for all the many blessings we enjoy. Participants name their gratitudes, and often, food and drink are shared as a reminder that the world feeds us delicious (and sometimes intoxicating) gifts.

Benediction. A “farewell” which indicates that the ritual is over, typically with good wishes for the participants and their aspirations, and humanity in general. Usually articulated by whoever convened or organized the ritual, or simply assigned to someone.

6. Exploring the Phases of the Atheopagan Ritual Format

A. Arrival

The goal of Arrival is *induction into the Ritual State*: a liminal “glowing” feeling of acute sensory awareness in the present moment, and of deep connection with both participants in the ritual and the broader Universe. Physiologically, the Ritual State is characterized by elevated levels of the neurotransmitters serotonin and dopamine, and higher activation of the Limbic brain than is usual. The process of induction into the Ritual State shares many similarities to induction into a state of hypnosis or trance. It feels great: alert, powerful, calm and highly Present.

The Arrival phase of ritual is necessary because our quotidian mental state is quite different from the Ritual State. Challenges to be overcome by the Arrival phase include *preoccupation* (thinking about the past or future), *self-consciousness* / *cynicism* (feeling embarrassed by or resistant to the prospect of entering the Ritual State), and *self-containment* (feeling separate from other participants, and uncomfortable with opening to them emotionally). The practices in the Arrival phase are designed to calm these effects and shift consciousness into preparedness for ritual work.

Arrival has several components, all or only some of which may be used in a given ritual. Not every ritual uses all of them, but they are most effective when performed in the order shown.

- **Establishing the Space.** Create a setting conducive to the Ritual State by using lighting (firelight or candlelight are best—flickering and dim—but low light levels with Christmas lights or rope lights can also create a good light level. Overhead light is not advised⁴); scent (resinous incenses such as frankincense and dragon’s blood are particularly effective); Focus(es) (i.e., altar(s)) with visual cues that draw the eye and communicate meanings; and sometimes music (when I do solitary ritual, I often put on recorded ritual music. Some of my favorites are *Passion*, the soundtrack to the film “The Last Temptation of Christ”, by Peter Gabriel; *In the Realm of a Dying Sun* and *The Serpent’s Egg* by Dead Can Dance; *Offerings*, by Vas, and *Stratosfear*, by Tangerine Dream).

The ritual begins when setup begins, so be mindful as you place objects, light incense, etc. Be silent, speaking quietly only when necessary. Begin the process of centering within yourself, of becoming Present yourself.

- **Entering the Now;** Sudden stimulation of the senses can help celebrants to inhabit their senses and aid them in becoming Present. Examples of techniques in this

⁴ Obviously, the use of lighting to affect setting and mood is for rituals held at night. Knowing that it can be more challenging for some celebrants to achieve the Ritual State in bright-light conditions, it is often helpful to use more Arrival techniques (e.g., smudging, grounding, embodiedness techniques) in daylight rituals.

category are *smoke blessing* (wafting or fanning smoke over each celebrant) with burning herbs or incense; *asperging* (sprinkling each celebrant) with water or scented water; use of a chime, singing bowl, rattle, didjeridoo or other instrument to outline the body in a *sound blessing*; or administration of a *sacramental taste* of something flavorful—a single dark chocolate chip, for example, or a drop of sour cherry on the tongue—to draw each participant’s consciousness into the senses, into the present, into the sacred Now.

- **Creating Connection** is intended to break the sense of “social boundary” between celebrants. Example techniques including having celebrants hold hands, make eye contact with one another around the ritual circle, or each speak her/his name. Connection (in group rituals) is important because it establishes a greater sense of safety than otherwise, improving the ability of celebrants to surrender into the Ritual State.
- **Grounding** is in most cases the use of guided imagery by spoken word to connect the celebrant with where she is in time and space, and to remind her of the vastness and beauty of the great Cosmos and of the living Earth. It is often helpful to coordinate this with awareness of breathing, as in mindfulness and meditation practices. Grounding can be enhanced physically by such actions as standing with bare feet upon the Earth or holding a heavy stone.

Grounding should acknowledge the *context* of the ritual. Rituals take place in locations on the Earth, whether that is indoors at a household Focus or outdoors in Nature. These places have histories, both human and natural. Living in the Americas, as I do, I acknowledge that the land where I stand was taken from native people, against their will, and that even before that they were the province of the oak, the elk, the bear and the eagle. I express gratitude to be here today, despite my grief for the injustice that led that to be.

- **Embodiment** is expansion of the felt sense of the Ritual State to encompass the body. Techniques to achieve embodiment include musical activities such as toning or singing or a heartbeat drum (which results in swaying, slow movement), or upbeat drumming/music to provoke more active dancing. Bluesy/gospely chants and songs work well for embodiment.

After these steps, all or most participants will be in ritual Presence and ready to do ritual work. It is time to move into the next phase: **Qualities (Intentions)**.

B. Invoking Qualities and (optionally) Intentions

"Calling the Qualities" is often just that: A designated celebrant encourages the circle to call out the Qualities they would like to be a part of the circle, and celebrants call them out (examples: the Ancestors; Compassion; Grief; Courage; Adventure, Strength, Health, Wisdom). It is more effective if, after each Quality is invoked, the remainder of the circle repeats the word or phrase.

This can be done in "popcorn" fashion or sequentially around the circle; it can be done singing, or even danced. There are probably hundreds of creative ways the Qualities can be invoked.

In some rituals there may be preassigned participants to invoke particular Qualities with more detailed invocations, similar to "calling the quarters" in a Wiccan/Neopagan ritual. In fact, special **Focuses** may be built on the themes of these Qualities to evoke greater attention to them on the part of celebrants.

Note that if there is a particularly important Quality you want to be the central focus of the ritual, this should have a special invocation of its own.

C. Intentions (Optional)

Many rituals have their intentions determined in advance, or their purposes are self-evident: to celebrate a Sabbath, for example. In these cases, declaring the intention of the ritual is not necessary, although celebrants may choose to do so.

Some rituals do not have a clear and obvious intention, however, or may have multiple intentions. In the latter case, after the invocation of the Qualities, declaration of the intended effect of the ritual adds to the psychological power of the ritual, and allows participants to add their own personal goals to the ritual's "cauldron" if they so choose. A designated celebrant can declare the intention, or participants may be encouraged to call out their own.

After the Qualities have been invoked and the Intentions have been established, it is time for the "meat" of the ritual: the **Deep Play**, sometimes also called the "working".

D. Deep Play or "Working"

Deep Play is the hardest phase to write about, because it can be nearly anything. It can be free-form dancing with spontaneously offered chant, song, spoken word, and music, or line or spiral dancing; it can be laying of hands on an ailing celebrant; it can be shared harmonic improvisational singing; it can be weaving together or braiding of strands of yarn

representing Qualities to be integrated while singing a chant; it can be the passing of a mirror from hand to hand as each celebrant contemplates his reflection to the sound of a heartbeat drum; it may be drumming and singing while each celebrant in turn makes an offering or performs an action.

In short, it can be anything that enacts symbolic and/or literal implementation of the *transformative work* of the ritual.

Typically, that activity will:

1. **Stimulate**, whether metabolically or contemplatively. Pulsing drumming, soaring harmonies, or calming/entrancing sounds like singing bells, tinkling chimes, or a quiet flute can set the emotional tone for celebrants while they are conducting the ritual's Deep Work activity.
2. **Communicate Meaning**, in the sense that what is done in Deep Play is freighted with metaphorical or symbol meaning beyond simple carrying out of an action.
3. **Preserve the Ritual State**. It is critically important that whatever activities take place in the circle during Deep Play must be tailored to aid celebrants in maintaining their Ritual State—their condition of open, empowered Presence. Even in lighthearted ritual, there is an underlying seriousness to the work that must be honored. So while stimulation is key, too much stimulation or the wrong emotional tone can “break the spell”. Imagine the Ritual State, the “energy” of a ritual as a soap bubble which must be kept aloft without breaking.

Some Deep Play is designed to increase in energy and build to a climax; some to remain at a “steady boil” rather than to climb. Some may even rise and then fall, to the point that at its end, there is only a whisper of activity, and then silence. All are effective ways to work with the emotional feeling of Deep Play, and may be selected for usage when appropriate.

The potential palette of activities and emotional flavors of Deep Play is nearly infinite. This phase of ritual is where much of the opportunity for creativity and imagination in ritual design is found.

When Deep Play is completed—when all participants have completed its activity, the energy has climbed to a climax or dwindled to a murmur—it is time to begin the *dénouement* of the ritual: **Gratitude** and **Benediction**.

E. Gratitude

When the Deep Play is done, it is time to express Gratitude. Gratitude is such a key element of a happy life that even when our rituals are to assuage fear or sorrow, we must always remember the many gifts with which we are showered by the Cosmos every day.

Gratitude is often done in a manner similar to Invoking the Qualities, creating a kind of “bookend” effect: either going around the circle and having each celebrant express what s/he is grateful for, or

doing so in random “popcorn” fashion. Celebrants may also express gratitude that the Qualities were with them in the circle, e.g., “I am thankful that Discipline is with me, and supports the work I do here.”

Gratitude is often combined with the sharing of ceremonial food and drink—a way for participants to feel their very bodies surging with gratitude as, say, a rich red wine or ripe strawberry or chocolate or freshly baked bread encounters their taste buds. We are alive today, says the phase of Gratitude: thank you for this, and for those who love us, and for all the great and small blessings we enjoy in this precious life we live.

F. Benediction

Benediction is the formal ending of the ritual: an expression of well-wishing and encouragement that celebrants act in accordance with the intentions of the ritual.

I prefer to end my rituals the same way each time, in the hope that my co-celebrants will learn this benediction in the same way so many Pagans have learned the “all from air into air, let the misty curtains part...” closing statement so commonly used in Wiccan-style rituals.

My usual benediction is this:

“To enrich and honor the gift of our lives, to chart a kind and true way forward, by these words and deeds we name intent (*participants join in unison*): to dare, to question, to love. May all that must be done, be done in joy. We go forth to live!”

Sometimes after the Benediction, a closing song is sung by celebrants—this can be a wonderful and connecting way to complete the ritual process.

7. Example: A Ritual for Joy

Arrival: As participants proceed toward the ritual ground where the ritual will take place, each is met by a pair of participants who smoke bless with incense and asperge them.

After being smoke blessed and asperged, participants stand in a circle around the Focus or a laid but unlit fire, holding hands and with their eyes closed.

The convener/coordinator of the ritual says: “We are sentient beings of Planet Earth, present in this place, this moment. The Cosmos is above us, the Earth is below us, and Life is around us. Here the wise mind unfolds. Here the playful child creates. Here the wondering human gazes out to view the vast and mighty Universe. We are here, and together.”

The participants repeat, “We are here, and together,” and open their eyes.

Qualities: Another participant (different from the convener/coordinator) says, “May we know and embody these Qualities, that our rites guide us forward to achieve our dreams and better the world.”

Participants then call out Qualities they wish to include, such as reverence, courage, abundance, health, etc.

Intentions: Convener/coordinator states the purpose of the ritual: “Our intent today is to align ourselves with the spirit of joy: to bring joy into our lives and between us, and express our desire that the world know more joy.”

Participants sing song, “This is a Song for Joy”.

If possible, this is the point at which a fire may be lit in the center of the circle to express the igniting of Intention. If not, the Focus is constructed at the center of the circle and candles may be lit. A slow drumbeat begins as the song ends.

Deep Play: As soon as the Intention has been stated, drummer(s) strike up a lively beat (or recorded dance music is played, depending on what is available), and the participants release holding hands and begin to dance around the circle.

This portion of the ritual can go on for ten minutes or ten hours, depending on time available and the wishes of the participants. If a longer ritual, quiet periods when people may speak or sing are interspersed between periods of drumming and/or dance. Participants are free to leave the circle to take a rest break, drink water or eat, etc., but should make an effort not to distract from what is going on in the circle while so engaged. To remain a part of the larger process, those who do not feel like dancing may stand at the edge of the circle and shake a rattle, or may join the drummers in drumming.

A signal is played to warn drummers and dancers to wind down a few minutes before the end of Deep Play: this can be a bell, a gong, a particular drum rhythm, etc.

The participants reform in a circle, holding hands.

Gratitude: Going around the circle, each participant states her/his name and something for which s/he is grateful.

Benediction: The convener/coordinator says, “To enrich and honor the gift of our lives, to chart a kind and true way forward, by these words and deeds we name intent (*participants join in unison*): to dare, to question, to love. May all that must be done, be done in joy. We go forth to live!”

Afterword

The above examples are exactly that: examples. Cultures all over the world have created powerful, emotionally transformative rituals with wildly varying formats and practices, and one could spend a lifetime studying without getting to all of them. But this format will work—as a general structure, it is a map to a particular kind of territory. I invite and encourage you to experiment, bearing in mind the “ingredients” that make a ritual engaging and emotionally powerful.

The most important thing is to start. Religion is *practiced*, not just thought about or analyzed, and Atheopaganism is no different. Get your feet wet and your hands dirty, and try out some ritual techniques to see how they feel. Ritual arts require learning and practice like any other, so don't worry about it if some of the things you try don't work out as you'd expected or hoped.

Whatever your reservations, in nearly every case I guarantee you'll find the outcomes gratifying and illuminating.

Best of luck and experiences to you on the journey!