**Your baby matters, however brief your time together.**

At some point – be it a week, a month or a year after your loss – you may yearn for a place to explore your grief, to honor your child’s small but important life and to mourn with others.

Whether public or private, intricate or simple, ceremony and ritual create space to express your emotions and process your experiences within a supportive and meaningful container.

Memorial rituals and ceremonies can have a significant role in grieving and celebrating the baby who has so profoundly changed you, helping you begin to integrate their loss into your life’s journey.

***your name whispers***

***eternity***

***like rain***

***falling***

***down in the wind***

***bathing lightly***

***the leaves***

***falling***

***down on the breath of love***

***dwelling within me***

***behind me, before me***

***your name***

***in the trees***

***below***

***in the sky***

***above***

― Andrea Albine Goslan

**Can I do a ritual or ceremony?**

Ceremony and ritual belong to everyone. They are not the privilege of religious institutions or clergy people; they are not available only to certain practitioners or experts.

They belong to us.  All of us.

Since prehistoric times, people have used ritual and ceremony to celebrate, to mourn, to express wonder, to offer gratitude, to ask for help, to find comfort in solitude, to gather strength in community.

This is not to suggest you alone should be responsible for creating and conducting a ceremony or ritual.

Faith traditions, clergy members, experienced professionals and sometimes our own friends and family can be a wonderful help, providing guidance and holding space when we cannot.

But most of us already have that idea.

I want to offer you permission to trust yourself: your own wisdom, intuition and knowing.   Even without experience to rely on, you already know something about how to do this.

My hope is that, after reading this, you feel enabled and empowered to honor the loss of your child, whether in a ceremony or ritual you design yourself or in collaboration with someone you trust.

How do I do it?

There is no “right way.”  There are no “shoulds.”

What this means is: You cannot get it wrong.

You might light a candle, recite a haiku and blow the candle out.  That is a powerful ritual.

You can gather twenty family members and friends to hike up a mountain, asking them to share with each other what is in their hearts as they climb, sing a hymn together at the top and hike back down.  That is a beautiful ceremony.

We all grieve differently.  Our needs, perspectives and choices are informed by our uniqueness.  With no blueprint – no prescribed format – what becomes most important is to honor the truth of our experience.

Great healing and comfort can come from simply acknowledging the truth.  Through ceremony and ritual, you have the precious opportunity to share your truth and be witnessed by others.

“The heart is the hub of all sacred places. Go there, and roam.”

― Bhagawan Nityananda

 **Where do I begin?**

One of the first questions I ask when helping plan a ceremony or ritual is why:  Why are you having this ceremony?  What do you hope you (and others) will experience?

In contemplating your intention – to acknowledge our child’s existence, to honor their place in our family, to celebrate the happiness they brought to us, to be seen in our pain, to mark this chapter in our lives, to find some measure of closure – you will find a steady compass to guide you along the way.

You should also know: You begin by beginning.

Your very consideration of a memorial ritual or ceremony sets into motion the experience you seek.

The reflections you have, the conversations you share, the scenes you picture as you imagine the ceremony or ritual are all aspects of fulfilling your intention.

The process itself will be part of your grieving, and part of your healing.

***We Trust***

*―  Anonymous*

*We trust that beyond absence there is a presence.*

*That beyond the pain there can be healing.*

*That beyond the brokenness there can be wholeness.*

*That beyond the anger there may be peace.*

*That beyond the hurting there may be forgiveness.*

*That beyond the silence there may be the word.*

*That beyond the word there may be understanding.*

*That through understanding there is love.*

**Suggestions, Samples and Things to Consider**

Below I have offered several suggestions, samples and things to consider when creating a ritual or ceremony, but understand you have the freedom to say or do anything you want.  Believe that you will find your way, remembering there is no right or wrong way to do this.

*“Let the beauty we love be what we do.*

*There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.”*

*― Jalaluddin Rumi*

**1. Creating Space**

**ALTARS**

When I use the word “altar,” I mean a physical representation of a sacred space or intent.  What that looks like is entirely up to you.

*"An altar is something that, when you behold it, it brings you back to yourself."*

*― Margot Adler*

You might put a cloth on the ground in the center of a circle and place on it a bouquet of flowers and a bell.   You may have a small table off to the side where you put a collection of objects from nature.  You can use a mantelpiece for candles, photographs or mementos.

Your altar may have a role in the ceremony – if it holds a candle that you light, for instance – or it might only be part of creating the space.  Whatever its function, allow it to be an expression of your love and care.

 **OPENING AND CLOSING**

Ceremony and ritual can provide a powerful container for our feelings and experiences, so take time to open and close them mindfully.

I often begin a ritual or ceremony with something simple like removing my shoes or watch, or putting on a prayer shawl.

Some people start with smudging, burning incense or lighting candles, ringing a bell or calling in the four directions.  Silence is appropriate to open a sacred space, as is singing or playing a special piece of music.

Whatever you do, let it help yourself and others make the transition from normal, everyday consciousness to a more quiet, receptive awareness.  The quality doesn’t have to be somber or formal, but rather evoke an openhearted presence.

Closing is often easier because we are already attuned to the sacred, but it is no less important.

You may wish to circle back to the opening by singing or playing another song, blowing out the candle, thanking the four directions, ringing a bell, etc.  Readings can make an eloquent closing, or you may simply offer gratitude for the gathering.

*Beauty before me,*

*Beauty behind me,*

*Beauty below me,*

*Beauty above me,*

*Beauty all around me,*

*It is finished in beauty.*

*It is finished in beauty.*

*It is finished in beauty.*

*It is finished in beauty.*

*― from a Navajo ceremony*

**2. Ceremony Format**

The following outline of a memorial service is adapted from a book titled, “Remembering Well: Rituals for Celebrating Life and Mourning Death.”  The outline does not include opening or closing space (detailed above), or any ritual elements or readings (discussed below).

*First – Set the tone: opening words; honoring the feelings of those gathered; speaking about the intention of the memorial ceremony*

*Second – Honor the person who died: naming them; sharing the story of their life and death; making space for family and friends to speak (if desired)*

*Third – Hold the loss: invoking a spirit of gratitude, hope and love; offering blessings for the family and the person who died; including them in life moving forward*

I think of ceremony and ritual most broadly as a vehicle for integration and transformation.  In that sense, this outline follows the arc of experience from what was, is, and yet will be.   While I am not suggesting you need to use this format, having an example may be helpful as you consider how to structure your memorial.

 **3. Ritual Elements**

While speaking, naming and giving voice to our experience is often of primary importance, I believe powerful ceremony and ritual can happen even without any words.

Whatever format you follow or words you choose, I strongly suggest finding some way to concretize the ceremony by incorporating a physical, ritual element.  Below are several examples you might use or adapt for your memorial, adding to them your own meaning and values.

The following samples do not include burial or committal rites specifically, but they may be thoughtfully incorporated into that ceremony, as well.

*To live in this world*

*You must be able*

*to do three things:*

*to love what is mortal;*

*to hold it*

*against your bones*

*knowing*

*your own life depends on it;*

*and, when the time comes*

*to let it go*

*to let it go.*

*― Mary Oliver*

**TREE PLANTINGS AND MEMORIAL GARDENS**

The seasons and cycles of nature have long been a frame for understanding death.  Imbued with a sense of beauty and renewal, tree plantings and memorial gardens affirm our awareness of the continuity of life.  They offer a reminder of our loved ones through the seasons of grief and healing, giving us a place to focus our attention and care.

When planting a tree or dedicating a garden during a memorial ceremony, be sure to first consider what kind of tree or plants will thrive for many years to come.  Factors include soil quality, sunlight, climate, pests, etc.  Plan ahead in terms of garden implements needed, soil preparedness, water, and so on.

You might use water from a river or creek that has significance for you, a variety of tree that carries special importance, or plants in a color that evokes sweet or poignant memories.  You may also wish to incorporate other meaningful elements such as a memorial stone or plaque, birdbaths or statuary.

If you live in an apartment or do not have land suitable for tree planting or gardens, consider using flowers instead.  One possibility is to ask friends and family members to each bring a flower for a bouquet.  After the ceremony you can dry the bouquet or have the flowers pressed and preserved in a memorial keepsake.  (Linda Ruel Flynn of [**Flora-Ly**](http://www.flora-ly.com/) in Orange, MA offers this service.)

**DESPACHOS**

A sacred Andean tradition, despacho means dispatch in Spanish.  Meg Beeler of [**Earth Caretakers**](https://megbeeler.com/earth-caretakers-blog) writes, “A despacho is an act of love and a reminder of the connections we share with all beings, elements, spirits, and sacred places.”

These little bundles of paper or cloth can be filled with small items such as flower petals, plants, herbs and spices, shells, beads, stones, miniature figurines, wool, feathers and so on.  The symbolic offerings vary from person to person but should be chosen with the intention of healing, gratitude, connection and love.

After adding whatever items you wish to include, the despacho is then folded and tied shut.  It is traditionally burned rather than opened, releasing the energy and blessings back into the earth, although whether and when you might do that is an individual decision.

At first the idea of a despacho may seem strange or unfamiliar, but I have found that many people discover a strong connection with this ritual.  Making one is a very intimate and personal act, made more so if you can or choose to include hair, umbilical cord or placenta.

At its deepest level, despachos are a manifestation of invisible connections.  Creating one can be a powerful ceremony unto itself, or you can make it prior to your ritual and have it be part of the ceremony by burning, blessing or including it on your altar.

**JIZO STATUES**

In Buddhism, a bodhisattva is a compassionate being who delays nirvana – an enlightened state – to save the suffering of others.  In Japanese culture, Jizo is one of the best loved of these deities.  He is the guardian and protector of children, particularly those who have died before their parents as in the case of abortion, miscarriage or stillbirth.

Small and childlike, Jizo statues are often adorned with caps and bibs.  Hundreds of these little figurines line the paths of cemeteries and temples across Japan, giving a face and name to what is often private or unseen grief.

In Japan, departed child spirits are dedicated to Jizo in a mizuko kuyō ritual.  This traditional Buddhist ceremony is easily adapted to give comfort to anyone mourning the loss of a child.  Especially if you do not connect with the notion of heaven or angels, Jizo can offer a place to direct your sorrow, express your love and embody your remembering.

Ceremony or ritual can be part of infusing your Jizo statue with deeply personal significance.   You may want to write your child’s name on a piece of paper and place it under the figure.  You might burn incense or light candles by the statue, leave offerings of food or flowers, or place the statue within a memorial garden.

**OTHER IDEAS**

Just about anything can be used to create a ritual element.  Other ideas include releasing balloons, making remembrance ribbons or blessing scrolls, creating a collage or artwork, building a stone cairn, cleansing with water, purifying with fire, singing or chanting, and more.  This is a place to truly let yourself be guided by your wisdom, intuition, feelings, creativity and sense of knowing.

 **4. Sample Readings**

Readings offer something to a ceremony that our own words sometimes cannot.

When you find one that speaks to you, it is like finding a raft in the middle of a raging river.  The right reading presents a quiet place of respite while opening us to awareness beyond our normal modes of being.  They can touch our spirit.

(I encourage families to freely edit or adapt readings to better fit their views and conceptualizations.)

*Finding You in Beauty*

*-Walter Rinder*

*The rays of light filtered through*

*The sentinels of trees this morning.*

*I sat in the garden and contemplated.*

*The serenity and beauty*

*Of my feelings and surroundings*

*Completely captivated me.*

*I thought of you.*

*I discovered you tucked away*

*In the shadows of the tress.*

*Then, rediscovered you*

*In the smiles of the flowers*

*As the sun penetrated their petals*

*In the rhythm of the leaves*

*Falling in the garden*

*In the freedom of the birds*

*As they fly searching as you do*

*I’m very happy to have found you,*

*Now you will never leave me*

*For I will always find you in the beauty of life.*

On Joy and Sorrow
― Kahlil Gibran

Your joy is your sorrow unmasked.
And the selfsame well from which your laughter rises was oftentimes filled with your tears.
And how else can it be?
The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.
Is not the cup that holds your wine the very cup that was burned in the potter's oven?
And is not the lute that soothes your spirit, the very wood that was hollowed with knives?
When you are joyous, look deep into your heart and you shall find it is only that which has given you sorrow that is giving you joy.
When you are sorrowful look again in your heart, and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight.

Some of you say, "Joy is greater than sorrow," and others say, "Nay, sorrow is the greater."
But I say unto you, they are inseparable.

*Poem by Yehuda HaLevi (adapted)*

*(foremost Jewish poet and thinker of the Middle Ages)*

*‘Tis a fearful thing*

*to love what death can touch.*

*A fearful thing*

*to love, to hope, to dream, to be –*

*to be,*

*And oh, to lose.*

*A thing for fools, this,*

*And a holy thing,*

*a holy thing*

*to love.*

*For your life has lived in me,*

*your weight once lifted me,*

*your presence was gift to me.*

*To remember this brings painful joy.*

*‘Tis a human thing, love,*

*a holy thing, to love*

*what death has touched.*

For a Parent on the Death of a Child
― John O’Donohue

No one knows the wonder
Your child awoke in you,
Your heart a perfect cradle
To hold its presence.
Inside and outside became one
As new waves of love
Kept surprising your soul.

Now you sit bereft
Inside a nightmare,
Your eyes numbed
By the sight of a grave
No parent should ever see.

You will wear this absence
Like a secret locket,
Always wondering why
Such a new soul
Was taken home so soon.

Let the silent tears flow
And when your eyes clear
Perhaps you will glimpse
How your eternal child
Has become the unseen angel
Who parents your heart
And persuades the moon
To send new gifts ashore.

*A Parent’s Love (adapted)*

*― Helen Steiner Rice*

*A parent’s love is something*

*that no one can explain,*

*It is made of deep devotion*

*and of sacrifice and pain,*

*It is endless and unselfish*

*and enduring come what may*

*For nothing can destroy it*

*or take that love away . . .*

*It is patient and forgiving*

*when all others are forsaking,*

*And it never fails or falters*

*even though the heart is breaking . . .*

*It believes beyond believing*

*when the world around condemns,*

*And it glows with all the beauty*

*of the rarest, brightest gems . . .*

*It is far beyond defining,*

*it defies all explanation,*

*And it still remains a secret*

*like the mysteries of creation . . .*

A Blessing For the Journey (excerpted)

― Wendy Egyoku Nakao

Let us vow

to bear witness

to the wholeness of life,

realizing the completeness

of each and everything.

Embracing our differences,

I shall know myself as you,

and you as myself.

May we serve each other

for all our days,

here, there, and everywhere.

Let us vow

to remember that

all that appears will disappear.

In the midst of our uncertainty,

I shall sow love.

Here! Now! I call to you:

Let us together live

The Great Peace that we are.

May we give no fear

for all our days,

here, there, and everywhere.

*Litany of Memory*

*―  adapted from a modern Jewish liturgy*

*Celebrant: At the rising of the sun and at its going down. . .*

*Family & All: We Remember you/him/her/name\_\_\_\_\_.*

*Celebrant: At the blowing of the wind and in the chill of winter. . .*

*Family & All: We remember you/him/her.*

*Celebrant: At the opening of the buds and in the renewal of spring.*

*Family & All: We remember you/him/her.*

*Celebrant: At the blueness of the sky and in the warmth of summer. . .*

*Family & All: We remember you/him/her.*

*Celebrant: At the rustling of the leaves and in the beauty of autumn. . .*

*Family& All: We remember you/him/her.*

*Celebrant: At the beginning of the year and when it ends. . .*

*Family & All: We remember you/him/her.*

*Celebrant: When we have joy and wish to share it. . .*

*Family & All: We remember you/him/her.*

*Celebrant: As long as we live, he/she/name\_\_\_\_\_, too, shall live,*

*for he/she/name\_\_\_\_\_ is now a part of us,*

*Family & All: As remember him/her/name\_\_\_\_\_.*

**About Rev. Hannah Grace**

It is a special privilege to be present with families for the joys and sorrows of their lives.  As a mother, I understand the profound depth of connection we have with our children.  As a survivor of unexpected loss, my heart knows the journey of grief and healing.  As an ordained Interfaith minister, I bring respect and gratitude for the many people and paths from which I have learned so much.