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Recapturing the power of ritual to enhance community in aging

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ABSTRACT


Ritual returns us to the center of who we are. In times of transition, loss, disconnection, and loneliness, ritual offers transformative power. It can provide a language for expression, stability, serve an integrating force in community, mediate tradition, and offer emotional support. This article explores the need for ritual in coping with late life changes, the relationship of ritual to suffering, value of ritual in storytelling and mourning, and explains the role of witness facilitated through community. Therapeutic functions of ritual are addressed and a framework for ritual design is suggested.

KEYWORDS

Ritual; aging; transition; loss; religion

We live in an age that has seemingly lost its capacity to engage in the rituals that brings us back to the center of who we are. Instead of participation in rituals that help quell anxiety, remotivate purpose, forge a collective identity and a sense of belonging, many individuals have lost connections with ceremony. They feel abandoned, empty, purposeless, and alone. They may have participated in religious rituals in their youth or engaged in community memorial rituals through the lifespan. They may participate in sports and ad hoc daily rituals. However, the power of ritual remains largely unexplored, unrealized, and unavailable to individuals, families, and communities in a postmodern age where the pace of society allows scant space for ritual inclusion. This article will examine the importance of ritual in aiding older adults to cope with important life transitions, grief, and suffering. The intent of this article is to recapture the value of the ancient tradition of ritual for modern times.

The traditional transition from adulthood to older adulthood looks very different now than for previous cohorts of aging adults. Standard and historical rituals that support life transitions and aid in crises may be void of meaning if they have not evolved with changing older adulthood. This new context of aging demands a rethinking and development of new rituals, both private and public, that address the lived experience and needs of older adults. For example, what meaningful rituals exist for those who are leaving

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the workforce? For those who are the first in their families to live past 90? These are significant life transitions for older adults and navigating the changes can be turbulent. Meaningful ritual can aid in the transition out or back to work and in housing and other related transitions.

Nearly 28% of older persons living outside of institutions live alone and 45% or close to half of women over age 75 live alone (AoA, 2017). Loneliness has been tagged as an important public health issue by Abrahams, director of the charity AGEUK and support has been found for ongoing loneliness in longitudinal studies (Victor & Bowling, 2012). Can attention to ritual be a strategy to help older people manage loneliness through creating a horizontal connection to acceptance of the present and links with other people? Can ritual also help maintain a vertical time connection to what was important to them in the past and help set new goals for the future?

Increasingly, individuals are connected through social media links, but those links can detail surface clutter regarding daily activities that fail to satisfy or explore the deep nature of friendships. The friendships of older persons have traveled through time and experience; they were sustained during difficult life challenges (Carstensen, Fung, & Charles, 2003; Nelson-Becker, 2004, 2013). When longtime friends begin to die and family reside in geographically distant places, loneliness can be a result of diminishing social networks. Ritual offers opportunity for reconnection that can enhance life purpose and change personal perspectives on being or living alone. Ritual can assist individuals to connect with both present and past experience and overcome loneliness.

Definition

Ritual is defined as a repeated pattern of behavior performed at specified times (Scott, 2014). It often involves tangible inclusion of symbols. A ritual is composed of rites or actions that may serve to uphold social goals. In Vedic religion, ritual represents the lawful and regular order of proper events, both cosmic and human (Turner, 1969/1995). Today ritual has flowed beyond the boundaries of formal religion, though it still can create a context or container for the sacred. It has been described as prescribed conduct for interaction where individuals reinforce a shared understanding of reality, such as might occur in a common custom of greeting (Goffman, 1967).

Rituals are universal human predispositions and paradoxically are also culturally specific communal practices that are expressed in a localized way. They may have religious or civic roots, but either form can express sacred meaning. They often mark important events in the life of the community, but they also carry individual meaning through personal interpretation. The meaning of ritual cannot often be fully captured through words inadequate to describe the totality of the experience. Through wordless sharing,

participants can discharge difficult emotions and heal and restore themselves. In this particular feature lies the fundamental power and promise of ritual.

The exploration of what ritual is and what it means is far from simple. It is layered with historical cultural understandings that are seen as public texts read systematically for meaning. In ritual meaning is transmitted to others including different generations. Often the dynamic of change is a central feature. Ritual offers both a framework and a type of analysis, demonstrating the blending of different aspects of living (Bell, 2009). It endows order on chaos, integrates belief and action, subjectivity with objectivity, and what is viewed as real with imagination. Groups of people carry a social sense of ritual; older adults socialized by religion may find these formal rituals satisfying, whereas older people with no religious belief may seek meaning from alternative rituals that likewise confer peace and contentment. Age may confer a cultural code that aligns with an innate ritual sense. This may occur, for example, when people sing together spiritual or folksongs from younger decades. In singing, singers may harmonize, blending their melodies into a creation that unifies the group.

The nature of ritual through historical perspective

Durkheim viewed ritual as one type of cement that held society together (Durkheim & Cosman, 2001). It formed an important aspect of social structure, a means by which people found place in society. One purpose of religion and ritual was actions which “regulate our relations with special [spiritual] beings” (Durkheim & Cosman, 2001, p. 30). The social attachments that people developed and the objects that served as symbols of the bond such as a religious text or the national flag were also important.

Ritual has historically carried boundaried definitions (Grimes, 1995). It is often seen as a *repeated pattern of behavior* performed at certain times (Grimes, 1995; Scott, 2014). Examples of this might be found in a daily greeting, an annual birthday celebration, or periodic attendance at a holy festival or service. It may be viewed as *sacred*, relating to religion or religious observations. It can be *prescribed*, consisting of certain actions such as kneeling or dancing. It may be *traditional*, an act committed over time and across cultures. Finally, ritual carries *intention*. The one who performs it has an awareness of why he or she is participating. The behavior is not random.

More contemporary and supple definitions are to be found in the writing of Van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1969/1995). Van Gennep (1960) suggested that ritual contained phases or movements which he termed *rites de passage*: separation, liminality, and aggregation. First, separation called the participant to step out of or apart from ordinary life. This first movement could be planned, but more often may represent an unexpected outcome as individuals release their attachment to a mundane and material sense of what is real. Second, it

involves an imagined passage over a threshold or limen, known as a liminal state, into an altered time and space. People in this state are often described as being betwixt and between. In this threshold state there is an enactment of the crisis (called mimesis) that catapulted or landed the person onto this separate space. In this state of openness, everyday life structures are confronted and perhaps redefined through symbolic act. Finally, there is a return to the ordinary world, or aggregation and reincorporation.

Turner (1969/1995) observed that although classifications could be useful in generalizing goal structures of situations for certain groups of people, none could be universal enough to apply to all cultural groups. In a society, ritual served to bring people together. In communities, those who engage in rituals together are equals. They practice a form of humility in recognizing the authority of the group. In the dance between homogeneity and differentiation, new understanding emerged.

Although the work of van Gennep, Turner, Levi-Strauss, and others captured a cultural foundation for ritual, the meaning of ritual in Western society is still emerging. Myerhoff (1992) wrote about the work of aging seniors living in a retirement community who sought to be seen. In our times, ritual has been overlooked or dismissed as having narrow purpose. However, the value of ritual lies in its deep capacity to strengthen the spirit and to accomplish spiritual goals.

Ritual and society

This space between individualism and group affinity that respects both aspects, but draws on the strengths of each, is one societies still negotiate today. Ritual can strengthen individuals managing difficult situations by extending the bonds of community. Likewise, individuals can also help fortify the bonds of community when they grow weak. The power of ritual is not well-recognized, appreciated, nor employed today, especially outside of religious gatherings.

There is another reason that the traditional venues for ritual found in religion are changing. The percentage of those professing to be atheist or agnostic is growing, though still highest in older adults. In the UK, those who consider themselves agnostic are about 19.6% of the population, whereas in the United States that figure is 13.5% (Association of Religious Data Archives, [ARDA], 2018). Ritual experienced through religion is becoming less accessible as numbers of adherents fall. Ritual is in danger of losing ground and its capacity for healing is under recognized.

Therapeutic functions of ritual

Ritual offers a number of important functions in the lives of individuals. These include: (1) a language for expression of emotion and cognition; (2)

stability; (3) an integrating force within a community, especially around deep joy and deep loss; (4) a path for transitions or a doorway into new dimensions of living; (5) a link that mediates tradition; and (6) emotional support and assurance (Nichols & Norgard, 1990). However, most people are poorly prepared to teach or engage ritual for clients at the times when it could be most effective in establishing a sense of continuity and connection.

Ritual is its own language. When people can no longer have meaningful speech as in some forms of dementia, they may still react positively to participation in religious services or they may be able to join in singing. The performance itself carries the meaning. Ritual offers stability through familiarity and presence. Older adults have great familiarity with tradition, and grief and mourning memorial rituals offer them solace when companions and friends pass away.

Ritual provides an integrating function by providing a sense of legitimacy in marriage ceremonies even at older ages. Ritual also provides support in unexpected and calamitous events: school and neighborhood shootings in the United States, stabbings and bombings in the UK, vast waves of immigrants seeking asylum from unanticipated terror, and the effects of natural disasters such as fire and flooding. Communities join together to find solace in services to remember the lives of those who died and regain a sense of place in a world that at times seems overwhelming and meaningless. Individuals receive emotional support to relocate themselves metaphorically as well as physically when fleeing their homeland. Engaging in familiar rituals linked to traditions can assist that integration process into their adopted country. Many immigrant older adults join children in their new country. Participating in customary rituals, such as a puja at a religious or community center, helps them moderate loneliness and integrate known and familiar ways in a new place and foreign lifestyle.

Ritual and suffering

Suffering is a universal and unavoidable experience. Suffering may emerge from a tragic event, the death of loved one, personal illness, pain and disability, unrelenting loneliness, effects of war, financial ruin, persistent mental illness, oppression, and myriad other circumstances and nameless situations. Suffering is a holistic experience: it is beyond the physical experience, and captivates the psychological, emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions also. This totality of experience provides multiple potential avenues for meaningful ritual development and engagement. A sense of meaning and purpose can be threatened and the existential sense of self may unravel. Participation in well-crafted grounded rituals can aid in the construction of or return to a meaningful life.

Ritual frequently plays a supportive role when meaning is called into question or threatened. Engagement in ritual can help participants create meaning from suffering. Frankl asserted that one of the primary ways of discovering meaning from deep challenge and recasting a meaningful life is by showing courage in difficult times (Frankl, 2006/1959). Wong (2012) defined meaning as consisting of four essential components with four corresponding psychological processes: purpose/motivational, understanding/cognitive, responsible action/social and moral, and enjoyment or evaluation/affective. Wong asserted that life would not be meaningful without all four facets in play. Ritual engagement not only helps construct meaning but can fuel the capacity to transcend the situation. This does not happen all at once. Participating in meaningful ritual can be the balm that brings one aspect of rest, refreshment, hope, and leads to a shift in perspective. Meaning making can also be facilitated by mindfulness (Wong, 2012). Every action and gesture, choice of instruments and symbols, timing of call and response, and other elements are selected and crafted together through mindful, deliberate intention and decision making to achieve a purpose.

There is tension between the views that meaning is available through suffering and the uselessness of suffering. How can there be meaning in the atrocities or the needless death of a child or loved one? French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas subscribed to the view that suffering and pain is “. . . . intrinsically useless, ‘for nothing’ . . . senseless” (Levinas, 1988, p. 138). Levinas asserted that to find meaning in suffering and pain assumes belief in a Power or God. Specifically, these beliefs are presupposed by theodicy, which attempts to answer the question why a good God allows evil and suffering in the world. It presupposes the existence of God. Levinas maintained that there is explicit and implicit theodicy in Western thought. On one side of the argument suffering and evil are deliberately imposed by God; on the other side God is absent from where suffering and evil exists, and in the middle, suffering and evil are present because of human sin.

Levinas proposed that the only way suffering is bearable or meaningful is that it is solely meaningful to the one who witnesses the suffering of the other. Suffering is not meaningful to one who is suffering. He called this the Inter-human Order. It is the one who is witness to the suffering who must negotiate the meaning. The witness *must not be indifferent* to the one who is suffering, but must take responsibility for the other and make a healing gesture. This is the appropriate ethical response. “It is in the inter-human perspective of my responsibility for the other person, without concern for reciprocity, in my call to help him gratuitously, in the asymmetry of the relation of *one* to the *other*. . . .” (Levinas, 1988, p. 165).

Seeman (2004) believed that although Levinas eschewed meaning-oriented approaches to ritual analysis, interpretation of ritual practice in alignment with healing and ethics is still available. Ritual in this understanding can be

developed and engaged to deal with extremes of emotions and unraveled self-understanding that could threaten to destroy individuals and communities. Whether or not concerned with meaning-making, ritual engagement contributes to an ordered and coherent life/world (Seeman, 2004).

Ritual and storytelling

Storytelling is a powerful, life enhancing act. It is necessary for human survival. However, the ritual of storytelling is an underattended aspect of healing and growth. As a part of speech, “story” is most often classified as a noun and most frequently defined as a fictional narrative or an account of incidents or events (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/story>). In addition, the word story is used as a transitive verb, that part of speech where the action word story is used with an object, i.e., “She told the story of her husband’s death.” Rarely is the understanding of story raised to level of a pure verb that expresses action or ways of being, yet that is where the reality lies. “To be human is to story” (Tippet, 2018). By virtue of being human a life is shaped through storying.

Individuals are constantly engaged in meaning construction to make sense of the world. It is through storying that the meaning and texture of an existence is created versus simply marked and understood by the passage of time. This storying is part of the innate human drive for meaning (Nelson-Becker, 2018; Frankl, 2006/1959; Wong, 2008, 2012). Storytelling expresses autobiographical and biographical memory. Expression of stories, particularly during and after experiences of loss, can aid self-understanding, healing, and family and community bonding.

Narrative and enactment

Narrative development and ritual enactment are two dimensions of human living that, when simultaneously engaged, produce potent effects (Anderson & Foley, 1998). For older adults who have a particular religious tradition important to them, ritual is a viable way of placing one’s personal life and human story in the context of the broader divine or sacred story. This has the power to transform individuals, families, and groups into nourishing communities of faith.

Rituals and stories are crafted to help make sense of life. For older adults there are many situations where standard rituals around life events and transitions are nonexistent. Current reality presents radically new contexts that require creative rethinking. There is an absence of ritual models for significant moments of transition, crises, and life cycle development in older adult lives. Such life events include undergoing a divorce after decades of marriage, remarrying later, or marrying for the first time later in life and

“blending” adult families. Long lived cognitive disorders present new struggles in the partnership and family structures. What rituals are available for care partners who have found another love, yet want to maintain the commitment of caring for their spouse?

Mourning: A time for stories

Loss and the experience of grief change us. The emotional impact of a loss can be staggering. Grief shifts daily rhythms and impacts self-understanding. Engaging in ritual can aid in coping and help move persons and communities through the early stages of grief. During the mourning period, culturally sanctioned rituals, prescribed symbolic acts that move the bereaved from the initial awareness of a death to facing the reality of life without the one they love, can help the bereaved function. Funeral and early mourning rituals can provide guidance for mourners navigating the first days of life alone, that liminal period, and satisfy a need for a sense of stability and order. Most religious traditions have rituals or rites that provide guidance and prayers. For example, many in the Christian tradition will hold a vigil for the dying person prior to and after death, followed by a funeral service and burial committal. The Jewish tradition encourages a week-long mourning period through the ritual of “sitting Shiva.” Many traditions suggest how long a formal mourning period lasts and what behaviors and tasks one follows. A long-lived life provides an abundance of stories that are retold during these rituals.

Mourning story examples

Sharing stories allows older adults to give speech to that which is unspeakable. Sharing life stories helped Virginia when her husband of more than 60 years died by suicide. Initially, she could not speak of his death and the way he died, but of the way they met and their life as a couple. With grandchildren and other family she shared stories of Ben’s accomplishments and love of family. Eventually, as time passed, Virginia began to speak about Ben’s vulnerability and suffering. She began by telling the story of Ben’s “first deep sadness,” and how he coped. Over time the narrative of Ben’s life, through Virginia’s perspective, and the narrative of their life together unfolded.

Helen and Sylvia were two older women who met and fell in love. Helen knew from a young age she was a lesbian; for Sylvia that awareness was confirmed when she met and fell in love with Helen. They were together less than three years when Helen was diagnosed with a late-stage cancer. Their relationship flourished through a few years of treatment, remission, reoccurrence. As older adult women who had never married, neither had explicitly

discussed their sexual orientation with their respective families. When Helen died, Sylvia had few friends who were aware of and could validate her loss. Sylvia sought the safe space of a therapist in which to share her mourning stories and the narrative of their life together. As the two-year anniversary of Helen's death approached Sylvia decided to have a celebration of Helen's life. In that two-year period Sylvia had "come out" to family and friends and met a new love. Sylvia wanted to honor her relationship with Helen and incorporate it fully into her life. She wanted to be able to freely remember and talk about Helen and introduce her new love, Donna, to Helen's memory. With the help of her pastor and a friend, Helen developed a meaningful storytelling celebration ritual. Invited witnesses were carefully selected among friends who knew and did not know Helen. Those who knew Helen were invited to share stories of her life; those who did not know her were invited to bear witness to the stories. After each story was shared all guests responded saying, "Peace to Helen's memory." This was a powerful time of healing and transformation for Sylvia and others who were present.

Sharing mourning stories helps transform the physical relationship with the deceased to an inner relationship thereby forging the pathway of continuing bonds (Hedtke & Winlade, 2004; Klass, 2017). Sharing stories about the loved one, circumstances of the death, and connection with the bereaved can help counteract the loss of meaning that the bereaved may experience and help facilitate the change in personal identity that occurs. Both Virginia and Sylvia identified they found comfort and support in sharing stories about the deceased's life and their shared life. They were able to incorporate the reality of their life narrative which included their loved one and move forward with a reconstructed identity. Rituals became part of the story.

Ritual is witness: Witness is ritual

A key element of ritual is the component of witness. The notion of witness has diverse understandings depending upon context. There are four important connections between witness and ritual. One can be a witness to one's own experience, a witness to the experience of others, be aware of the witness of others to one's experience, and provide witness to an event, such as a wedding or a protest. A witness is one who has personal knowledge of an event or a fact. There are two particular areas in life where ritual and witness are intertwined. One is in world of religions and faith; the other is in the legal, judicial realm. Religious traditions bear witness to aspects of faith through various rituals. For example, liturgical traditions such as those in the Catholic and Episcopal faith bear witness to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus in the celebration of the Eucharist. Ritualized prayer, chant, liturgical dance, and practices that engage all the human senses are a form of

spiritual practice for a range of religious traditions that are communal acts witnessed by one with another.

To be a witness means being fully present when something of meaning occurs; ritualizing it helps the witnesses to appreciate the level of meaning. When we think about witness one usually thinks about others. Someone is a watchful observer or providing validation, attesting to the reality or experience. However, a primary witness is the self. “We are the most important and only full witness of our own lives” (Schneider, 2012, p. 361). Ritual is a thoughtful path in which one can bear witness to life experience and complex emotions such as fear, grief, rage, shame, betrayal, guilt, and others. It provides a form for accessing complex emotions. To engage in ritual requires a degree of courage for at its core ritual acknowledges and expresses something of significance. Simultaneously it can create something new. Participation in ritual can simultaneously move one forward and provide a sense of stability by highlighting continuity. Through the use of ritual emotions can be discharged, identity can be shaped; connections can be developed or restored.

The importance of witness is frequently underestimated, but is highlighted when the witness is gone or the opportunity for witness is unavailable. A witness validates. Being a witness to self and others is a sacred task. In times of loss and sorrow, a witness is one who offers to hold hope in our darkest time. Witnessing validates a meaningful experience whether that experience is one of loss, success, or transition.

Living in a culture that values youth over the aged often leads to a feeling of invisibility among older adults. As the older adult population increases, by sheer volume, demands are made to cease relegating this population to the margins. Participation in meaningful ritual can aid in breaking through the effects of ageism and impact ageist stereotypes, both for the older adult and the witness. Although invisibility is an experience for many older adults it is particularly so for those in minority groups (Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2017; Siverskog, 2014).

An example of the importance of witness and ritual can be seen in the wedding of a lesbian couple. Ellen and Jane had been together for 14 years before they legally married four years ago. Ellen was 70 years old and Jane was 65 when they married. They had a simple, elegant ceremony in a friend’s backyard. It was officiated by an Episcopal priest and witnessed by longtime and new friends, family, and onlooking neighbors. When asked to reflect on why they chose to have a wedding ceremony after being together for so many years, Ellen stated, “I wanted the full acknowledgement of our relationship and I’m a traditionalist.”

Ellen described the process of preparing for and participating in the wedding ceremony in great detail and with joyous emotion. There were witnesses of relationship and witnesses of understanding. Witnesses of relationship are those who knew the couple well and actively shared in their lives.

Witnesses of understanding were those who were acquainted with the couple and who understood the import, meaningfulness, and gravity of the marriage of these older, lesbian women. Ellen identified two critical changes after the wedding took place. The first was in identity. “I was able to call Jane, my spouse, my wife. We never thought that would happen. Having that title of “wife” and “spouse” is important.” For both Ellen and Jane this addition of title provided an expansion of identity.

The second surprising shift that occurred was they both had a felt sense of being “out” more. Having the friends and family present to witness and validate their partnership in a time-enduring, sanctioned ceremony broke open a new level of “outness” and encouraged the couple. Karen, Ellen’s adult daughter, spoke about how important it was for her to be a witness at her mother’s wedding. She noted that Jane had moved from an important person to *legal family*. Karen also noted how validating it was for her to observe others’ validation of her mother and Jane’s personhood, as an individual and as a couple. For Karen, participation in the ceremony as the key witness, the “maid-of-honor” who signed the marriage certificate, was also a protest statement. “At the time of the wedding same-sex marriage was not legal throughout the country. I felt like I was taking a firm stand against discrimination when I signed that certificate!” The experience of all involved, including the wider society represented by the legal document, illustrates the interconnectedness of ritual and witness.

Designing therapeutic ritual

Ritual thus has an important place in assisting people to move through periods of upheaval and change in both cognitive and noncognitive capacities. Rather than serving as a fixed form of culture, ritual helps people adapt to new situations through the reciprocal action and interaction of ceremony. Religion has long valued the importance of ritual and many religions have room for different ritual elements in sacred space. Bells or a shofar calling congregants to prayer, singing bowls to meditation, water used for ritual washing or baptism, lighted candles, and burning incense are but a few common religious ritual elements (Nelson-Becker, 2018). Although some aspects of ritual are notably visible, others are invisible and represent inner transformation and revitalization. Religions such as the Anglican Church employ many rituals and some, such as the Quakers, employ very few. Rituals require honesty with one’s self, purity of intent, and encourage intimacy when performed in a group. Thich Naht Hanh (2012) wrote that every home should have a meditation room that is individualized according to values. Rituals can thus move outside of religious frameworks to embrace spiritual areas (a house altar with meaningful objects such as a seashell, a piece of driftwood, a stone, or a picture), or everyday experiences, which can

convey meaning beyond the action such greeting, leave-taking, or sipping a cup of tea.

Ritual has found application in therapeutic practice. Four aspects include (1) a confiding and emotionally stimulating relationship with a healing person or person who has similar characteristics, even if largely unacknowledged; (2) a healing venue; (3) a conceptual framework or rationale (myth) that delivers an explanation for client symptoms and provides a system (ritual) for treating them; and (4) a procedure (ritual) that requires active participation by both therapist and client, which each accept as a method for restoring patient health (Frank & Frank, 1993). Safety and confidentiality within a therapeutic alliance open space for inner healing. Ritual in this perspective recognizes the potential for therapy to break down former unsuccessful life patterns and assist individuals to break through into new understanding and behavior.

If people live to an older age, transition can be recognized through marking entrance into elderhood. In this last stage of life, there is seldom a set ritual unless it might be for the celebration of a 50-year marriage. However, it is possible for individuals to create their own meaningful ritual as they turn 65, 75, or 85 and beyond. For women this is the stage of the crone. This term has been reframed as representing a wise person, though previously it was associated with a negative image of aging (Nelson-Becker, 2018). A man who exercises authority as head of a family is referred to as a patriarch; this term is generally associated with age. One of either gender who is ascribed wisdom and good judgment may be known as a sage.

Rituals can be designed to build the power of community for witness in ways that strengthen both individuals and their community. As with van Genep's structural phases of separation, liminality/healing, and reincorporation, a ritual can be designed to honor separation and move participants through healing and into reintegration. If done with a therapist or friend, the intent and goals of the ritual can be specified. Including elements for emotional release through attention to the senses is often useful; the more senses attended to, the easier it may be to enter therapeutic sacred space. Evaluation of both the process and the elements of the ritual after it has been performed can suggest whether goals have been met and reintegration achieved. Please see [Table 1: Guidance for Therapeutic Ritual Design \(Nelson-Becker, 2018\)](#) for factors that are useful as a framework.

Conclusion

The development, use, and benefit of rituals for older adults in community have been relatively unexplored. People are living longer and new rituals are needed to address older adults' lived experience, dispel loneliness and

Table 1. Guidance for therapeutic ritual design.

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1. Assist the person/client to consider the why, where, who, and how elements for this ritual. Why will it be performed? Where will it be conducted? Who should be invited? How will it develop? Assess the client's background characteristics, relevant history, level of support, and any areas of loss that the ritual may be intended to mend or restore. What is the client's history with rituals and other ceremonies? What is the client's expectation or hope?
 2. Think about the goals for the ritual. What are the immediate and ultimate goals? Are they celebratory, transformational, or healing? Will the ritual address:
 - a. transitions—major life transitions such as marriage, adoption, entry into elderhood, or death
 - b. continuity—reinforcing bonds and stability of relationships during times of change, e.g., when a young family member leaves for the university a special meal may be designed with an opportunity for each member to share objects of meaning with the one departing and wisdom thoughts, or when a grandparent transitions into an assisted living or long-term care facility, family members can facilitate a goodbye and hello ceremony.
 3. Specify the types of thoughts and feelings that will be symbolically expressed: love, regret, forgiveness, endings and openings, for example. This can guide the activities to be planned.
 4. Consider whether the person prefers to engage in a familiar ancient ceremony and participate deeply or to creatively craft a new or modern ritual.
 5. Engage the spiritual or religious support system or family system if desired. It can help if there are witnesses—especially if the sorrow is a community sorrow.
 6. Co-consider sensory elements:
 - What elements will affect sense of smell?
 - What colors and visual elements will be present?
 - What music or sound will be made or listened to.
 - What will be tasted or sipped?
 - What or who will be physically touched and in what way?
 - What symbols will be present? Examples might include candles, a stone, another natural object, a small statue, a painting, or a photograph.
- Also consider whether some aspect could be offensive to anyone who attends, cause allergies, or be harmful in another way.
7. What can be prepared in advance or constructed by hand?
 8. Co-create procedures:
 - Who will be invited and what will be their role? Who will preside or lead?
 - What symbolic acts will occur? Examples include reading personal writing, sharing a handshake or hug, reading poetry or sacred text, planting a tree, releasing balloons, passing a talking stick
 - What will be open and impromptu and what will be determined?
 - What will the location, tone, and preferred timing for the ritual be?
 - Ensure privacy, if desired, and safety of setting.
 - Establish the beginning and ending, or how to know when ritual is complete.
 9. Implement the ritual and evaluate both the process and result.
 10. Identify whether further ritual work or something else might be needed to complete the healing process.
 11. Celebrate what has been achieved!
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strengthen community. Historically, ritual was primarily within the purview of formal religion and sacred cultural rites. However, awareness of the power of ritual has flowed beyond these boundaries and is accessible to individuals, families, communities, and cultures in different contexts. Ritual possesses both a grounding and a centering quality. It may be transformative. The grounding and centering feature of ritual roots individuals and community members to essential values, sometimes deemed sacred. The transformative quality allows the opportunity for routine ways of thinking, being, and experiencing the world to break open to new perspectives and new ways of

being. The transformative energy of ritual is available to individuals and communities, across time and cultures. Both are valued as an antidote to the speed of change in this postmodern age that tends to foster disconnection, purposelessness, anxiety, and loneliness.

Some practitioners and scholars have examined the therapeutic functions of ritual in a variety of contexts: however, more needs to be done to capture and support the older population's lived experience. Never before in history have so many lived such varied experiences. Globalization, wars, and ease of transportation and technology have caused the permeation of what were once rigid, cultural barriers through widespread movement of peoples across the world. This time of reflection creates the space for new expansive meaning to emerge. Ritual grounds us and shapes us at every stage in life, to support us in facing the challenge of change that lies ahead. Ritual can return us to strengthened communities where aging finds respect and inclusion.

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