



♥ LOVE

🕯️ LOSS

🌀 LIMINALITY

RITUALS OF HONORING FOR DEATH & DYING IN THE TIME OF COVID-19



by Danna D. Schmidt, *Master Life-Cycle Celebrant®*, WAYPOINT CEREMONIES
[Visit my [blog](#) for other ways to honor your Grief and Loss]

VIRTUAL VIGILING

It is Spring 2020 and the world is grappling with a pandemic called novel coronavirus or COVID-19. We now have a new lexicon of buzzwords like Social Distancing and Sheltering-in-Place. Government restrictions in most places now prohibit gathering to honor our nearly and dearly departed ones, whether that is at a hospice bedside or for a funeral.



So many are dying alone, without the solace of loved ones at their side or other last rites and farewell gestures. And this social isolation extends into their after-death care, as burials and cremations are being administered unwitnessed by family, and funerals in some areas are prohibited.

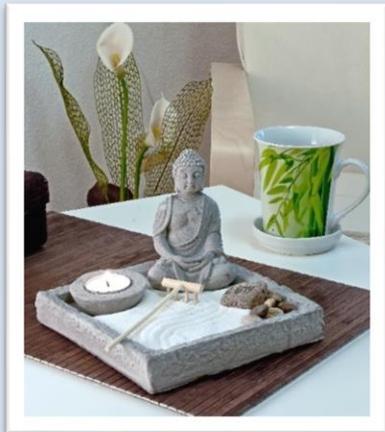
How can we honor our grief for the world and the tally of deaths in this uncommon hour? How do we hold vigil in these important moments before and after death if we can't be present at the bed or graveside?

The author of Ecclesiastes notes that for "everything, there is a season, turn, turn." In this time of liminality (which we might think of as a kind of fertile void), we have been delivered a rare if unsolicited invitation to get creative and resilient about how we foster connections and support.

During this indeterminate season, we are all being asked to attune ourselves to the present moment, our sequestered spaces, and our hearts within. For some, it might provide an opening to rekindle or deepen our connections with our immediate circle of loved ones.

And we are reliant on the power of technology in the form of FaceTime, online streaming platforms and social networks as never before, bringing new meaning to the term Virtual Vigiling.

FOREVER ALTAR(ed)



I assure you that without even realizing it, **you have a rich array of ceremonial resources within your grasp**. If you aren't sure where to start, I invite you to do as poet David Whyte instructs: "Start close in."

Begin by noticing the **symbols and talismans** you surround yourself with that bring you sustenance. There is such power and resonance in focusing on what is tangible. Not only do symbols lend a tactile utility – something for us to have and hold in our hand to help ground us – they are like time travelers in so far as they timeslip us along memory lane.

- Make a list of the **physical items that calm and center you**, and then gather them together, creating a small **Honoring Altar** for yourself. These might be religious symbols, a small bell, an aromatic candle, beads, an inspiration art card, a quotation plaque, or miniature figurines.
- Now consider items **you would associate with the person(s) you're honoring**. Print or collect photos of them, feature symbols that represent them (recipe card, teacup, flower, cigar, herbs, book, a pair of reading glasses, gardening gloves, candies, etc.).
- **Invite each family member/close friend to create their own Honoring Altar**. Show, tell, and compare notes via Zoom or Facetime, drawing inspiration and good ideas from one another. Set aside a time for the grand reveal, as you each speak to what these Altar items represent.

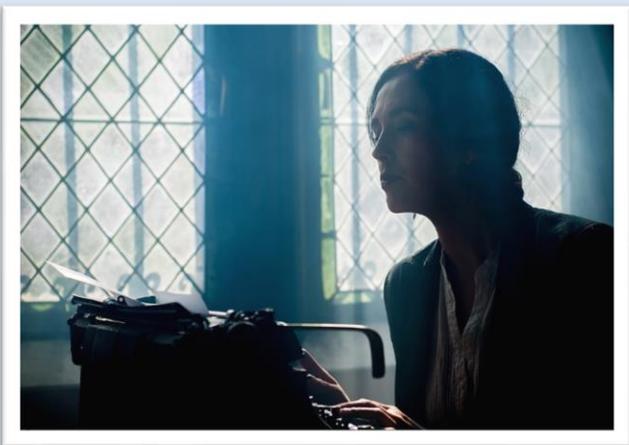
LET THERE BE LIGHT

The simple yet powerful gesture of lighting a candle or turning on a lamp or porchlight at a certain time of day can be centering. Consider how you might use the power of light in your ritual space. Here are some examples:



- If this is a virtual vigil, have each person **take turns lighting a pillar candle**, holding it in front of them so their face is illuminated, and **share words** of intention (*"I light this candle in the spirit of bringing healing or eternal peace to _____"*) or words of grief (*"Today I bring a feeling of sadness about...."*).
- If honoring a dying loved one at a distance, consider the gift of the [Long-Distance Friendship Lamp](#) that allows for remote/Wi-Fi access and illumination at a certain time each day or whenever. (The same capability is available via Amazon Alexa with remote lamp control, but a dedicated Wi-Fi network and pre-programming is needed).

(META)PHYSICALITY



Being deprived of the opportunity to reach out and offer tactile gestures of love and farewell to our nearly and dearly departed ones is heart-wrenching. FaceTime, Zoom, phone, photos, video recordings, and social media spaces, while offering something, still fail to gift us the loving connection we most yearn for in these moments.

For the time being, we must be willing to either suspend our disbelief around communal consciousness and energy practices (such as intentional meditation) or lean deeper into them. Yes, I'm talking about the woo.

And so, what this looks like is that we apprentice ourselves, as friends and family, to playing the role of vicarious Psychopomp, a fancy word for modern death doulas from the Greek word *psychopompos*, meaning “guide of souls.” Helping guide or sing the soul of a loved one to the next realm from afar, and in the absence of touch, entails a host of creative rituals. Consider the following:

Write Your Sorrow. For several weeks during my father's dying season four years ago, I was a few hour's drive and a border/ferry crossing away. I couldn't be with him physically, so I took the opportunity to write letters to him, beginning with the prompt, “*You're dying and...*” I shared one letter with him but saved another to dispatch upon the ether with the out-breath of my anticipatory grief and pen, trusting my words would find their way to him. It was a cathartic experience.

Bundles of Love.

I later bundled all my letters to him into a **wrapped Grief Bundle** with fall leaves and placed them into his cremation casket with him. Had that fierce form of witnessing not been available to me, I would have opted to construct my own burning bundle.

And on the topic of fire, a home funeral advocate friend shared news of how her husband's uncle was dying of cancer in the early weeks of the coronavirus outbreak. They were fortunate to be able to vigil with him in his last days as they sang and played guitar.



She noted how he had a love for campfires and I offered that in an ideal world, they could create a campfire ambiance complete with camp chairs, a virtual crackling fire on the TV screen, blankets, song, and sweet campfire roasted treats. You get the picture. As together, so apart. This time necessitates that we be imaginative and enact ways of gathering that we might otherwise deem as somewhat silly or too much.



Gathering your group of grievers together in later months for a fire circle vigil is a medicinal way to huddle close, tell stories, share music, and roast marshmallows. Friends and family can take a moment to go around the circle, recount memories, and release written notes of remorse and remembrance connected to the dying days of your loved one.

Guided Meditation. Know that even as you may not be permitted to be by the bedside of those you love before or after death right now, you can **gather virtually via Zoom and you can take turns sharing your healing thoughts, words of blessing, and imaginal wishes.**

It is all far from ideal but it's still a small measure of something.

Several meditations for grief and the dying process are available [online](#). You might offer to lead or enlist a family member to take on the role of facilitating this circle and selecting soothing background music to be played while reading the words. A couple of excellent resources are John O'Donohue's blessing words for death and dying (found [here](#) or in *To Bless the Space Between Us*).

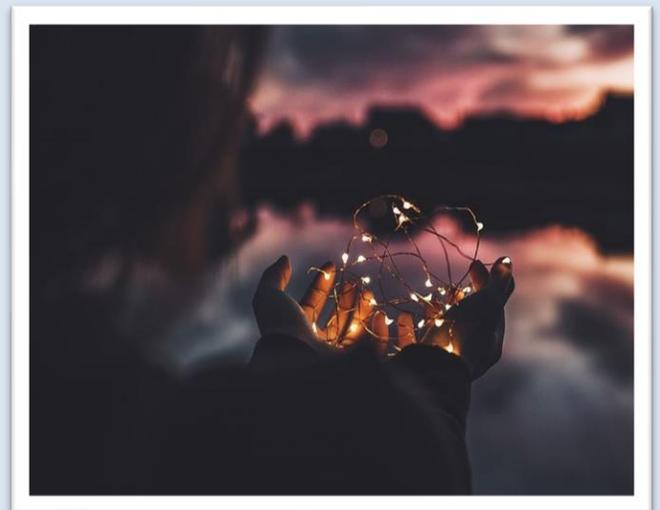
Additionally, family and friends can take turns leading others in a collaborative gesture of touch from head to toe (think "Head and Shoulders" and you're onto something), as you reflect upon the [blessings](#) and gifts of wisdom, heart, healing, and hands that your loved one has lent the world.

Good Vibrations.

Communal meditation and prayer lends solace, as does **joining voices in song**.

Sharing worries and expressions of concern as a group about how everyone is feeling in the face of the pandemic and loss is important.

Invite those participating in this dying time vigil to **hold an object in hand** (a stone, a religious talisman, photo, or symbol that reminds them of their loved one), and to reflect upon a cherished memory with the one who is dying or has died.



By spending the final reflective moments envisioning the honoree surrounded by the healing energy of the group, and **simply breathing together** in prayer, meditation and fierce presence, know that you'll be creating a way for the group to find temporal comfort through ritual.

Encourage everyone to repeat the process at a certain time each day as a way to **stay connected and imaginal**.

NATURE = NURTURE



Nature grounds and restores us and can be a [lifeline](#) when separation is the temporary norm. Consider how taking to the garden or the forest path might offer respite and clarity for these confusing times.

Simple gestures such as making a [nature altar](#), creating a **backyard grief garden**, planting seeds, or spending time under the shelter of a tree all help. Join forces as family and friends in this time to **bring nature indoors** as a reminder of how love blooms eternal.

- **Craft small shrines of still life** using fruits, vegetables, plants, flowers and assorted mementos and share these portraits with each other as a daily source of [quiet beauty](#) in the midst of your grief.
- Borrow a **sprig of greenery, a cut flower, or a cedar branch** from nature to remind you of life's [interconnection](#). Return the favor by planting a tree later.
- And if you find yourself unable to engage in common burial practices after death (such as placing a flower upon the urn, taking turns shoveling dirt, or throwing a clump of soil upon the casket), **enact your own memory capsule burial**. Have everyone write notes on the inside of compostable wrapping, fill the bundle with flowers, pinecones, and other tree offerings, wrap your bundle with hemp cord, and then designate a place in your own yard(s) as memorial ground. Dig a spot with a spade and then bury your bundle. You can later **decorate and place a memorial stone** above, set a memorial bench or chair nearby, plant a perennial as an annual ritual of remembrance, and place nature bouquets or wreaths upon this commemorative ground each year on anniversary dates.



SENSE & SENSIBILITIES

Families are getting creative and are enlisting the help of caregivers to help them connect with dying loved ones. Stories of bringing phones to the ears of those dying or medical practitioners **playing video and voice recordings** of family vigiling from afar are both heartwarming and heartbreaking.



With only the first third of 2020 behind us, even the least tech-savvy amongst us are having to rely upon technology in new ways as a way to apprehend connection. So, too, is this true of our senses.

In the absence of physical touch and togetherness, we beg reliance on our other senses to help us connect and bear witness. **Consider all the ways you might heighten your taste, touch, smell, sound, and sight sensibilities as you vigil virtually.** Here are some inspiring ideas to help you hone your senses:

- A sprig of rosemary, a stick of cinnamon, **a hot cup of herbal tea** (bonus for [DIY heart-shaped tea bags](#)), freshly baked banana bread, sweet treats, vintage photos, big band music, and a small ball of clay (or even Play-Doh) are all examples of how you can enliven your senses with seemingly ordinary things.

- Invite your people to inhale peace and exhale love by making an [aromatherapy ball](#), a lavender-infused bean bag, or to stuff a plastic egg with paper wishes and sentiments, which they can then decoupage with tissue paper or place inside an aroma-spritzed drawstring bag.

- When huggable moments are needed, which is often, offer up the comfort with **a stuffed bear** (the best kind of grief guardian) or **soft cushion to have and to hold** while gathering virtually, when a hand or a hug is not possible. (Pets are the best for this though).

- **A multi-sensory, no-sew fidget mat** (a tactile tool used for memory care patients) might also be a way to busy the hands and engage the heart throughout an acute epoch of grief. Adding trinkets, jewelry, heirloom bits of fabric, Velcro flaps for small notes and clear photo pockets helps to personalize this touchy-feely item.

- When my father was dying, I stitched a **simple grief quilt** that included torn strips of fabric I had written on that I attached as a collage assemblage. I carried that grief quilt with me everywhere in those months he was dying.

- If you're holding space for a loved one in a facility with visitation restrictions, **record the family singing or expressing messages of love on Zoom** and have a caregiver play the clip later. **Make a playlist of songs that remind you of your loved one.** Take turns sharing a song a day as you hold vigil, together with stories and memories you associate with the music.





- During this year of staggering statistics, orient your days as a cohort of family and friends by **gathering marbles, stones, or other small ephemeral objects** in a mason jar or glass bowl over a period of 30-100 days (or choose a number in honor of their age). Each day at a designated time, have everyone move an item from one glass vessel to the other and make their love count by reflecting upon and sharing words of appreciation about your nearly or dearly departed one. These objects, together with messages written on slips, can then be compiled to share and/or curated to form a collaborative memorial art project.

IT'S ELEMENTAL

Give thought to the elements in the crafting of communal grief rituals. These are some examples of how to work with the elements:

When Breath Becomes Air. This pandemic is reminding us about the precious gift of air. Each breath is a miracle. To honor this element, float your grief upon the winds as a community in the form of a communal **kite flying ritual**. Order simple white kites [online](#), task your family with decorating them artfully and with messages of love scribed, fly them high in the sky on a designated day as a symbol of outreach to the one who died.

Eternal Flame.

Together with the ideas listed on Page 2 ("**Let There Be Light**") and Pages 3-4 ("**Bundles of Love**"), you can keep the flame of love for your person who has died alive in all kinds of ways. Send smoke signals to the great beyond by having everyone gather an object to release to the communal bonfire. It could be a beloved food item, an article of clothing (old shoes), or a printed email. Everyone would then take turns telling a cherished story in tribute. Another fire ritual favorite is to have each person write messages of release + renewal upon [Flying Wish Paper](#), to be released to the flame and the wind.

Still Waters Run Deep. Water is the source of life making water rituals especially powerful.

My favorite is to have everyone **gather a pitcher of water** from a favorite nearby lake, stream, or water source, and take turns pouring it into a clear bowl with iridescent stones at the base, and floating candles and flower buds upon the surface. Include **water soluble paper slips** for everyone to release private messages to be dissolved in the bowl.





In the absence of being present for bathing rituals at the bedside, know that you can host a **communal hand soaking or washing ritual** to rinse away feelings of guilt, regret, and helplessness.

Whether together or virtually, each person can rest their hands in their own bowl or basin of herbal-infused warm water as you acknowledge the uneasy truth that death seldom delivers tidy endings. Have wash cloths to place over your faces, and hand towels for drying (and hand lotion, too). Make this a daily sustenance ritual of self-care and forgiveness for the short-term.

Earthly Goodness.

There are countless ways to honor the element of earth. Stone stacking, tree plantings, seed art, and flower petal scattering are just a few ritual ideas.

I'm partial to **personalized litanies of remembrance** that allow each person to enact a ritual gesture such as layering earthly goods in a glass vessel (or placing them upon a custom nature altar), as they take turns sharing remembrance words (*"Whenever I see pink hair curlers, I will remember her."*).



You can make a **garland of love** with fishing line (or string and clothespins) by collecting fallen leaves and then cutting or hole-punching them into heart or other shapes for everyone to scribe their heartfelt messages upon. Or use small **tree branch slices** as photo and message tags to hang on a memory tree. **The possibilities and opportunities to conspire with nature are endless.**



Grief rituals are not a *once and for all time* thing, particularly now, when everything feels askew. As long as we carry our losses like legacies of love through life, we will need creative forms and modalities to honor our ever-changing relationships with our beloved dying and dead. And all these little rituals aside, you know your people best. Find a way, in community, to commemorate your loved one's unique gifts to your world. And then do it again but differently.

Grief needs space, story, symbols, ritual, food, song, and celebration, and mostly importantly, witnesses to help us bear the unbearable.

 **Blessings to you in this tender and tending time.** 