

CREATING RITUALS THAT SPEAK TO US AND FOR US
IN THE WINTER-TIME OF LIFE

The greatest resource any congregation has today is the wisdom and the gifts of its elders! It does not concern me that there are so many older folks in many of our congregations! It does not concern me that a high percentage of those older folks are women. Our task is to take the folks we have and to seek together to be the Body of Christ in the place where we have been planted.

Our task is to develop the art of knowing how to hold in creative tension our *ministries of nurture and care* and our *ministries of challenge and risk-taking*. One of the most important ministries our elders can offer the church is to demonstrate how **dignity** and **respect** and **interdependence** and **community** are what holds a society together—rather than autonomy and independence and individual productivity which have been so highly valued by our culture. I believe that unless we learn to acknowledge and value our interdependence and engage in building community, our society is in grave danger. It needs the stories that older women hold in trust for our communities.

The elders in our congregations know stories we need to hear. As leaders in congregations our task is to invite all in our faith community to explore connections between their own stories and the Stories of our faith. As individuals and congregations claim the Christian story as their own and begin living into it, we can discover that, as Roberta Bondi has written, “gratitude is not something we do. ... Rather it is a medium of grace, a gift of God that softens the heart and enables it to see and hear and receive the things that come to it from God”¹

Think for a moment, what softens your heart? What helps you find “home” as that space “where souls can thrive and dream.” A sign on the wall at the Sisters of Charity of Calcutta mother-house where we met Mother Teresa says, “It is not how much we do, but how much love we put into the doing.”²

I would like to focus on why, as Mary Pipher³ observes, there are so few rituals to empower us and comfort us—to speak *to us* and *for us*--as we journey through the autumn and winter of our lives. Think about it. After retirement ceremonies, what is left beyond some birthday parties and our funeral?

¹ Roberta Bondi, *In Ordinary Time: Healing the Wounds of the Heart*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996, 173.

² A hand-lettered quote on the wall of the Mother House of the Sister’s of Charity in Calcutta, India.

³ Mary Pipher, *Another Country: Navigating the Emotional Terrain of our Elders*, New York: Riverhead Books, 1999, 16.

Rituals that are *authentic* and *speak the truth in love* hold much power and can challenge us, hold us steady in the storms of life, and can comfort us. They can give us the strength we need to make hard decisions and to hold on when we are ready to give up.

As leaders of congregations and in other settings where we find opportunity to create rituals, they can speak *for us* when we do not have the strength or the words we need; they can speak *to us* when God through the church and through other life-giving communities offer words and actions of challenge and of hope that we desperately need to hear. These rituals can be celebrated in our families, with a Sunday School class or a covenant prayer group, or in our congregational worship.

Let me offer an example.

A woman from Houston—a Presbyterian, whose name I do not know--shared this experience in a workshop I was leading. Her mother had always been a doer and a giver. Suddenly this woman in my workshop and her sisters had to face the fact that it was not safe for their mother to continue driving. This was not something Mother wanted to hear or to face.

The daughters made a hard decision and then said to their mother, “We know you do not want to face this, but the time has come when you must stop driving! For your own safety and for the safety of others, there is no other alternative. Next Sunday after church, we are going to have a gathering of family and friends here for dinner. And then you really must give us your car keys.

The daughters arrived on Saturday, put all the leaves in the dining room table, and cooked up a storm. After church their mother discovered that in addition to her daughters and their families, several neighbors and their now-grown children were present. After dinner one daughter began with a prayer. “God, we are truly grateful for our mother and grandmother and friend. She has always been there for us. So many times she put each of our needs before her own. We ask you to be with her now in this time of sharing and in the days ahead when she will be sad because she cannot do the same kinds of acts of neighborliness and mercy that she could do when she was able to drive. Bless her and us for this is a day of endings and beginnings.”

And then the stories began. “You were always our favorite ‘car pool mom.’ You never yelled at us or made us feel bad when we were late.” ... “I remember when you took us to the hospital when Billy cut his foot so bad and I couldn’t get hold of my husband.” ... “I always knew I could count on you to call to see if I needed a ride to church.”

And as the stories were shared, there was laughter and there were tears.

“Transitions are always hard,” one of the daughters said. “But we are here to promise that we will be with you as you learn to deal with this next phase of your life.” And one now-grown neighborhood friend of her daughters said, “I will be glad to take you shopping every Saturday morning and then you and my mom and I will go out for lunch.” A grandson said, “Grandma, I’ll be glad to run errands for you. I have my license now so just whistle and I’ll come!”

“As the stories and promises drew to a close,” this woman said to those of us in the workshop, “mother reached into a pocket, and with tears in her eyes she handed me her car keys.”

What can we learn from this story about ritual? Continue mining this story in light of the following characteristics of ritual.

WHAT IS A RITUAL?⁴

A ritual

- has a repeated pattern
(something we do over and over again in much the same way)
- does not have just one meaning
(rather a ritual is a matrix of many levels of meaning; hence, we talk about a ritual being "thick" or "dense" with meaning)

In a ritual

- We perceive something with our senses
(it involves visible, audible, and/or tactile experience)
- an action is done
(not just something we say, but something we do)
- language is used or implied
(we express meaning of what we are doing with words)

Ritual

- Evokes our participation in the stories connected with the tradition
(giving it "depth" and making it "thick" with meaning)
- is the way in which the beliefs and ideals of the community are simultaneously generated,
experienced, and affirmed (Emile Durkheim)

Rituals

- Separate us from the ordinary and the mundane
(causes us to leave some things behind so we can attend to others)
- are a threshold (liminal) experience in which we are not bound by what we have been in the past, but are not yet propelled into the future

⁴ Summarized from Dwight W. Vogel and Linda J. Vogel, *Sacramental Living: Fallings Stars and Coloring Outside the Lines*, Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 1999.

(here, through symbols and actions, we participate in the sacred stories that shape our identity)

(here we engage in a kind of "holy play" which puts things together in a new way)

- reorient us to the world we live in day-by-day but in a transformed way (Victor Turner)

Ritual

- Gives coherence to understanding our experience
- Shapes our attitudes, mood, and internal motivation (our "disposition for action" [Clifford Geertz])
- Helps us know instinctively what is real and important
- Helps us understand how to act in light of these priorities
- Holds us accountable for our choices (Catherine Bell)

What are some other situations that might call us to develop rituals to celebrate with older women?

* * * * *

There are a variety of resources to help us create rituals that speak to us and for us and help us with our endings and new beginnings as older adults face losses and the need to make difficult changes.

An aging class that David Otto taught at Centenary College in Mississippi created a ritual to be used by a small group of friends in the church (or perhaps by the whole congregation in a small church) that is based on the renewal of our baptismal covenant ritual in the *United Methodist Hymnal*.⁵ Other denominations also have liturgies for the renewal of baptism. This adaptation of a baptismal renewal ritual is a way of acknowledging the new situation of a widow or widower or divorcee some time after the loss of their spouse. The funeral is past (perhaps months or even a year past) and these persons may find themselves in a very different place—no longer a part of a couple after many years of marriage (see Appendix A).

Rituals can help us face the losses and changes that come into our lives. There are rituals for healing and wholeness in *The Book of Worship*.⁶ Many congregations now hold regular services for healing of body, mind and spirit. A powerful ritual to be shared with close friends on the death of a family member by whom she had been sexually abused was shared with me by Robyn Plocher. (See Appendix B)

⁵ *The United Methodist Hymnal*, Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989, 33-43.

⁶ *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992, 613-629. Also see services of death and resurrection which include resources for untimely or tragic deaths and for persons who do not profess the Christian faith (139-172).

There are rituals for leaving one's home and moving into a nursing home or retirement community. One family returned to the home that their mother and grandmother moved into when she was married 62 years before. The adult children were raised there and the grandchildren had wonderful memories of summers spent with grandparents on the farm and of family Christmases. Now grandma was no longer able to stay alone and was moving from that wonderful old farmhouse into a two room apartment in an assisted living facility in a nearby town.

The pastor and several close friends and neighbors joined the family when everything had been moved except the very old Christmas cactus and Grandma's favorite rocker—both of which were going to her new apartment. Those gathered in that home began on the front porch. Stories were shared.

“Grandma, remember the story about how mom's brothers used to peek out the window when dad brought her home from a date so they could tease her about getting kissed!” ... “Remember the summer you broke your ankle and how you told us all what to do while you sat in the old swing?” Already the air is filled with laughter, rebuttals followed by a different version of the same story, and tears.

Then they move into the living room, the dining room, the kitchen ... and on through the whole house—recalling stories, laughing, crying. When they get to grandma's bedroom where two of her children were born and where her beloved husband died, the pastor was asked to pray. They said their good-byes and asked God's blessing on the new family that would soon make this their home.

Then they picked up the rocker and the Christmas cactus and piled into cars and vans and drove in procession to Grandma's new home. Most things were already in place—pictures, Grandma's desk, the single bed that replaced the old double bed with the feather tic comforter which children and grandchildren had loved.

They brought in the rocker and asked grandma to sit down. The pastor prayed a blessing on this new home. He prayed that Grandma would find ways to bring joy to her new neighbors even as she had brought so much joy to everyone who visited the farm. He asked God to be with her in her lonely times and to help her find ways to continue to bless her family and friends.

The move was not easy. But somehow it helped everyone remember and celebrate the old, and begin to accept the new way things were to be.

We do not need to use “fancy words” in the rituals we create. We can sing songs, share stories, pray prayers of sorrow and of gratitude. We can share food around the table. We can actually step out of the old and into the new.

A congregation we attended summers in the Black Hills of South Dakota has developed a long standing ritual of parting. Even when there are no directions in

the bulletin, once the benediction is pronounced, folks reach for the hands of those next to them, they stretch for the hand of the person across the aisle, and they reach back or forward to connect with the last person in the row in front of them or behind them so that everyone is included. And then we sing,

“Grant us thy peace upon our homeward way,
With thee began with thee shall end the day,
Guard thou the lips from sin, the hearts from shame,
That in this house have called upon thy name.”⁷

For some, I suspect that is the only loving touch they may have experienced all week. They are connected. They belong.

Family rituals, rituals growing out of Sunday School classes, women’s groups, rituals that we share in hospitals, and in worship can provide us all with a sense of belonging—with hope in the face of seeming hopelessness. Like the psalmists before us, rituals can be vehicles for expressions of despair and anger; they can also help us express our deepest joys.

The key to creating rituals that speak to us and for us is
that they speak the truth in love...
that they honor our faith and our doubts...
that they speak our stories...
that they invite us to do something... and
that they are grounded in God’s gracious and faithful Love we
know in Jesus Christ.

The rituals Christians create are firmly grounded in Table fellowship. I believe with John Wesley that table fellowship (both in and outside of Eucharist) can be a means of prevenient grace. Out of our own understandings of Eucharist and what it means to break bread together, we can offer hospitality and care at table apart from eucharist and with those who do not claim our faith Stories.

Jesus’ ministry models for us how very basic are these ritual acts—in the feeding of the 5,000, and at the Last Supper, and with those two disciples who walked with the risen Christ on the the road to Emmaus. Jesus **took**,

blessed,
broke,

*and gave the bread to his disciples who
then shared it with all who were present.*

As we celebrate communion in our churches and in hospital rooms, let us give thanks! And as we seek to create rituals to help us in our faith journeys, let us remember that *hospitality* and *gratitude* can give us the courage we need to face whatever life brings—even as it gave Jesus the courage and grace to pray for his

⁷ A stanza from the hymn, “Savior, Again to Tkhy Dear Name.”

enemies on the cross that was meant to destroy his life and, instead, became God's way of offering life--abundant and eternal--to each of us and all God's children!

APPENDIX A⁸

RITUAL OF ACCEPTANCE OF MEMBER WHOSE SIGNIFICANT OTHER HAS DIED

GATHERING

(The participants should gather around a basin of water. Candles, representing the life and light of Christ in the world may be lit. Hymns and songs may be sung or played during the gathering.)

OPENING

Leader: With the passing of our loved one, _____, our community has experienced the departure of a significant member of Christ's holy church. Faith tells us, however, that through the death and resurrection of Christ, this beloved saint has joined the eternity of heaven, purified through the love of Jesus the Christ.

We have celebrated the life of our saint, (brother or sister _____).
But now we come together to recognize the grief and pain of this saint's significant other, _____.

As a community of faith, we come to embrace _____ as our sister (or brother) in Christ. As a family of believers, we come to support _____ in the struggle for understanding, patience, and healing. We come together to ward off loneliness and undue despair. We come to renew our claim to this person as sister (or brother).

THE RITUAL

(All participants shall approach the basin of water. A member of the group shall read Mark 1:9-11 or Matthew 3:13-17, or both.)

Leader: (to the significant other)
In baptism, our beloved saint, (name of departed), put on Christ, so in Christ they were clothed in glory. Likewise, in baptism, sister (or brother), you put on Christ, so in Christ you stand clothed in glory.

All participants:

**In Baptism, We Have Put On Christ, So In Christ We Are
Clothed In Glory. Praise God, The Creator, Redeemer And
Sustainer Who Has Robed Us In The Holy Spirit And
Named Us "Children Of God."**

⁸This ritual was developed by the Older Adult Ministry class, David Otto, professor, Centenary College, Shreveport, Louisiana. It is included in Linda J. Vogel, *Rituals for Resurrection: Celebrating Life and Death*, Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1996, 114-116. Used with permission of Professor Otto.

Leader: (to significant other)

Sister (or brother), pray with me.

Eternal God, when nothing existed but chaos, you swept across the dark waters and brought forth light. In the days of Noah you saved those on the ark through water. After the flood you set in the clouds a rainbow. When you saw your people as slaves in Egypt, you led them to freedom through the sea. Their children you brought through the Jordan to the land which you promised.

All participants:

Sing To The Lord, All The Earth. Tell Of God's Mercy Each And Every Day.

Leader: (to significant other)

In the fullness of time you sent Jesus, nurtured in the water, a womb. He was baptized by John and anointed by your spirit. He called his disciples, both men and women, to share in the baptism of his death and resurrection and to make disciples of all nations.

All participants:

**Declare The Works Of God To All Nations,
The Creator's Glory Among All People.**

Leader: (to significant other)

Great God of all water and earth, pour out your Holy Spirit, and by this gift of water call to _____ remembrance of the grace declared in her baptism and the family of God to which she forever will belong.

All participants:

We, Too, Will Remember Our Baptism. We Call You Sister. We Embrace You. We Love You. We Stand With You Forever.

(Leader will ask significant other to kneel. All persons shall gather around her. In unison, all participants shall dip their fingers in the water. Take fingers and place upon cheek of significant other.)

Leader: In your tears, remember your baptism.

All participants:

In Your Tears, We Remember Our Baptism.

(Dip fingers again. Place fingers on forehead of significant other.)

Leader: In your worry, remember your baptism.

All participants:

In Your Worry, We Remember Our Baptism.

(Dip fingers again. Surround hands of significant other with your own hands.)

Leader: In this touch, remember your baptism.

All participants:

In This Touch, We Remember Our Baptism.

Leader: Let us pray. God, we give thanks for our sister, _____, who we remember as a significant member of the Family of God. As members of the Body of Christ, all of us promise to support, care, and love our sister, _____, all the days of her life and beyond. Amen.

(At this point, the significant other may say whatever she would like to share with the congregation.)

CLOSING

The God of all grace, who has called us to eternal glory in Christ, establish and strengthen you by the power of the Holy Spirit, that you may live in grace and peace. Amen.

Developed by the Older Adult Ministry class, David Otto, professor, Centenary College, Shreveport, Louisiana. Used with permission.

APPENDIX B⁹

A MEMORIAL SERVICE

FOR

SURVIVORS OF ABUSE UPON THE DEATH OF THE PERPETRATOR

This is a service of Christian worship for survivors of physical or sexual abuse upon the death of the perpetrator of abuse, when the abuser has also been a family member or close family friend. It is designed to be shared by a small gathering of trusted friends, with or without clergy participation. It could be shared between wife and husband or brother and sister in a very private manner in the home.

This liturgy makes three important assumptions: 1) that the deceased was the perpetrator of abuse and one with whom the survivor(s) had a close, often familial relationship (as in cases of child abuse, spouse abuse, and incest): 2) that the survivor is a Christian and 3) that the survivor has taken the first steps toward healing the pain of the past and is on the road from being "victim" to becoming "victor" in Jesus Christ.

GREETING

While others have gathered to honor the life and memory of _____, we confess that this time has brought to us a myriad of emotions that are perplexing. How do we mourn the loss of that which we never really had? How do we mourn the loss of one we knew as (specify relationship), but could not trust? How do we mourn the loss of one we loved and hated at once, because our love was manipulated, used and abused? How do we mourn the death of one with whom we may not have related to in years? How do we mourn the loss of one who we really lost long ago? How do we sing the Lord's song in this strange and fearful land where broken hearts and broken bodies haunt our memory?

PRAYER (unison)

Lord God, we stand in your presence, knowing that you see our hearts and our lives with greater clarity than we even see ourselves. Accept our anger. Accept our sorrow. Accept our love. Accept our desire for revenge. Accept our desire to forgive, though we find forgiveness impossible. Accept our confusion. Accept all that we are and all that

⁹ Robyn Plocher was an elder in the United Methodist Church at the time she created this ritual which is included in Linda J. Vogel, *Rituals for Resurrection: Celebrating Life and Death*, Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1996, 109-113. Robyn is now a Deacon in the United Methodist Church and serves as Director of Rick's House of Hope in Muscatine, IA. She works with children who have experienced deep hurt and loss. Used with permission of the author.

we are becoming in your infinite grace and mercy. Do not turn your back on us now, for we are only beginning to understand our great need of your love.

WORD OF GRACE

Thus saith the Lord: "Before you were or
(Father's name)

→
(Mother's name)

You are Mine--A child of My Own creating, precious in My sight. My Grace is sufficient unto the need.

Thanks be to God!

SERVICE OF BAPTISM RENEWAL (optional)

P. 111, The United Methodist Book of Worship

The vows and sign act of Baptism renewal affirm the survivors commitment to resist sin and evil in this present day, including the suffering he/she experienced at the hand of another. The service can become a commitment to healing, a claim on the conquering power of grace as manifest in Jesus Christ, and an affirmation that we are indeed God's own dear child. This service would be used when a member of the clergy was officiating or presiding over the service.

HYMN

SCRIPTURE LESSON(S) (See list that follows)

WITNESS TO THE WORD (optional)

A formal meditation upon the scriptures may be offered at this time where a member of the clergy is presiding.

SHARING OF OUR JOYS AND PAIN

Many victims of physical/sexual abuse have memories of good times as well as memories of the abuse. It is important at the time of death to tell both and experience the validation of both. This sharing might best be done by using a formula such as completing the sentence:

I remember when.... This is a happy/painful memory for me.

Example:

I remember when the whole family went camping at the Grand Canyon. This is a happy memory for me.

or

I remember when dad took me on fishing trips. This is a painful memory for me.

(Sharing may be indepth or superficial as those sharing are comfortable with.)

HYMN (see list that follows)

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH

(#881, #883, #884, #885, #887 from The United Methodist Hymnal recommended)

RESPONSE: Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.

COMMENDATION

Almighty God, into your hands we commend the soul of _____, in sure and certain trust in your justice and your grace, infinite in wisdom and beyond our understanding, through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.

PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING

(p. 875, The United Methodist Hymnal)

God of love we thank you for all with which you have blessed us even to this day: For the gift of joy in days of health and strength, and for the gifts of your abiding presence and promise in days of pain and grief. We praise you for home and friends, and for our baptism and place in your church with all who have faithfully lived and died. Above all else we thank you for Jesus, who knew our grief, who died our death and rose for our sake, and who lives and prays for us. And as he taught us, so now we pray ...

THE LORD'S PRAYER

HYMN (optional)

DISMISSAL WITH BLESSING

Suggested Scripture Lessons appropriate for this service:

Jeremiah 31:29-34 The new covenant and promise of justice to each according to his sin.

Isaiah 40:27-31 Those who trust in the Lord will find their strength renewed.

Psalms 63 Longing for God

Psalms 119:137-144 God's Justice brings joy and comfort

Matthew 25:31-46 The final judgement

Matthew 28 Jesus' Resurrection
 Luke 16 The Resurrection
 Romans 8:35-39 Nothing can separate us from the love of God
 Ephesians 3:14-21 The power of Christ's love is given to us
 Hebrews 12:2 The joy of the cross
 Revelation 21:1-4 No more crying...no more pain

Suggested Hymns appropriate for this service:*

- #262 Heal Me, Hands of Jesus
- #265 O Christ, The Healer
- #266 Heal Us, Emmanuel, Hear Our Prayer
[God's healing power]
- #375 There Is A Balm in Gilead
- #643 When Love Is Found
-Affirms those loved ones supporting the bereaved today and validates the pain of betrayed trust, hope of restoration in God's will and time, which of course is eternal.
- #443 O God Who Shaped Creation
-Affirms that we are God's own children; That God is just and mourns humanity's evil ways; God is likened to Mother-Love (for situations where father was the perpetrator of violence); and Affirms God's healing powers.
- #117 O God, Our Help in Ages Past
-God's steadfast care
- #143 On Eagle's Wings
-God's providential Care (best when used with verses)
- #367 He Touched Me
-Freedom from the Past (Be sensitive to title)
- #383 This Is a Day of New Beginnings
-Healing for the past; hope for today and tomorrow
- #707 Hymn of Promise
- #394 Something Beautiful
-Affirmation/Praise for what God is doing in us
- #474 Precious Lord, Take My Hand
-Prayer for God's presence
- #521 I Want Jesus to Walk With Me
-Prayer for God's presence
- #526 What A Friend We Have in Jesus
-Affirmation of Jesus' presence and care
- #480 O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go
-Affirmation of God's love/grace

- #507 Through It All
-Witness to strength when trusting in God

* All Hymn numbers are taken from The United Methodist Hymnal, 1989.

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