



An Atheopagan Ritual Primer

Guidance for Crafting Rituals by Earth-Honoring Atheists

by Mark Green



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Fifth edition

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mark Green

1. What is a ritual?

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

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

As with all elements of Atheopaganism, we do this to enrich our lives and because it works: there is solid scientific evidence for the benefits and effectiveness of ritual in a person's life. <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/why-rituals-work/>

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

2. INGREDIENTS: Concepts and elements for successful ritual

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Group Participation and Ritual Etiquette are a right and a responsibility. Rituals work best when many participants contribute to their content with music, spoken word, or other contributions. It is the responsibility of a participant to pick carefully her

moment to come forward with an offering, and avoid stepping on someone else's. Don't hog the focus for too long. Be present and pay attention to others when they are offering something. Know that there will be a moment for you, and wait for it to come.

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

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

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

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

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

3. Ritual Technologies

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

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

- **Scents** such as incense and sacred oils can help to bring participants into Presence and a feeling of being in sacred space. “Smoke blessing” participants with smoke is an effective way to help them feel transformed as they enter the ritual experience, and is often done with incense, burning sage, sweetgrass or oak leaves. Scent is a powerfully evocative sense with a profound ability to alter mood; traditional religious incenses such as copal and frankincense have even been shown to alleviate depression and anxiety.
<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/05/080520110415.htm>
- Similarly, the **taste** of food and drink consumed during a ritual—such as bread and wine, a ritual meal such as a Passover Seder, etc.—can enhance Presence while also evoking a sense of religious tradition and continuity: of having done the same ritual at previous times. The circulation of “cakes and ale”—which can mean any kind of drink and finger food—is a common element of Pagan rituals, and usually takes place during the Gratitude portion of Atheopagan rites.
- **Touch and tactile experiences** are very powerful and contribute to participants’ inhabiting their senses and being in the body, especially when the sensations come as a surprise, as when the eyes are closed or in full darkness. I have seen tactile experiences used in ritual ranging from the sharp patter of water droplets from “asperging” with a water sprinkler to passage of soft fur across the face, passage of a chunk of ice from hand to hand, cloths damp with hot water given to each participant to cleanse the face, etc.

4. The Focus (altar)

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

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

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

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

5. An Atheopagan Ritual Format

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

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

It has six phases:

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

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

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

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

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

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

6. Exploring the Phases of the Atheopagan Ritual Format

A. Arrival

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

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

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

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

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

- **Entering the Now;** Sudden stimulation of the senses can help celebrants to inhabit their senses and aid them in becoming Present. Examples of techniques in this category are *smoke blessing* (wafting or fanning smoke over each celebrant) with burning herbs or incense; *asperging* (sprinkling each celebrant) with water or scented water; use of a chime, singing bowl, rattle, didjeridoo or other instrument

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

to outline the body in a *sound blessing*; or administration of a *sacramental taste* of something flavorful—a single dark chocolate chip, for example, or a drop of sour cherry on the tongue—to draw each participant’s consciousness into the senses, into the present, into the sacred Now.

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

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

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

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

B. Invoking Qualities and (optionally) Intentions

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

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

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

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

C. Intentions (Optional)

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

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

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

D. Deep Play or "Working"

Deep Play is the hardest phase to write about, because it can be nearly anything. It can be free-form dancing with spontaneously offered chant, song, spoken word, and music, or line or spiral dancing; it can be laying of hands on an ailing celebrant; it can be shared harmonic improvisational singing; it can be weaving together or braiding of strands of yarn representing Qualities to be integrated while singing a chant; it can be the passing of a mirror from hand to hand as each celebrant contemplates his reflection to the sound of a heartbeat drum; it may be drumming and singing while each celebrant in turn makes an offering or performs an action.

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

Typically, that activity will:

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

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

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

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

E. Gratitude

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

Gratitude is often done in a manner similar to Invoking the Qualities, creating a kind of “bookend” effect: either going around the circle and having each celebrant express what s/he is grateful for, or doing so in random “popcorn” fashion. Celebrants may also express gratitude that the Qualities were with them in the circle, e.g., “I am thankful that Discipline is with me, and supports the work I do here.”

Gratitude is often combined with the sharing of ceremonial food and drink—a way for participants to feel their very bodies surging with gratitude as, say, a rich red wine or ripe

strawberry or chocolate or freshly baked bread encounters their taste buds. We are alive today, says the phase of Gratitude: thank you for this, and for those who love us, and for all the great and small blessings we enjoy in this precious life we live.

F. Benediction

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

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

My usual benediction is this:

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

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

7. Example: A Ritual for Joy

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The participants reform in a circle, holding hands.

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

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

Afterword

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

The most important thing is to start. Religion is *practiced*, not just thought about or analyzed, and Atheopaganism is no different. Get your feet wet and your hands dirty, and try out some ritual techniques to see how they feel. Ritual arts require

learning and practice like any other, so don't worry about it if some of the things you try don't work out as you'd expected or hoped.

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

Best of luck and experiences to you on the journey!