

# New family traditions

Create rituals with and for your children to celebrate your family's values.

By [Meg Cox](#)

July/August 2003 7.1.03

You may have heard the joke that goes: What's a Unitarian? and the answer is An atheist with kids. That's funny partly because there is a grain of truth in it. I know I'm not the only person who came to a Unitarian Universalist church after not belonging to a church my whole adult life. When my son was born, I went church-shopping. I wanted to raise my son in a religious tradition, but not the one in which I was raised. I wanted to raise my son in a faith that made deep sense to me.

The good news about being a Unitarian Universalist is also the bad news: There is enormous freedom in how we practice our religion, and we wouldn't have it any other way. But we are often left to our own wobbly devices in doing so. We don't have handed down to us the carefully prescribed traditions of many other faiths, so we have to figure out on our own how to practice our Unitarian Universalist beliefs by incorporating them into our daily, weekly, and holiday family traditions.

Family traditions are wonderful, and it is a special joy to celebrate a holiday or carry on a bedtime ritual just as our parents and grandparents did. But the fact is, our lives are very different, and we need to invent new traditions for today's families. When I became a mother in 1994, I started a personal quest to find great contemporary family rituals that would inspire and instruct me, rituals that were simple but profound, practical and fun. I interviewed diverse families all over the country and compiled a collection of inventive new traditions, everything from Family Happiness Parties Overcoat Day, one family's quirky way of welcoming winter.

Family ritual is pretty much anything families do together deliberately, as long as it's juiced up with some flourish that lifts it above humdrum routine. Repeated words or actions, special food or music, or a heightened sense of attention can provide the juice. I wouldn't call it a ritual if you sometimes sit on the front steps and blow bubbles with your kids, but if you do it every Friday and then have graham crackers and milk and call it your welcome-to-the-weekend party, that's definitely a family ritual.

Ritual is not just for special occasions but also for every day, every meal, every bath, and every bedtime story. In ritual, little is big: Although dress-up holidays with lavish feasts are fun, it's the everyday traditions that determine how we experience our families and demonstrate hands-on love to our children. Intuitively, we know this is good, and consciously pass down beloved traditions from our own childhoods. But the power of ritual and the need for it are far stronger than we realize.

Even the most bewildered new parent quickly realizes that a baby gets calmer with a settled routine for sleeping, eating, and other activities. And if you start singing a funny little song every time you get ready to dip her in the baby tub, she starts cooing in anticipation: The two of you are in a private society, and she loves knowing the secret handshake. Through rituals

and traditions as simple as this, you are building the bond of your joined identity, defining your relationship by acting it out.

Comfort and security are two of the most important benefits of early ritual, and these are not just things we need as babies. Rituals also provide a sense of identity: Religious families build their beliefs into every tradition, sports-crazed families often have sports-related rituals, and musical families sing together. Children grow up feeling Mexican or Chinese partly because of ethnic celebrations and ritual foods.

Next to rituals of celebration, which include birthdays and holidays, the biggest category is probably rituals that help children handle transitions. Bedtime rituals, for one, are all about helping infants and children switch gears from activity and togetherness to stillness and solitude.

Rituals need to be conscious because they also pass on our values. That's why many families add rituals of philanthropy to their holiday festivities and don't just focus on gift-giving. Rituals can be designed to teach practical skills, like families where the kids take turns making Sunday dinner (even if they start off serving peanut butter sandwiches). Savvy parents realize early that one of the most practical uses of ritual is in problem-solving. Do the kids bicker constantly? Create a tension-diffusion ritual. Having a crisis every time you drop your toddler off at daycare? Design a good-bye ritual that helps her feel loved but independent, ready to explore new ground. Ritual is also an important tool in helping families heal in times of stress or loss, whether it's the loss of a beloved pet or the loss of the Little League championship.

The special power of ritual is that it can slow time and heighten our senses, and by doing so, we can intensify and deepen our family ties.

And how can we use ritual to deepen our children's ties to Unitarian Universalism? One good way is to introduce Unitarian Universalist philosophy and language into grace, if you say one at meals, and bedtime prayers.

I started doing a bedtime prayer with my son before he could talk, fashioned as a sort of open conversation with God. I always begin Dear God, thank you for this day and always include a list of things we're grateful for. As my son, Max, began attending religious education classes at church (often taught by me), I added language from the class, such as, Dear God, please give us open minds, loving hearts, and helping hands this week, sometimes explaining what I meant by that.

Another way to incorporate Unitarian Universalist themes is to use and refer to the Seven Principles as your children learn them. When my son's class was getting ready for the Stepping Stone ceremony, I had them each put together a string of beads that help them remember each of the principles. I suggested they could create a bedtime ritual of using them like prayer beads, and as they touch each letter, say the word it stands for and the principle it represents. They had the option of making these beads into necklaces, or they could be attached like key chains to their backpacks.

There are seven principles and seven days in a week, so one option is for parents to concentrate on one principle each day, talking about it briefly at dinnertime or bedtime,

perhaps mentioning a related item in the news. For example, when an Evangelical minister stands up and denounces Islam as an evil religion, ask the kids, Would a Unitarian say this? And if not, why not? It is this sort of dailiness that will help our children grow up knowing the principles the way Christians know the Lord's Prayer.

---

## Ritual Recipes

There is no minimum daily requirement of ritual prescribed by the USDA or child psychologists, but if I had to reduce ritual life to a formula, I'd give families three goals to meet:

First, research and experience suggest that families should have one solid ritual of connection daily, and I recommend they also plan a modest weekly family ritual.

Second, all major milestones, accomplishments, and relevant holidays deserve to be celebrated, leaving enormous leeway to individual families about which occasions they mark, and how.

Third, I suggest applying rituals as a corrective whenever there's a bumpy spot in the regular routine. Transitions are always tough for young children; substituting a fun or silly ritual for a ritual of tantrums and fussing can miraculously smooth over rough patches.

Daily rituals of connection don't have to take up much time and can take many forms. The important thing is that every family member gets to act or speak. Some families have breakfast together and compare their thoughts about the day ahead. Some perform a group hug or family cheer. Other families find it easier to connect after school each day, or at dinner or bedtime.

The Kyger family in Free Union, Virginia, saves its connection ritual for dinner. After a simple Quaker grace, during which family members briefly hold hands and pray silently, each person around the table has to share a new and good about their day, even the teenagers. Another family has a bedtime ritual called gratefuls and grumbles, where the children have to come up with one of each, but end with the positive note of something for which they are grateful.

Suzy Kellett, a divorced mother of quadruplets, had teatime with her kids, now grown, every evening around nine o'clock. The kids would stop doing homework, hang up the phone, and gather in the family room for twenty or thirty minutes. In addition to imbibing cinnamon herbal tea, the Kelletts were drinking in each other's moods and stories. All of us change continually, and such check-in circles allow us to witness one another's transformations, while also celebrating what stays constant in our connection.

Weekly rituals also vary widely, including weekly meetings or a designated family night. One family has a weekly pizza night at home, but they structure the meal to include family business. They may tell jokes and rate their favorite sports teams while eating pizza, but over dessert, they always discuss current family issues, anything from behavior concerns to vacation ideas. It's also fine if the weekly get-together is movie night in your family room. But in that case, it's even more important to build in a conversational give-and-take component. Saying please pass the popcorn doesn't qualify as a ritual of connection.

Some families have a meeting format, maybe half an hour that includes a review of everyone's schedule that week and a discussion of chores. To make it fun, this is also a good time to pay the kids their allowances or designate a family winner of the week based on attitude and accomplishments, and end with a special snack.

There is no Joy of Rituals cookbook, but after interviewing hundreds of families across the country and trying lots of rituals with my own family, I've developed some basic recipes. A satisfying and thorough ritual has three parts: It has a beginning, middle, and an end. Even a simple grace before supper has those elements: a nod or verbal cue that grace is to be said, the grace itself, and amen at the end. These are similar to the three stages anthropologists observe in tribal rites of passage: first comes preparation, then action (and often transformation, say from boyhood to manhood), and finally the stage of integration and celebration.

The reason you need some sort of beginning is that ritual is human life in capital letters: It needs to be punctuated, capitalized, elevated. Ritual requires intense focus, and a good ritual beginning gets the participants engaged. It tells people a ritual is starting, like the rising curtain before a theater performance.

A common way to signal a ritual's start is by sound: a verbal cue, or special music, or tapping a fork against the side of a glass. Visual cues work, too. If you think about a simple birthday celebration, the beginning is as basic as turning out the lights before presenting the cake. The action stage is when the child blows out candles and makes a wish while everybody sings Happy Birthday. In the final or celebration stage, cake is eaten and gifts opened.

Ritual beginnings make us aware that something special is about to happen, functioning like the Once upon a time of a fairy tale. But in order for the narrative of ritual to keep us absorbed, there must be something compelling to pull us along. These are a creative combination of dramatic elements--ritual words and actions, often accompanied by ritual food and ritual music. But special doesn't have to mean complicated. Your ritual food can be lemonade and crackers, and your music as simple as a child's drum or a bedtime lullaby.

A simple ritual doesn't have to include music plus food plus action plus words. It might have just one or two of those elements, but it becomes cherished through repetition, like families who develop elaborate hugs or handshakes for bedtime or good-byes.

The seed for a ritual's form grows directly from its purpose. That includes everything from holidays to problem-solving rituals. Figure out your purpose; then you can imagine creative ways to achieve it that suit your family.

The first year my son went trick-or-treating, I invented the Good Witch of Halloween. My purpose was this: I was afraid he'd want to eat that huge candy hoard and I wanted to find a fun reason for it to disappear. Since Max's birthday was two weeks later, I told him to put his plastic pumpkin of candy outside his bedroom door the night before he turned three (until then, he's only allowed one piece a day). The Good Witch of Halloween would come and take the candy for poor children and replace it with a small birthday gift, which he would find when he awoke. Not surprisingly, my son loves this ritual, and it achieves my goal.

For a Thanksgiving ritual, the purpose is to give thanks. But when it comes to narrowing down the millions of possible rituals for this, it's helpful to focus on another P--make it personal. Take something from your family's history or passions to create a ritual of thankfulness that will be much more meaningful than a generic ritual because it is specific to you.

One family of avid needle workers started a special tablecloth ritual for Thanksgiving: Every person at the table signs their name in pen on the cloth, and the family matriarch later embroiders over the signatures, a different color each year. Then there's the family whose ancestors nearly starved out west, surviving one bad year only on turnips; they include a turnip dish every Thanksgiving, thankful they have so much else to eat now.

But how does a parent blend Unitarian Universalist traditions into holidays? What does a Unitarian Universalist Thanksgiving look like? Or a Unitarian Universalist New Year's? One answer is that celebrating these holidays and other occasions within the community of our congregations will help our children absorb these shared beliefs. (I'll never forget saying to my son, They're going to kill me! I'm gonna be late to help at the tree-decorating open house at church, and my son replied, somewhat sternly, Mother, UUs would never kill anybody: they're much too nice for that!)

When it comes to New Year's specifically, I had an idea last year that I tried out on my Sunday school class. I talked about how solstice, Hanukkah, Advent, and Kwanzaa are all holidays that concentrate on light. I said that by doing good in the world, by trying to actually live such Unitarian Universalist principles as working for fairness and peace, we are giving our own light to the world. We can start a new year by making a commitment to add to the light in the world, and not the darkness.

Families could do this by having a candle-lighting ceremony on New Year's Eve, and each person lights a candle and promises to use her or his talents and energies to bring light to the world. One specific promise could be made that would further this goal, such as promising to help in a community park clean-up effort. In my class, I had each child make a small book with a candle on the front (a strip of felt glued to the cover, with a flame of gold glitter), and this was to be their personal "Book of Light for the year" and every Sunday, they could take it out and write down (or illustrate) a good deed they had done that week, however small. I don't think I followed up nearly enough to make this stick, but this is exactly the sort of thing families can do at home.

---

## Ritual Actions

The bigger and more ceremonial the occasion, the more elaborate the ritual, and the more attention must be devoted to the ritual's central action. The right action for a ritual is one that powerfully expresses the core emotional truth of the ceremony.

Think of the actions within a wedding, and the way in which the ceremony combines speaking with doing. It isn't just the vows that make us feel married, but also the action of placing rings on each other's fingers. The circle is a powerful symbol of eternity, and we are placing this physical object around a part of another person's body. Special clothing, elegant flowers, and a string quartet will add to the atmosphere, but this simple act is the emotional core of the ritual.

Sometimes there is no ritual pattern to follow. I decided, for example, to invent a ritual when I changed my name to that of my husband. To me, this seemed to require a sort of baptism. I decided I needed to submerge myself and asked my friend if I could dive into her swimming pool before witnesses--in a dress. I spoke to the group before I dived, and afterwards, we celebrated with cake and champagne. I changed into a new t-shirt, on which was painted my new name.

I've thought a lot about what constitutes a major milestone in a child's life, and how those can be marked. One way, borrowed from tribal rites of passage, is to create a threshold, an actual barrier that the child must pass through as he or she acts out this important transition. There are lots of ways this can be done, including having them break through tissue paper that's been taped across a doorway. I know a private preschool where the kids graduate by walking across a bridge made of wooden blocks; they are literally embraced by the kindergartners waiting on the other side.

Simple actions become profound when placed in a context of ritual focus and meaning. When I wanted to create a womanhood ritual for my niece on her thirteenth birthday, it was mostly about the words I spoke, but they carried extra weight because we were standing inside a circle of sparklers on the beach, in the dark.

If you can't think of a ritual action, a great place to start is by mentally going through the list of four elements (earth, air, fire, and water), and asking if any of them fit the core emotional truth. A ritual of remembrance, for example, could include lighting a candle (fire) and talking about a deceased pet or person, or planting a tree for them (earth). If a ritual is about letting go, then the action of burying something in the ground is a possibility, or releasing something to the wind or water.

Just remember this: Start with your ritual's purpose and let that guide you to a central ritual action. Your best chance of success is to keep it simple and to be playful. If you set a tone of having fun, of everybody having their say, then family members won't feel awkward or too embarrassed to participate.

When starting a new ritual, it's vital to announce your plans in advance, so everybody knows what's coming. Kids love routine, so the first time you try a new ritual, they might be wary, and adjustments may be needed before the family embraces this new tradition wholeheartedly. (And family rituals often need tweaking over the years, giving kids a bigger role as they age.)

As I said earlier, bracket your central ritual action with a beginning and an end. It could be as simple as a declaration that it's time, or perhaps turning the lights off for a second, or lighting a candle. Possible endings include a simple hug, a short prayer, or treat food you all share.

Don't worry about finding good ideas for new traditions. There are hundreds of possibilities. You can adopt other families' rituals and celebrations just as they are, or use them as the germ of a new idea. Even if the resulting ritual doesn't turn out exactly as you hoped, you will have captured time and created memories as a family, together.

One extra bonus you should never forget: Every time you create a tradition or celebration with your children, you are giving them a template for creating the rituals they'll need all their lives. All I know is that so far, whenever my son creates a new ritual, it always echoes in the rhythm of his words this chant: We light this chalice to celebrate Unitarian Universalism. . . .<sup>□</sup>

---

*Excerpted with permission from* The Book of New Family Traditions: How to Create Great Rituals for Holidays and Everyday by Meg Cox (Running Press, 2003). Available from the UUA Bookstore; see link in sidebar.