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living

body + soul

DECEMBER 2005

Before there was written history, there were rituals. Our ancestors sought ways to understand their world, to live in harmony with its mysterious ebbs and flows. Without the Internet, book clubs, or 12-step programs, men and women created rituals to organize their communities and make sense of their lives. Most marked the rhythm of the seasons—the equinoxes and solstices—as well as rites of passage like birth, adulthood, marriage, parenthood, and death. Rituals gave our ancestors a sense of order, of comfort, of belonging. But mostly, notes New York City-based shaman and ritualist Donna Henes, they gave the understanding that everything was connected, and therefore sacred.

Today, in our too-fast, information-overloaded society, we've lost much of our connection to the earth, to spirit, to nature's cycles, to our own cycles. And yet, says interfaith minister Barbara Biziou, who has written two books on rituals, "we still need things to feed us, to ground us, to give us courage and connection. Rituals can give us a map."

"Good rituals are essential to our emotional, psychological, and spiritual health," adds British author and rituals expert Jane Alexander. "Psychotherapists since the days of Jung have recognized the power of symbol, of archetypes, of emotive ritual to cleanse the psyche and free the emotions. We need to rediscover this lost language."

Some scholars feel human beings lost our essential connection to nature when patriarchy replaced matriarchy as the dominant paradigm; others point to the rise of religions that are

not nature-based. Steven Farmer, Southern California-based author of *Sacred Ceremony* and a former psychotherapist, blames the light bulb. "Artificial light shifted the balance between dark and light, as well as the seasons," he says. "Our ancestors had great respect for the fire that had to be tended." When that fire went out, many believe, rituals died along with it. Maybe that's why many surviving rituals, from birthday cakes to the Jewish Sabbath, involve candles.

Rituals are not the same as habits. Brushing your teeth is a habit, explains Henes. By contrast, almost anything you do with an intention can become a ritual, if it helps you connect, release, heal, anchor, or honor some aspect of your life. A cup of tea after class with friends can be as powerful as a meditation under a full moon. It's all in the intention, and the doing.

To help reconnect us to the sacred aspects of our lives, we asked our three experts on the subject to share everyday rituals that they've created or practice. Henes is a ceremonialist whose books include *The Queen of Myself: Stepping Into Sovereignty in Midlife* and *The Moon Watcher's Companion*. Alexander is the author of 20 books on holistic living, including *Spirit of the Home: How to Make Your Home a Sanctuary*. Biziou, who lives in New York, is the author of *The Joy of Everyday Rituals: Spiritual Recipes to Celebrate Milestones, Ease Transitions, and Make Every Day Sacred* and *The Joy of Family Rituals: Recipes for Everyday Living*.