Sacred
Design Lab

Principles for Online Ritual Design

Amidst hardship, this is an unprecedented moment for extending the reach of ritual to online participation--crossing barriers of geography, generation, and time like never before. Here are five design principles that we've developed for our work at Sacred Design Lab, which we hope will support you in crafting and leading online rituals of your own. While far from exhaustive, these ideas can be applied to anything from funerals and weddings to birthday parties, holidays, and rites of passage.[1]

Make A Space

Set the scene for something special

Your real environment affects you and those you are virtually with. It impacts how you feel, even if much of it is off-screen. And as a leader, what you present to others on-screen helps to shape their experience as well.

To the extent that it's within your control, create a space with an atmosphere that will support your inner state and that of others. It might be somber, celebratory, reverent, or silly. Fill your surroundings with beauty and meaning for the occasion--whether that's through art, photographs, lighting, plants, toys, books, or furniture. You might adorn yourself in special clothing or jewelry for the ritual at hand.

And while you can't always control your outer environment--and may not have access to video to share it--do your best to prepare your inner environment before an online ritual. Set intentions and do any personal practices that will allow you to show up as fully as possible. Even a few deep breaths before you join the call can be a huge help.

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[1] NB: These principles support the design process rather than the technicalities of online gathering. For a more technical overview, we recommend Leading Groups Online by Jeanne Rewa and Daniel Hunter, which also provides some great high-level guidance on bringing people together virtually.

Note especially their ninth principal on p 13-14: Oppression is Compounded by Technology. The realities they describe, as to varying levels of access to and comfort with technology, will be very important to consider when designing and leading online ritual spaces.

Mark This Time

Beginnings and endings matter

Ritual creates a frame, a time out of time. Help participants to know that this special time has begun and when it has ended. When everyone is together, it should feel as though they've entered a magic circle.[2] Once the ritual is over, help the group to experience closure and release.

In an online environment, part of the magic comes from breathing life into virtual space. On our team, we often start with three breaths ("a breath for arriving, a breath for presence, a breath for community…"), and end with three blessings.[3] At a recent virtual Jewish women's circle, the leader lit a candle at the beginning, and all of us unmuted ourselves at the end to "blow it out," hearing each other's breath as the leader physically blew out the candle.[4]

Consistent beginnings and endings are also important if you're creating a ritual container that repeats over time. If I as a participant know that we always open and close with the same practice--be it singing, meditation, dancing, blowing kisses, bowing to each other, reciting a litany, reading a poem, saying a prayer, or hearing a piece of music--that practice accrues layers of meaning. Amidst instability, it provides assurance: when I come here, I know I can depend on this, even if everything else is changing.

Use Real Things

Give us something to hold onto

While they're gathered virtually, each person is embodied where they are. It can be all too easy to forget about everything below the shoulders, not to mention the five senses! Virtual events are not all about the screen. Online ritual is richer when each participant is having a real, sensory experience--along with everyone else.

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[2] See the work of experience designer Ida Benedetto for more on magic circles.
[3] With thanks to Katie Gordon of Nuns & Nones and Chris Chavez of Prime Produce.
[4] Visit At the Well, founded by Sarah Waxman, to learn about Virtual Well Circles.

Participants can light and extinguish candles, drape themselves in cloth, and pour and drink water.[5] Each person doing this in their own space, using candles and cloth and vessels that are meaningful to them, adds a personal, participatory element that is sometimes lost in more formal in-person settings. And there is even greater power in everyone doing it at once in different places, sharing symbolic action across distance.

At online b'nai mitzvah, people throw real candy.[6] In Zoom youth group, home scavenger hunt is the game of choice.[7] And online happy hour would be lost without the cocktail toast. Just remember that if you are incorporating real ritual objects, give folks a heads up in advance so they can come prepared.

Lean Into the New

Play to the strengths of this format

When adapting ritual from in-person to online, it can be tempting to dwell on what's lost. We fully recognize the loss--online events are not the same as in-person gatherings. However, for design purposes, we suggest a reframe: Think of online ritual as a different medium entirely. This isn't a less-good version of the "real world"--it's a new category of experience, and one that is only just being developed. You have an opportunity to create the traditions of the future!

While some things are lost in virtual space, many are gained. People can connect across vast distances, which includes individuals with limited mobility who could not otherwise participate. Unlike in shared physical experiences, the personal environment of each participant allows for greater control. For instance, at an online funeral, participants might mute themselves or turn off their video if they need privacy. Someone might hug a pillow to their chest. Perhaps someone's cat crawls into their lap, or their child comes in and out of the room. The mixture of personal space with collective experience is a real opportunity for innovation.

Similarly with group celebrations. A normally reticent singer might belt out lyrics to a group worship song because their sound is on mute. A shy dancer might join 100,000 others at an Instagram dance party and dance like no one's looking--because no one

[5] The Formation Project was our year-long experiment in spiritual community using online ritual.
[6] See "Becoming a Man, Virtually" in the New York Times.
[7] See more Zoom youth group games here.

can see.[8] Audio liturgy might be taken in while walking in nature.[9] The simultaneous intimacy and expansiveness of online ritual is just beginning to be explored.

Help Us Connect

Distance doesn't have to mean disconnection

In some cases--such as the group singing and dancing referenced above--virtual space can offer both shared experience and liberating anonymity. But what about deep connection? Is that really possible online?

Emphatically, YES. With a little guidance, compelling prompts, and creativity!

On Zoom and most video platforms, participants will be muted when in large groups. You can overcome the silence of the mute button through movement, by establishing shared gestures of greeting, affirmation, or gratitude. You can use the chat feature to allow participant conversation throughout, which would not be possible in person. And you can use breakout rooms to facilitate pair and small group conversations as well as intimate ritual experiences. For an online wedding, the couple might join one breakout room after another, receiving blessings from groups of family and friends all over the world. We have seen weekly online small groups prove transformative again and again.

In an era marked by social isolation--even before the pandemic--fostering and sustaining connection is perhaps the most important role of online ritual. Social and spiritual life can flourish on these platforms, if we apply ourselves to that creative task. While we will not always have enforced social distancing, let us take this opportunity to develop new tools for coming closer together.

You can access this guide and other materials in Sacred Design Lab's public Ritual Resources google folder. We welcome your thoughts at hello@sacred.design.

[8] Check out DJ D-Nice and his quarantine dance parties.
[9] Such as Pray As You Go from the Jesuits in Britain.