

Vigil for the Good Death

Presented by Jamie Michelle Waggoner

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Workshop Description: Death happens on multiple levels: in our personal lives, in our communities, and in that which is larger (on a global or existential scale). As it is not only a physical ending, we can also experience the death of relationships, careers, and outmoded ways of thinking, being, or doing — just to name a few types of death that may be encountered within a human lifespan. The Vigil for the Good Death is a sacred container, or ritual, that leans into the power of community to recognize and honor death on these multiple levels. After our ritual, participants will be invited to take this powerful magic back to their home communities, and provided with access to online resources that will help them host their own vigils online or in person.

Introductions

- Hello, I'm Jamie. My pronouns are she/her.
 - I'm an author, Pagan priestess, and unapologetic expert in things that make mortals fascinated and slightly nervous.
 - I've been a practicing witch for 25+ years.
 - I'm the author of *Hades: Myth, Magic and Modern Devotion* (Llewellyn, 2024), and contributor to *Witchology Magazine*, *Haunted Magazine*, *The Feminine Macabre*, and *The Rebis Tarot Journal*, among others. I write and teach from my home studio, located in Alabama, U.S.A., which is the ancestral land of the Mvskoke (Muscogee) people, the "People of One Fire" I offer honor and gratitude to the Mvskoke elders and their descendants, and I acknowledge and affirm their sovereignty on these lands.
- In our time together today, we're going to have...
 - A bit of informal introduction to our topic, followed by a ritual, and then some time for conversation wherein we can ask questions, and share our reactions and experiences with each other (if we choose).
 - Your consent is important: our ritual includes invocations to Hades, Makaria, and Melinoe. If you don't want to be in the presence of these particular deities, or you're not sure, you can access my speaker notes and resource materials later. No worries if you need to opt out at any time.
 - Please turn off any recording devices once our ritual begins.
 - And finally, take what makes sense to you, leave what doesn't. There are many ways to work the magic of the death priestx. These are just some of my thoughts and experiences.

What is the "Good Death"?

- What comes to mind when I mention the phrase, "the good death"?

- You may have heard of the Death Positive Movement, begun by a group called The Order of the Good Death (est. 2011). In their words, “The Order is about making death a part of your life. That means committing to staring down your death fears—whether it be your own death, the death of those you love, the pain of dying, the afterlife (or lack thereof), grief, corpses, bodily decomposition, or all of the above. Accepting that death itself is natural, but the death anxiety and terror of modern culture are not.”¹
- On social media, Hospice Nurse Julie and other content creators are demystifying what happens at the end of life, and are very much invested in this concept of the good death. “Death Doula” is also now a concept re-entering collective consciousness – even Nicole Kidman is training as a death doula.
- But...we know that not all deaths are “good”.
 - What if someone dies in a tragic accident, is a victim of war or genocide, or dies of suicide? Does that mean their deaths were not good?
 - How can we work with the concept of the “good death” without bypassing the very real structural inequalities that make it difficult, or impossible, for certain groups of people to have the type of death they desire for themselves and their loved ones?
- From my perspective, I believe this concept of the “good death” is tied to how the dead are honored and remembered, more so than what their transition from living to dying looked like. This is where I like to call on the daughters of Hades, Makaria and Melinoe, to help us better understand how to care for the dead.
- The Daughters of Hades: Makaria and Melinoe
 - The goddess Makaria is the embodiment of blessed death — when the soul is settled, happy, and at peace in the Underworld. Melinoe, on the other hand, is the goddess of unsettled ghosts and spirits, the restless dead, night terrors, and those who haunt the living because they are unable to cross over to the Underworld.
 - Reading: For Makaria and Melinoe—Hymns of the Good Death (*Hades*, pg. 156)
 - As contrasting opposites, Makaria and Melinoe together personify our responsibility to define the good death for ourselves, and invite us to take steps to ensure it for ourselves and others.
- Death happens on multiple levels: in our personal lives, in our communities, and in that which is larger (on a global or existential scale). As it is not only a physical ending, we can also experience the death of relationships, careers, and outmoded ways of thinking,

¹ Order of the Good Death, “Our Story,” accessed January 28, 2023, <https://www.orderofthegooddeath.com/our-story/>.

being, or doing — just to name a few types of death that may be encountered within a human lifespan.

- Personal Level
 - Relationships: How do I give romantic relationships, friendships, partnerships, jobs, and other interactions a good death? What do I need to feel a sense of closure for myself, regardless of what the other party may be willing or able to provide? Am I still grieving any relationships? How am I moving through any grief processes that may be ongoing?
 - Habits: How do I give outdated, undesired, or unnecessary habits and ways of thinking or being a good death? What feels like the right way to say goodbye? How can I compost them into fertile soil, ready for new growth?
- Community Level
 - Honoring our ancestors of blood and affinity
 - Honoring the other-than-human world that also experiences death
 - To live, we need a few critical things: fresh water, restful sleep, clean air, and nourishing food. Dead and decaying matter—leaves, fungi, insects, animals, even humans—are forever composting into soil, which will in time grow the plants we harvest for our tables, or feed to the animals that we slaughter for food. Death is truly among us, every moment of the day, whether we are cognizant of its presence or not. How do we honor these sacrifices?
 - Deforestation, extinction, and other natural crises
 - Supporting communities and groups who are greatly impacted by death
- That Which is Larger Level
 - How do we give a good death to white supremacy, colonization, capitalism and all forms of oppression? Are these things already haunting us, and if so, how can we propitiate their restless spirits?

Why do we need a Vigil for the Good Death?

- Based on the idea of how we might encounter and honor death on multiple levels, I created a nonsectarian Vigil for the Good Death that can be hosted in person or online using meeting host sites (such as Zoom).
- I led my first Vigil for the Good Death online in October 2021. Initially I thought, who the heck will show up to talk about death for two hours? But, as it turns out, many people. And they kept coming back month after month. It was readily apparent from the beginning that simply creating a sacred container for this type of discussion and sharing was so vital for people. Since that time, I have led the Vigil for the Good Death for groups large and small, in person, online, and in

hybrid scenarios for larger events.

- This vigil is a ritual for honoring the good death on multiple levels: for ourselves, our loved ones and communities, and that which is greater (such as systems, ideas, cultural mores, etc.). The example I am sharing with you (download via Sched) is not aligned with any religious sect or ideology and purposefully utilizes inclusive language, however, I am going to make it more “witchy” for us today.
- Within this sacred container, participants enter “time outside of time” — coming together as an intentional collective, we are able to enact change and transformation on many levels, over vast distances, and outside of the confines of linear time. Participants are invited to gently lean into the circle, to be open to what may be here for them in the present moment. This might mean leaning into connection, solace, catharsis, and/or discomfort.
- During three rounds of sharing, participants are invited to take turns speaking aloud what needs to be honored, acknowledged, and/or released: examples may include names or memories of ones who have passed; personal habits or relationships to be released and composted; systems we wish to dismantle.
 - No participant is required to speak aloud if they do not wish to, however, everyone is given a chance. The role of sacred witnessing is honored and crosstalk is discouraged. Participants are reminded to bear in mind that the experiences and emotions of others may be different from their own. We gather in support and solidarity.
 - After each round of sharing, the group sings a simple chant, directing their energies into a central cauldron (or other vessel) as an offering for the dead. This also helps participants integrate what they have shared and witnessed between each round. The cauldron is filled with a liquid condenser aligned with rest and remembrance. After the ritual, the condenser is poured into the earth in the spirit of propitiation.
 - What’s on our altar?
 - Condenser infusion: Balm of Gilead, Linden Blossoms (for Makaria), Quince Blossoms (for Melinoe), and Thyme (for courage and easement).
 - Vulture and owl feathers for allyship
 - Other items (if applicable) — participants can also place things on the altar if they wish

- Chant: “There is a Heart in Everything” by [Fern Maddie](#)

*There is a heart in everything
Now they sing, now they sing
There is a heart in everything
Now they sing the silence*

*Earth and root, rock and bone
Sing us home, sing us home
There is a heart in everything
Now they sing the silence*

- Remember, you can take a break if you need to. Let’s wiggle and get started!

The Vigil for the Good Death

1. Purification and Centering: Invite participants to share a few breaths with you to purify and center themselves in the present moment. Ring a gentle chime and state: “We begin.”
2. Circle Casting and Warding: In the spirit of inclusivity, this very simple circle casting and warding calls upon elements of the physical landscape:
 - a. East: “I call to the east, across the vast Atlantic ocean, to the direction of dawn, the land of my ancestors. I ask for the east to witness and watch over us as we perform these rites.”
 - b. South: “I call to the south, to the need-fires of protest, justice, and liberation that roar passionately in these lands. We reclaim the flames to fuel our fight. I ask for the south to witness and watch over us as we perform these rites.”
 - c. West: “I call to the west, to the lakes, rivers, and waterways — among them the Cahoosa, Cahaba, and Black Warrior — to the direction of the setting sun. I ask for the west to witness and watch over us as we perform these rites.”
 - d. North: “I call to the north, to the valleys, forests, and mountains that stretch up this continent, including the ancient Appalachian mountains that reach into these lands. I ask for the north to witness and watch over us as we perform these rites.”
 - e. Center: “I call to the center, to the deep heartbeat of the earth, that which is echoed by our own heartbeats. I ask for the center to witness and watch over us

as we perform these rites.”

3. Welcome: “Welcome to our Vigil for the Good Death. Rituals like these are an important part of community care and grief activism. Thank you for your presence here today.”
Take a few moments at this time to orient participants:
 - a. Set expectations with regard to consent, feedback, and crosstalk: “You are invited to gently lean into the circle, to be open to what may be here for you in the present moment. This might mean leaning into connection, solace, catharsis, and/or discomfort. We all have different experiences.”
 - b. Remind participants that every step of the vigil is an invitation, not a requirement. No one is required to speak if they do not wish to do so. Explain how participants can take a break or leave/re-enter the circle if they need to do so.
4. Consecration: “This vigil is a sacred container for honoring the good death on multiple levels: for ourselves, our loved ones and communities, and that which is greater. In renewing the tradition of honoring a good death, we ensure that the dead (embodied or conceptual) rest easy and do not return to haunt us. Tonight you are invited to bring what needs to be honored, acknowledged, and/or released.”
5. Invocations: “We welcome the Unseen Ones around us to these rites — the spirits, guides, ancestors, and others who are also in attendance. We light this flame as a symbolic hearthfire of our hospitality and gratitude.”
 - a. Hades, Makaria, and Melinoe
 - i. Reading: Hymn to the Unseen One (*Hades*, pg. 25)
 - b. Plant and Animal Allies
 - i. Balm of Gilead, Linden, Quince Blossom, Thyme
 - ii. Owl and Vulture
 - c. All Other Unseen Ones
6. Vigil Part One: For our communities and loved ones. Participants are invited to take turns speaking names, memories, etc. aloud. Prompt the group to begin: “What is on your heart today? What desires to be spoken or remembered?”
 - a. Choose a very simple chant for the group to sing together as they direct their energies and emotion toward the waters of the cauldron. Explain that these charged waters will become an offering for the dead once the vigil is complete.
 - b. Sing the chant at least three times, and then encourage the group to be together in silence for a few breaths — pause, rest, integrate. To signal that the next part of the vigil is to begin, gently ring a chime.

7. Vigil Part Two: For that which is greater. Again, participants are invited to take turns speaking aloud. You can prompt the group to begin: “What is on your heart today when it comes to that which is greater? What desires to be spoken or grieved?”
 - a. Chant together, directing energies and emotion toward the waters of the cauldron. This can be the same chant for all three parts of the vigil, or you can pick a specific chant for each part.
 - b. Sing the chant at least three times, and then encourage the group to be together in silence for a few breaths — pause, rest, integrate. To signal that the next part of the vigil is to begin, gently ring a chime.
8. Vigil Part Three: For ourselves. Once more, participants are invited to take turns speaking aloud. You can prompt the group to begin: “What is on your heart today with regard to your own transitions and struggles? What desires to be spoken, released, or composted so that you can move forward?”
 - a. Chant together, directing energies and emotion toward the waters of the cauldron.
 - b. Sing the chant at least three times, and then encourage the group to be together in silence for a few breaths — pause, rest, integrate. To signal that the next part of the vigil is to begin, gently ring a chime.
9. Valediction: “Forsythia” from *Love Notes from the Hollow Tree* by [Jarod K. Anderson](#)

*As forsythia grows tall,
its branches bend beneath their own weight,
bowing to the ground in arches of yellow flowers.*

*Wherever they touch the earth,
the branches root again and send up new shoots,
stitching gold across the landscape.*

*Some new kinds of knowledge shift our center of gravity,
staggering us,
bending us low beneath the burden.*

*If you think of your worldview as a stone tower,
this shift is a cataclysm of splintered rock.*

*If your worldview is forsythia,
then every startling truth that bends you low becomes a new connection to the earth,
a new way to stand,
an invitation to grow.*

*We live in a time of strong wind and sudden pressure.
It is not an age for towers.*

It's an age for stubborn flowers.

10. Devocation: Offer gratitude to the allies and Unseen Ones that gathered today...
 - a. Hades, Makaria, and Melinoe
 - b. Plant and Animal Allies
 - i. Balm of Gilead, Linden, Quince Blossom, Thyme
 - ii. Owl and Vulture
 - c. All Other Unseen Ones

11. Release of Wards: Release the wards by thanking and bidding farewell to them in the opposite order that they were called upon:
 - a. Center: Deep heartbeat of the Earth, echoed by our own heartbeats
 - b. North: To the valleys, forests, and mountains that stretch up this continent
 - c. West: Toward the lakes, rivers and waterways, and setting sun
 - d. South: The need-fires of protest, justice, and liberation
 - e. East: Across the vast ocean, to the dawn, and the land of my ancestors

12. Release of the Circle
 - Chime: "It is done."

Group Sharing and Conversation Time

- Would anyone like to share their reactions and/or experiences from our shared vigil?
- What other questions do you have for me?
 - If you're planning your own vigil, let me know! I will be happy to answer your questions and attend if I am able.

How to Connect with Me

- Purchase my books:
 - *Hades: Myth, Magic and Modern Devotion*
 - Watch for *One Foot in the Underworld* (tentative title) coming soon!
- Website: jamiewaggoner.com
 - Sign up for my email list to be notified of all of my upcoming events
 - Mystic South: July 17–19, 2026 in Atlanta, GA
 - Underworld Rising Retreat: October 15–19, 2026 in North Georgia
 - River Styx Book Club 2027 is already enrolling! Check out the details: <https://jamiewaggoner.ticketspice.com/river-styx-book-club-winter-2027>
- Way of the Weaver: wayoftheweaver.com
 - Offering "radically enchanted" classes and events that weave together the threads of magical study, justice and community.
 - Check out our Way of the Weaver podcast! We post two episodes each month.

- [Weaver Camp](#) and [Spider Threads](#) are enrolling now
 - Weaver Camp is June 25–28, 2026 near Worcester, VT
- Sign up for my newsletter to be notified when we open registration for our Winter 2027 online module – a three month deep dive into trance journey!
- Socials: @jmwaggoner on Instagram, Facebook, YouTube

Gratitude and Grounding

- “Butterfly Hum and Hug” grounding (credit: Nkem Ndefo)
- Extinguish candle
- Thank y’all for your time and attention today!
- Thank you to the SassyCon organizers and volunteers!