

Vigil for the Good Death

A Community Container for Grief | Jamie Waggoner

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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.). It is not aligned with any religious sect or ideology and purposefully utilizes inclusive language. 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.

Here is an example Vigil for the Good Death that you can customize for your own use. Feel free to add more ritual elements to this outline if you desire, or to alter the wording or form of any part to suit your preferences. For the sake of good ritual hygiene and etiquette, however, do not skip the purification, circle casting and warding, welcome, consecration, words of gratitude and farewell, or releasing steps — and if you choose to invoke any Unseen Ones, be sure to also thank and wish them farewell.

Some considerations as you prepare:

- You may want to have a small chime or bell to ring at the beginning of the vigil, as well as in between each round of sharing, and at the end. Feelings generated during this vigil can be deep and possibly disorienting; the sound of a gentle chime at regular intervals helps bring participants back to the present moment.
- Your altar setup can vary according to your venue and desire, however, you will need a cauldron or other vessel of water for the vigil.
- If you are facilitating the vigil in person, be a caring host by having tissues, water, and simple grounding snacks close at hand for those who may need them.
- Gently set expectations by reminding participants not to offer comfort (physical or verbal) or any type of feedback without consent. This can be hard to remember in a situation where we want to comfort someone in distress, but asking for consent is vital to maintaining a space where all participants can feel safe to express vulnerability.
- This vigil should not be recorded or photographed. It exists simply in the moment.

The basic outline:

1. Purification: Purify the room where your vigil will take place: fumigation, lustration, or sound/movement. Set up your altar and supplies. Next purify your altar, supplies and offerings, yourself, and participants. Check to make sure you have all the materials needed to carry out each step of the vigil.
2. Centering: Invite participants to share a few breaths with you to center themselves in the present moment. Ring a gentle chime and state: “We begin.”
3. Circle Casting and Warding: In the spirit of inclusivity, this very simple circle casting and warding calls upon elements of the physical landscape. You can invite participants to turn with you to greet each direction. If you are facilitating the vigil online, try to use larger regional features (such as oceans, mountain ranges, etc.) and/or ask participants to call upon the landscape where they live as they greet the directions with you. For this example, I am calling to the landscape of my home in the southeastern United States:
 - 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.”
4. Welcome: Acknowledge and welcome the participants who have gathered for this vigil. Feel free to make this short and sweet, or more elaborate if you prefer. A simple welcome statement might sound like, “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. I like to also state: “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.
 - c. Point out the water station, tissues, doors, and any other relevant information participants may want to know in order to attend to their needs.
5. Consecration: Read aloud a statement of intention to consecrate this vigil. This may sound something like, “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.”
6. Invocation: This is the time to invoke or acknowledge any Unseen Ones and allies who gather with you for this vigil. It could sound something like this: “We welcome the Unseen Ones around us to these rites—the spirits, guides, ancestors, and others who are also in attendance. We also welcome our friends rose, thyme, and linden who have contributed their healing magic to the waters in our cauldron.”
7. Vigil Part One: For our communities and loved ones. Participants are invited to take turns speaking names, memories, etc. aloud. You can prompt the group to begin: “What is on your heart today? What desires to be spoken or remembered?”
 - a. There may be long pauses in between participants speaking, or there may be bursts of sharing. Try to monitor the group’s energy and feel into when this part of the vigil is complete. When you feel the time is right to move on, always ask once more if anyone has a final share.
 - b. 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.
 - c. 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 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. Monitor the group’s energy and feel into when this part of the vigil is complete. When you feel the time is right to move on, remember to ask once more if anyone has a final share.
 - b. 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.
 - c. 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. 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. Monitor the group’s energy and feel into when this part of the vigil is complete. When you feel the time is right to move on, remember to ask once more if anyone has a final share.
 - b. Chant together, directing energies and emotion toward the waters of the cauldron.
 - c. 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.
10. Valediction: Select a poem or nonsectarian prayer to read aloud to provide a sense of closure as the vigil concludes.
11. Devocation: Offer gratitude to the allies and Unseen Ones that gathered with the group today. This can be very simple, such as: “Unseen Ones, and rose, thyme, and linden, we thank you for your presence today and bid you farewell.”
12. Release of Circle and Wards: Release the circle and its wards by thanking and bidding farewell to them in the opposite order that they were called upon: center, north, west, south, and east. Ring the chime one final time and announce: “It is done.”

If space and time permits, offering participants a grounding exercise after the vigil is highly recommended. You can also invite participants to have a bit of food and drinks (non-alcoholic), and enjoy a little bit of social time together, before everyone disperses. The last

thing you need to do as the facilitator is to offer the waters of the cauldron to the dead. You can do this anywhere out of doors, such as in a garden or at the base of a tree, or you can even transport the cauldron to a cemetery to make the offering. Speak a few words of respect as you pour the waters on the earth.

About the author: Jamie Waggoner is an author, Pagan priestess, and witch. She is the author of *Hades: Myth, Magic and Modern Devotion*, and contributor to *Witchology Magazine*, *Haunted Magazine*, *The Rebis* tarot journal, and *The Feminine Macabre*, among others. Jamie is also a cofounder and teacher for [Way of the Weaver](#), an inclusive program of magical study, social justice, and community building. Learn more at jamiewaggoner.com or follow @jmwaggoner on social media.