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In the ancient Maori culture of New Zealand, the haka is a ritual dance that was originally created as a war ritual to gather strength and unity on the battlefield. Over time, it has evolved to be performed by men and women of all ages at major moments for the “celebration of life”—weddings, funerals, milestone birthdays, welcoming honored guests, welcoming a child. The haka is an incredibly physical ritual with guttural utterances and wild gesticulations of the body parts and tongue. It has been said of the haka that during the ritual, the body becomes a symphony as the stomps, slaps, shouts, and grunts outwardly express the emotions of the occasion. The purpose of the dance is both a display of unity and for the body and face to reflect the depth of the body’s inner dimensions.

Young Maori people learn versions of the Haka as a part of their tribal family traditions, but most New Zealanders learn them as a part of their school curriculums. Last Friday, when two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand were violently attacked, spontaneous Haka dances broke out on the streets and in schools. On Monday, a group of more than a thousand students—Maori and white, Catholic and Muslim-- gathered in a park near one of the mosques to perform their high school's haka, to grieve for two students who were killed in the attacks.

Komene Kururangi is a lecturer in indigenous studies at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch. In a [recent interview](#) about the haka performances in response to the attacks, he said: “When you roll the eyes back, and you poke your tongue out, you can show your empathy, but you can also definitely show your frustration, and your anger towards this vile, cruel act of terrorism through haka. Venting their frustration, venting their anger towards the act, but also, in the same vein, sending their sympathy and their emotion towards the people who passed away.”

Donna Hall, a member of the New Zealand Maori Council, also responded: "I am not all surprised to see this. It's a spiritual response to what has happened and it really is intended to tap the spiritual depth of people."

We need ritual to help us cope with the constant changes in our lives and in the world. Ritual is all around us if we know how to look for it. Rituals draw people to participate in something together which is transforming and unifying. There are the ordinary changes of our lives which for most of us are difficult enough to manage. And then, piled on top of our own private struggles we encounter tragedies like Christchurch, where the scale of human suffering is too great for understanding.



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Rituals are opportunities for us to integrate our inner emotional landscape with the outer world. We need ritual not only to help us to mourn, but also to hold great joy and possibility. Rituals can be containers for us to safely explore the depths of meaning in our lives. Here in church, we use ritual every week to help us to make meaning together. When you look at it carefully, everything about church could be seen as a ritual. You come into the sanctuary, and are handed hymn books and an order of service. And you participate in simple rituals: singing hymns from our tradition, giving an offering in gratitude, and lighting candles. All of these elements work together to recalibrate us from week to week, creating a container for us to experience the depths of our life experiences. Through our rituals, we celebrate life's greatest joys and grieve life's deepest losses.

We are resourceful creatures who crave ritual. To create meaningful rituals on your own, ask yourself to which symbols, myths and traditions you are drawn. Think about the spiritual and the secular things you are already doing in your life that restore balance and harmony. You may be someone who has a ritual of preparing a meal every day and finds balance in preparing nourishing food for yourself and your family. You may be someone who cleans your desk, your home, or your car every week as a ritual, restoring order and balance to your work or home life. You may already have spiritual rituals which you are practicing, whether you gather at the full moons or honor the Jewish tradition of Shabbat.

At every time of year, there are stories that have ritual dimensions built into them from different religions and cultural traditions. In an [interview](#) several years ago, Joseph Campbell once said:

A ritual is the enactment of a myth. And, by participating in the ritual, you are participating in the myth. (...) by participating in the myth, you are being, as it were, put in accord with that wisdom, which is the wisdom that is inherent within you anyhow. Your consciousness is being re-minded of the wisdom of your own life.

Through sacred stories, we remember a dimension of our history and link our stories with the wisdom of our spiritual ancestors. Their strength becomes our strength, their resilience becomes ours. We have just passed the not only the Jewish season of Purim but also the Persian New Year, and we are about to enter into the season of Passover and Easter. These holidays are rich with opportunity for ritual gatherings and celebrations. But spiritual stories are only one place to begin.

If you are stumped on where to start, you can always start with the elements of air, fire, water, and earth. These are the building blocks of ritual. Use your intuition to see if you can



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find elements of ritual that already speak to you. Then try to explore that more. Perhaps you are drawn to bodies of water in times of big transition or change. Maybe you are drawn to light a candle. If you are a water person, create a ritual of taking yourself to the ocean regularly with a simple poem or prayer. If you are a fire person, try lighting a candle every night with some brief words of prayer or a simple "thank you." The possibilities are endless. I encourage you to get creative and playful with making your own rituals. Bring your family into your rituals and make ritual together. To close, I share words from author Elizabeth Gilbert:

We do spiritual ceremonies as human beings in order to create a safe resting place for our most complicated feelings of joy or trauma, so that we don't have to haul those feelings around with us forever, weighing us down. We all need such places of ritual safekeeping. And I do believe that if your culture or tradition doesn't have the specific ritual you are craving, then you are absolutely permitted to make up a ceremony of your own devising, fixing your own broken-down emotional systems with with all the do-it-yourself resourcefulness of a generous plumber/poet (Eat, Pray, Love.)

The incredible challenges of our lives and our world demand from us great strength of mind, body, and spirit. Let us come together as one people, drawing courage from the wisdom of our rituals to hold us in times of joy and of sorrow.