

ELEMENTS OF CEREMONY:

THE WHAT AND WHY OF CEREMONY

WHAT THIS HANDOUT IS ABOUT

This handout offers thoughts on what *ceremonies* are about, highlighting common elements of ceremony that you might want to include in your own

1. WHAT IS CEREMONY?

Ceremony has been an important part of human life throughout recorded history. A ceremony usually marks an important point in someone's life, perhaps a transition into a new phase of life (a **rite of passage**), a celebration of a commitment to each other in relationship (as in the case of a wedding), or to help a person to process the change that they are passing through, often involving to remember, commit or let go.

A ceremony causes those who take part in it to stop for a short while and reflect on what they are marking and, when relevant, to commit themselves to and better prepare themselves for the steps they will take for the life they will lead after. This change can happen at a deep unconscious level, as well as with what's being brought to mind and what emotions are being raised on the surface. In this sense, there is often something primordial about ceremony, tapping into a deep instinct and connecting all the people who take part in it in a very natural way.

Ceremonies may be secular, but usually involve acknowledging that a higher power gives guidance and blessing (asking for favour and protection). Interfaith ceremonies do make such an acknowledgement. An interfaith ceremony allows people of many different faiths, those having differing notions ways of expressing their spirituality, and those who are agnostic to share in a way that is meaningful for all.

2. WHERE TO HOLD A CEREMONY?

There are no special requirements for a venue, other than the ability to comfortably hold the people who are taking part in or who are otherwise invited to the ceremony. Public buildings or open spaces, family homes, hospices, cruise ships, beaches, hotels and gardens are all possibilities. The minister will (usually privately) bless the chosen place to be a positive place and a sacred space before the start of the ceremony.

Note: In many countries, the legal part of a wedding (registering the marriage) *does* need to take place in a place that is specifically licensed for that purpose, although the celebration ceremony can take place anywhere, most likely at another time.

3. SOME COMMON ELEMENTS OF CEREMONY?

Common elements of a ceremony are shown in the picture overleaf (this is for a baby blessing ceremony, but the same elements apply for a marriage ceremony too).

Some or all of the elements depicted will normally be present in a ceremony, although these don't have to be orchestrated in a formal or very structured way (some of the most meaningful ceremonies are quite informal and unconventional in nature). Which are relevant and most meaningful for you is what matters. Every ceremony is unique – it is this uniqueness that marks out a 'ceremony' from a regularly repeated 'service'.

Welcome

A simple introduction and reminder of why we have come together, usually saying a little about how the ceremony will be organised and expressing the intention or purpose for the gathering.

Invocation

Here, we are remembering that the place for our ceremony is a special or sacred space, and (for those who believe in a God or higher power of any kind), welcome the God of our understanding to be with us through the ceremony and to hear our promises and prayers. For the minister and possibly many present, the presence of 'the Divine' and calling on their/its help and blessing, is very important. For those who don't have a belief in a greater power, they may wish to connect with whatever they see to be their true self, the core of their being.

Address

The minister may choose a brief reading, story or offer thoughts of their own to help bring home what the true purpose of the ceremony is about. The intention is to help those gathered to reflect on what is happening and to inspire them, especially if they have a role to play in supporting or are the person (people) for whom the ceremony is designed. The address may often be very personalized.

Arriving and leaving from the ceremony

It's usually wise to allow a few moments to arrive at a ceremony, giving a chance to settle and detach mentally from the normal routines of the day. Similarly, following a very meaningful and important ceremony, most people prefer not to leave at the end of a ceremony too abruptly, allowing an opportunity too to greet other gatherers if they wish to. Light background music might be played at these times to help create a welcoming atmosphere.

Music

Songs or other music can help engage and unite the people gathered, inspire or speak directly to the heart. It can minister, uplift and touch no less powerfully than actions or spoken words. Music also helps in creating the special space, also adding to a welcoming atmosphere at the start and a sense of continuing spirit at the end of the ceremony. Music selections will be chosen carefully for the ceremony, usually by the person (people) being celebrated or their guardians.

Prayers

Prayers are simply 'talking to God' or to the universe, consciences of ourselves and others or simply to speak out a deep desire or will in ourselves or for others (for those who don't believe in a greater power), willing an intention to come to be.

Commitments

Many ceremonies involving making promises, either by the person or people for whom the ceremony is for (e.g. a wedding vow), or by others who will support them (e.g. the new parents of an adopted child). These are spoken publicly, and (for believers), before the God of their understanding. As such, they are seriously intended promises that have usually previously been carefully thought through.

Symbolic actions

Items used as symbols can help us focus or remember something that's meant to be marked by the ceremony. Such impressions can be especially powerful if they are accompanied by some simple ritual or action, also helping a person to process internally what the ceremony is about and the change it might represent for them. For example, lighting a candle might represent welcoming a new light or someone special into someone's life; a passing on of a gift might symbolize a passing on of wisdom or support for a new path a person is setting out upon; anointing a baby's head symbolises protection; the burning of incense might be intended to represent a pleasant or comforting sensation. Along with commitments, the rituals played out may often be the 'key part' of the ceremony – a significant aspect that most other parts build up to.

Blessing

A heart-felt request to the Divine of our understanding to protect, give strength and shine light on the path of the person (or people) being blessed. The blessing takes the form of a prayer; though the minister usually speaks directly to the person being blessed. Some way of symbolising the depth of intention in the prayer and marking the moment for the person being blessed normally accompanies the spoken blessing, e.g. laying on hands, blessing with water or anointing with oil.

The idea of anointing with oil as a symbol of blessing and protection stems from a practice observed by shepherds, who used to pour a little oil onto their sheep's head to avoid insects nesting there and causing distress for the sheep. Clear flowing water represents rejuvenation, refreshing or renewing.

Arrival music, as guests are gathering: Berceuse / Dolly Suite: I (chosen by parents).

1. Welcome

- Intention of the ceremony, why we have come together today: We come to this beautiful place to welcome this beautiful new baby. We are here to show [baby's name] that we love him/her and to offer our promise to keep him/her safe, to love and guide him/her...*
- Invitation for the God of our understanding to embrace us and be at our centre: For those of you who can call upon a God of your understanding, I ask you now to join me in welcoming The Divine to be with us all right now...*
- Minister speaks directly to the baby: [Baby's name], you are very welcome here, little one. Everyone here wants you to know that you are cherished and loved...*

2. Family's welcome and commitments

- Minister invites grandparents to show their commitment to the baby. (Turning to them.) Grandmas and grandpas, please stand.*
Grandparents say: Dearest [baby's name], we, your grannies and grandpas, promise to always stand by you and your mum and dad, to support, teach, care for and protect you...
- Minister invites godparents to show their commitment to the baby: Now it's the turn of 'uncle/taunty [godparents' names], your new godparents, to stand up and say 'hello'...*
Godparents say: Dearest [baby's name], we, your godparents, the people that your mum and dad have chosen to help watch over you in supporting the unbreakable circle of love that they wish for you, promise to always stand by you...
- Minister invites parents to show their commitment to the baby (parents repeat each line after minister): Mum and dad, we haven't forgotten you... (One parent embraces or cradles the child, whilst the other holds the words to be repeated).*
Minister: Dearest [baby's name], we, your mum and dad, love you more than you will ever know...
Parents repeat: Dearest [baby's name], we, your mum and dad, love you more than you will ever know...
Minister: You are our deep joy, a precious miracle, our world...
Parents repeat: You are our deep joy, a precious miracle, our world...
All who can stand, except parents.
- Prayer for parents and helpers: Almighty Creator, Great Spirit, we ask that you will always guide the parents, grandparents and godparents of [baby's name]...*
- Minister invites congregation to sit.*

3. Reflection

- Reflection (brief address): On the gift of new life and the promise of a new life ahead...*

4. Anointing and naming

- Anointing (optional; addressed directly to the baby): [Baby's name], we now come to mark this special moment by placing a little oil on the crown of your head, so that you might know that you are special and blessed...*
- Naming: Now, your parents will let you know the name that they have chosen for you...*
- Parents: We offer you this, your precious name [full name], with our love.*
- Blessing: [Baby's full name], as you are a gift for us, we offer this, your name, as a gift for you...*
- Moment of silence to reflect on the beauty and miracle of [baby's name].*

5. Blessing and Closing

- Reading (poem)*
- A blessing for the gathered congregation, as we end our time together today: May our hearts be filled with light and love...*

Closing music, as guests prepare to leave: J. S. Bach / The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book II (chosen by parents).

Poems and readings

Few things can capture the essence of a thought or an emotion like a well-chosen poem or reading. These can help inspire reflection, appreciation and respect. If they feel able and wish to, family members or friends of the person or people for whom the ceremony is designed, or they themselves, might wish to choose and read a brief text.

Silence

Periods of silence in times when there is nothing else to do and nowhere else to go are often all-too rare moments in our lives. Silence allows time for words to sink in, for thoughts to find a link with feeling, and provides space for reflection.