The background is a solid reddish-brown color. A central white rectangular box contains the title and author information. Surrounding this box are several stylized illustrations of hands performing different actions: a hand holds a black key at the top left; a hand holds a yellow circular object with a cross-like symbol at the top center; a hand holds a blue and white striped cup at the top right; a hand holds a small photograph of a group of people at the middle left; a hand holds a blue and white striped cup with a slice of cake on a saucer at the middle right; a hand holds a yellow and blue dandelion-like flower at the bottom left; a hand holds a yellow and black geometric object at the bottom right; and two hands are shown exchanging a small yellow ring at the bottom center.

CRAFTING SECULAR RITUAL

A PRACTICAL GUIDE

Jeltje Gordon-Lennox
Foreword by Isabel Russo

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by the same author

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A Transdisciplinary Conversation

Edited by Jeltje Gordon-Lennox

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For my children Sushila and Jefferson

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FOREWORD

The need for ritual is innate. We need ritual to enable us to connect with our deepest thoughts and feelings, our nascent hopes and our debilitating fears. We need it to re-connect us to our changing bodies and to our changing relationships, to help us create a language that authentically articulates our experience of ourselves in the world, and to speak that language both to ourselves and to those closest to us. We need ritual to create the technicolour signposts on our self-crafted map, signalling where we have come from and where we are going.

In an increasingly frantic world, ritual gives us punctuation. It gives us an essential pause that says:

Hey. Stop for a moment. Breathe. This really matters.

Removing god from the heart of a ceremony, be it a funeral, a wedding or a naming, can still feel to many like a radical, bold and uncharted step. It creates a profoundly significant shift of focus and of purpose, as in each case the person who has died, the couple who are getting married, the baby who has been born, are put at the centre, at the heart of the ritualizing. At the same time the community of family and friends are invested with the responsibility of ‘bearing witness’, humanizing instead of, as was previously the case, deifying the experience. Crafting secular ritual is an intimate, challenging and profoundly rewarding act of creation.

The British Humanist Association (BHA) has been conducting non-religious ceremonies since 1896, but it has seen demand grow exponentially in the last decade as people have become more aware of the secular option and increasingly emboldened to make a choice that genuinely reflects their own belief system. More and more people who choose to live their life without religion are allowing themselves to embark on a genuine and sincerely felt journey of what ceremony really means to them, rather than acquiescing to the charade of what it should mean.

Over the last eight years, both as a humanist celebrant and in my role as Head of Ceremonies at the BHA, responsible for a network of over 300 celebrants, I have been involved in the development of non-religious ritual in Britain. This has given me a strong sense of the emerging secular rituals that I hope one day will be viewed as an acceptable and integral part of life, as our non-religious naming, wedding and funeral ceremonies are finally becoming.

I first met Jeltje Gordon-Lennox at a Celebrant Trainers' Symposium in Utrecht at a time when I was tired and raw from an unexpected loss in my personal life. Over the next two days we discussed and developed thoughts on the key elements of successful celebrant training and the essential components of ritual. With her encouragement, we also designed the first draft of a powerful and deeply personal 'Death of a Marriage' ceremony, which I carried out on my own four months later, at a place and a time that had heart and meaning to me.

From my own experience of ritual, as a participant as well as a celebrant creating it and conducting it, I share Jeltje's perspective that ritual is born of a deep need to articulate times of profound experience and transition, and that it is an essential part of what makes – and keeps – us human. Like Jeltje, I also firmly believe that meaningful ritual – that is, ritual that reflects the subject's belief system and the core elements that have meaning for them – makes for a psychologically healthier individual and by extension, for a substantially healthier society. I have heard innumerable accounts from people who attended 'traditional' religious funerals that left them alienated, frustrated and depressed because the platitudes offered were at best, irrelevant and at worst, an offensive contradiction to the values held by the person who had died. The complex process of recognition, acknowledgement and letting go of the deceased cannot take place at this type of funeral, and so the grieving process and subsequent healing process are stymied.

In writing this outstanding guide, Jeltje Gordon-Lennox not only states a watertight case for the significance of secular ritual, but also more importantly provides us with a set of finely honed crafting tools and a clarion clear explanation of how to use them. She thereby charges

us with the ability to carve for ourselves our very own profound and contemporary rituals, whoever we are, and wherever we are.

While Jeltje's voice is that of a highly skilled artisan, her academic's eye works alongside her practitioner's heart to deliver a comprehensive and compassionate toolbox with historical, biological, psychological and even neurological context. As we read, a powerful apprenticeship takes place and we are generously provided with excavating, creating and planning tools for each of the major birth, marriage and death rituals.

In addition, we are equipped with case studies and suggestions for the new rituals that are emerging, be they civic or deeply private, as taboos are addressed and the need for newly articulated signposts is uncovered.

Jeltje's extensive work as a psychotherapist, together with the 35 years she has spent presiding over both religious and secular rituals, and her keen knowledge of world religions and of ritual history, mean that she is able to bring a uniquely broad canvas of experience and perspective to this work.

Crafting Secular Ritual is a landmark book. I am delighted to be a part of this fascinating and necessary conversation, and even more delighted that, with this book, so many more people will be enabled to actively participate in the life-altering and life-affirming creation of meaningful ritual.

*Isabel Russo, Head of Ceremonies, British Humanist Association
London, May 2016*

PREFACE

My first non-religious wedding ceremony was created for my sister and her husband in 2000. The couple upped the ante by combining it with a naming ceremony for their newborn daughter and honouring their Jewish and Christian cultures. I was flattered by their request and stimulated by the challenge. Nonetheless, I saw it as a one-off event: this kind of wedding was for trendy New Yorkers; it was unheard of in Europe. As we prepared their ceremony, I realized that – trendy or not – this was exactly what I was being asked to do in my parish in Switzerland. The situation put me wise to a major paradigm shift¹ in contemporary society. I stood on one side with the respectable clergy of religious institutions who proposed traditional rites; on the other were growing lines of people who wanted to celebrate the transitions of their lives without these religious trappings.

In the parish, I prepared funerals for atheist grandmothers whose family cried: ‘We have to do something! She wasn’t a dog!’ I did weddings for young couples wanting ‘a nice ceremony’ with no references to god or religion, and baptisms for children who would never again cross the threshold of a church. Touched by these people’s unmet needs for fitting ceremony, I spent a year preparing, and then resigned from my job. This decision marked the beginning of an intense period. For more than ten years I kept my head down – literally and figuratively – as I put an untried professional activity into place while caring for our young children and following my husband’s music career. There was little time to wonder about what others were doing elsewhere, let alone muck about with theory.

Early on, a British couple working in Geneva contacted me to do their wedding ceremony. They explained that although they would not have

1 Scientist Thomas Kuhn popularized the concept of ‘paradigm shift’ over 50 years ago, arguing that scientific advancement is not evolutionary, but a ‘series of peaceful interludes punctuated by intellectually violent revolutions.’ During these revolutions ‘one conceptual world view is replaced by another’ (1996 [1962], p.10).

mind a church wedding, they did not want to offend religious friends who knew full well that the couple were not practising Christians. Shortly after that, a couple from Colorado called, asking me to help them with their wedding ceremony in Paris. This was a second marriage for both of them. As they moved into their late thirties, they observed that their needs had changed. They were less interested in tradition than in a ceremony that authentically marked their mature relationship and commitment. A recent death in the family made it a poor time for a big celebration, so their friends and family organized small receptions for them in four different states. Thanks to the internet, we crafted a ceremony that suited their need for intimacy and adventure in a quiet corner of a public park. After a champagne toast, the photographer and I accompanied the couple to the most famous sites in Paris for their wedding shoot. The newly-weds were applauded at each stop by busloads of tourists and Parisian well-wishers. Yet another couple who got engaged on a pier rented a holiday home near that spot so they could have a wedding ceremony on the lawn overlooking the lake. A group of buskers who impressed them was hired to play for the bride's arrival in a motorboat driven by her father. Two years later, they asked me to craft a naming ceremony for their daughter.

While I enjoy the challenges of wedding and naming ceremonies, I feel truly useful when I do funerals. From the first, I was called in to accompany people who lost loved ones under the most trying of circumstances: murder, suicide and the sudden death of a child. As with weddings, the ceremony is only the visible tip of the iceberg. The important work of accompaniment goes on behind the scenes. On top of the loss, tiny fissures in family relationships may burst open in an untimely manner with the volatile pressure of sorrow and old, unattended grief. Time and tempers are often short. Putting together a funeral outside traditional religious structures is a real challenge. A meaningful funeral ceremony faithfully reflects the deceased's values, life and relationships. In the first days after a death, few mourners feel ready to put words to their relationship with their loved one. Our culture is not geared to letting people emerge at their own rate from the shock of death and loss. Too often the bereaved

feel pushed into making decisions designed to ‘get the funeral out of the way’ so that they can ‘move on’. Even when a death is expected, mourners may need days or even a week or two to feel ready to work together on the funeral ceremony. When the bereaved can take the time they need to craft a fitting ceremony, they usually find the process of expressing their joy and sadness in a ceremonial setting remarkably healing.

As I accompanied people through their lifecycle events in non-religious settings, I realized that my own ritual identity had changed. Ritual studies scholar Catherine Bell’s description of what happened to her resembles my experience:

Once I was a believer, thoughtfully and intimately committed, and then I was no longer one, with a different set of thoughts and emotions. While I was able to ‘explain’ my believing and my not-believing in the popular Freudian patois of the day, I wanted to assemble a fuller picture of what had happened and explore whether what was true for me might be useful for understanding others. (Bell no date)

While Bell wanted to know what had happened, I wanted to know what comes next and to explore whether what was true for me might be useful for others. Could I help others meet their need for non-religious ceremony? Instinctively, I moved towards using creativity and rigour to craft new ceremonies, and included the senses as an important part of the equation. At the request of a local publisher I wrote two manuals – in French. When my second book came out, Matthieu Smyth, Professor of Ritual Anthropology at the University of Strasbourg (France), contacted me to talk about my practical approach. Our dialogue – now in its fifth year – brought me out of isolation. I eagerly discovered fresh vocabulary such as ‘emerging ritual’, and explored the myriad of fields in ‘ritual studies’, from psychology to art, performance and neuroscience, but I searched in vain for a practical take on the paradigm shift to *secular* ritualization.

Ritual practice is the rhyme and rhythm of society.

David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames (1998, p.270)²

My approach to the craft of secular ritual is based on more than 30 years of professional ritual practice in leadership roles within established religious institutions in North America and Europe, and enhanced by my role as an independent psychotherapist, secular celebrant and trainer. My model is influenced by my unique personal, linguistic and geographical vantage points. It is my hope that what works for me, my clients and the celebrants I have trained will be of use to others as they ritualize their life events.

This guide is intended as a simple hands-on approach to crafting secular ritual. It keeps the ritualmaker on course by concentrating on the essentials: Who or what is at the centre of this ceremony? What values do I want to convey? How can I transmit them simply and authentically? It should be adapted as needed to specific situations and contexts. Those who want recipes for ready-made ceremonies must look elsewhere. ‘Ritual is work, endless work. But, it is among the most important things that we humans do’ (Seligman *et al.* 2008, p.182).

If you are eager to get to work on a specific occasion, feel free to skip the more theoretical chapters in Part I. Part II is the heart of this handbook: it contains the guidelines to ritual design and materials as well as a practical toolbox that includes checklists to keep ritualmakers on course and free them up to fully experience the process and the ceremony. Part III applies these basic principles and tools to the ritualization of five transitions in life and public events.

2 The context for this quote is a discussion about ritual in Chinese thought: ‘Ritual practices, then are “performances”, social roles and practices that, through prescribed forms, effect relationships. The etymology of the English “rites” and “ritual” is suggestive of our understanding of both *li* and its cognate *ti*. In Latin, *ritus*, derives from the base **ri-* “to count”, “to enumerate”, which in turn is an enlargement of the base **ar-* “to join” as in “arithmetic” or “rhyme.” That is, ritual practice is the rhyme and rhythm of society’ (Hall and Ames 1998, p.270).

Rituals have rhyme and reason, when they make sense and provide us with a safe context for our feelings. Making things special through secular ritual is an intense creative process that explores the subtle boundaries of being human in the present, reframes the past and formulates our fears and dreams for the future.

This guide is designed for amateur ritualmakers, who need to craft a secular ceremony for themselves or for a loved one. The tools presented here have been forged, tested and tempered with individuals, couples, families and professional celebrants of diverse cultural backgrounds and language groups.

It can serve as an *aide-mémoire* for professional celebrants. If you are searching for a training course, select one that offers personal attention from a skilled instructor, a mentoring system and the stimulation and support of peers. Online instruction is popular now and useful for studying facts. Learning about accompaniment, how to deal with complex situations and preside at real ceremonies, like ritualizing, takes place during face-to-face interaction.