

## Ritual Design and Facilitation: Ritual Bling and Magical Mood-Setting

by Shauna Aura Knight

Once upon a time I facilitated a ritual in Chicago and was quoted by a journalist covering his first Pagan ritual. Unfortunately, the quote he chose was when I said, **“It’s all about the bling.”** Fortunately he didn’t quote me by name or that would have been really embarrassing. Ultimately, the article was actually fairly positive; the slightly out-of-context quote was actually me laughing with other ritualists as I was setting up the central altar for the evening’s ritual.

I have jokingly referred to my large collection of altar decorations and outfits as **“ritual bling.”**

If you’ve been to one of my rituals or seen my Facebook photo albums, you’ve probably seen some of the elaborate altars and other visual setups that I create. In fact, my van is a mobile storage unit for the massive amount of ritual bling I use. I also regularly offer extra gowns, robes, swaths of fabric, or scarves and stoles to people taking ritual roles who don’t have their own ritual-wear. Setup is time consuming; I can’t tell you how many hours of my life have been spent hauling bins of supplies.

### Why Bother With All that Bling?

People do ask me why I bother with all the stuff. But, people more frequently ask me, “How did you get us all dancing and singing and crying? How can I get my group to do that?” My first suggestion is usually to light a fire or candles.

But what does lighting a bonfire or candles have to do with chanting or dancing? What do altar setups and ritual clothing really have to do with a successful ritual?

In the end, candles, fire, altars, tools and costumes are all set dressings; we don’t really need them. But we humans are creatures of habit, and these trappings help us to suspend our sense of disbelief. We get bound up in cultural expectations of how to act. The little voice in our heads tells us, *“It’s not ok to dance or sing, to have an emotion in front of people in public. That’s embarrassing, don’t do that, people will laugh.”*

Creating a ritual that takes us to a deeply intimate place of connection to the divine, to each other, to our highest self, is a tremendous challenge. Getting a group of people who don’t know each other to be ok with dancing, singing, and expressing sorrow or joy or other real emotions, means getting people to lay aside societal expectations.

***In my experience, the hardest part of effecting actual meaningful, magical, potent rituals is helping people to get over themselves and stop worrying they are going to look stupid.***

### Suspending Disbelief

I use many and varied techniques to help people open up, feel safe, and be willing to risk emotion. I’m trying to take people out of the everyday; it’s difficult for a participant in a ritual to connect to deep magic when there are reminders of the modern world all around.



*Ritual bling, such as the trappings of a beautifully dressed altar, helps us suspend disbelief. It allows us to work past everyday societal constraints that keep us from connecting with the intent of the ritual.*

Glaring fluorescent lights, T-shirts with slogans, tennis shoes, posters and advertisements, cars driving by...all of these serve to bring us back to the fact that we're a bunch of folks dancing around looking ridiculous.

*And our ego does not want us to look ridiculous!*

When I create elaborate altars, draped fabric archways, or alcoves, I'm trying to destroy that sense of the modern and the societal constraints of "don't laugh, don't sing, don't cry, don't dance, don't embarrass yourself." Similarly, I try to dress in a way that removes as much of the modern as I can. I opt for long gowns in jewel tone colors, a scarf around my neck, sometimes a sleeveless duster/robe. I keep my glasses on for necessity, but even those I'll take off if I feel it will help take the group deeper.

I ask people taking roles in my rituals to not wear any overtly modern clothing. Modern shoes, collared shirts, t-shirts, shirts with words or logos; any of these will take the participants out of the magic.

#### **But I Don't Have Bling!**

Even without a closet full of ritual wear, there are ways you can adapt your clothing to help people stay in "the zone." A sweater and jeans can work with a simple duster or long scarf.

Similarly, I don't advocate overdressing. Renaissance Faire costumes or overly elaborate outfits can be distracting. I've made the mistake of wearing overly-complicated costumes and ended up tripping on the fabric -- definitely less-than-magical! On occasion intricate outfits can work, such as if someone is drawing down a particular deity, but be sure that you aren't going to be in danger of trailing bits of fabric catching fire!

You're not trying to overwhelm people with your flashy gear; you're helping participants to understand on a nonverbal level that you're a professional who's helping take them between the worlds.

#### **"How Do I Build Up My Collection?"**

Many of my ritual clothes have come from thrift stores, or I've sewn them myself. I've also hand-dyed rayon dresses from Dharma Trading.

For altars, I collect pieces such as elemental-colored candle holders, bowls, and fabric to drape over tables. I hunt pieces out at thrift stores, Home Goods, Michaels, JoAnn's, or other places where you can get decorative items. Just after Christmastime, or in clearance aisles,

you can get great deals. *Craigslist.com* can be a place to check, as brides often sell off elaborate decorations from weddings. I try to buy fabric in pieces at least 3 yards in length as that is enough to cover most tables, and use smaller decorative fabric as the centerpiece of an altar.

For many altars, such as the ones photographed here, I make the pieces in the center higher with cake stands or fabric-draped boxes. Shorter items go on the sides. I rarely use statues, but those could be placed in the center of an altar and given more presence and focus by being placed on a higher stand. I also collect small mirrors, which add dimension and depth to altars.



*An indoor cauldron filled with fire becomes the Axis Mundi - the center around which the participants gather.*

*Photo by Anna Rod*

Large decorative altars, arbors, draped fabric, and fire will instantly begin to take people into the magic. The colors are engaging, the shiny pieces glisten, and people begin to wonder, what is the magic we will join in tonight?

#### **Cauldron Fire**

I'd say if there's one ritual supply investment that's worth more than all the other pretty bits, it's a cauldron. An indoor cauldron fire is a technique that I use at almost every ritual. Cast iron is best. A bowling-ball size cauldron will cost \$30-\$50. I have

a brass cauldron that I thrifted for \$5. **Always do a test burn before ritual;** some metal can't hold up to the heat.

Fill your cauldron within an inch or two from the top with Epsom salts, then fill it with rubbing alcohol until the alcohol is floating just above the salt. Light it with a taper candle, or a long-stem match—a butane lighter in the middle of ritual will bring people back to the modern. The fire burns for 15-45 minutes, depending on the size and how much alcohol you pour.

The alcohol burns almost without smoke; I've never had this set off a smoke detector, and it doesn't bother my throat when I'm singing. It's also a fairly safe fire; it's fairly difficult for someone to actually catch fire from this, but all the same, keep long sleeves, hair or flowing decorations safely out of the way!

Typically, I place the cauldron on a low central altar where it becomes the *Axis Mundi*, the center that we gather around. Keeping the fire low means we can get close and have enough light to see each others' eyes across the fire.

## Candles

I have over a hundred votive holders. Even without all the other bins of supplies, you can evoke a magical mood with dozens of shimmering tealights. You can get small glass votives inexpensively at thrift stores; they don't have to match. Something I have also done is save all my glass pasta and pickle jars. I clean them and remove the adhesive labels. Then I have a tall, sturdy tealight holder that can be placed on the floor and participants are unlikely to have a skirt catch fire. Use the long butane lighters or long matches to light these.

## Facilitation is More Challenging Without Mood

To put a mathematical value on bling, I can honestly say I have to work twice as hard to get a group chanting if I don't have a fire. If it's a bright room or daylight, double that. The hardest rituals for me to facilitate and get a group to open up are at events like Pagan Pride. It's bright daylight, no candles, no fire, cars are zooming by, there are curious people watching, there's a soccer game going on next door...there's an endless list of distractions and reminders that we all look ridiculous.

When I'm facilitating rituals at a hotel conference that doesn't allow fire, I dim the lights. Sometimes mood lighting is all you have access to, and it can be enough to take people into "the zone." At times I've used LED candles; I recommend the amber ones in semi-opaque votive holders as they look more realistic. The expensive fake pillar candle ones look even better.

## Care with Settings

If you're trying to get ritual participants to a deeper, more magical place, take extra effort with your physical/mundane setting to support that.

You might try to find a ritual spot that is bordered at least partially by trees. People will feel a little safer, plus you get sound containment for chanting. Consider dressing to set mood without being ostentatious. A simple black or elemental-colored gown or tunic, a nice scarf, a simple duster, can bring a formality and focus to your presence. It really will help people to forget about the distractions.

Consider investing in some decorations to help people focus. Sometimes I don't even physically use the altars during the ritual, they are just there to hold a visual/kinesthetic presence, such as elemental or deity altars.

Even without decorations, you can invite people to remove their shoes and silence their cell phones. It's also important to remove some of the jarringly modern elements from the room/ritual area. Asking people to move purses and backpacks to an unobtrusive area, lowering lights, bringing in floorlamps to avoid using overheads, can transform a room completely. If there are posters up on the walls, or tables and chairs in the way, or plastic bags or other overtly modern clutter, try to open up the space, remove the visual distractions.



*Elemental or deity altars can help people focus - even when they are not used in the ritual.*

## Language & Words Set the Mood

Beyond all the trappings of outfits and decorations, you can engage a timeless space through language. For example, 'bling' is actually a word I'd never use in a ritual; it's too modern.

Open, accessible language that takes people out of time is a topic for a future article, but consider these words and how they make you feel: *Formeldahyde, Minivan, Facebook, Jurisdiction, Alarm clock, getting in the car, pants.*

Do any of these help you feel more magical? Probably not. Here's a few more words: *Journeying, splashing, transformation, center, brother, breath, green, timepiece, garment.*

Can you sense the difference? I'm not advocating talking like you're at Ren Faire, but finding words that are simple, elegant, and less modern, help to craft a timeless space. Generally, words

that are more Anglo-Saxon have more onomatopoeia and speak more to our deep self. *Mother, father, brother, sister,* are more magical sounding than *parent* or *sibling*.

## Bring the Magic

How can your space promote safety and comfort for your ritual participants? What artwork or decorations would help take people out of time? What clothing helps to serve ritual intention, and what is distracting? Are you able to work with fire or lower the lights? What words will help evoke a space between the worlds?

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*Her new ebook [Spiritual Scents](http://jupitergardenspress.com/shop/spiritual-scents/) is available online now at <http://jupitergardenspress.com/shop/spiritual-scents/>. Contact her at [shaunaaura@gmail.com](mailto:shaunaaura@gmail.com).*

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