

Secular sacraments

From ‘first blood’ ceremonies to croning rituals, some mark life’s passages in their own way

BY ANNE BOKMA

When Rev. Abigail Johnson, a United Church minister in Toronto, turned 60 last year she wanted to mark the passage into her senior years in a significant way. Since her denomination doesn’t offer a suitable ritual, she took to the woods instead — joining a group of 25 women ranging in age from 40 to 80 for a “crowning” ceremony at a Unitarian camp near Orangeville, Ont.

The ritual involved walking across three thresholds — gates made of willow branches that represent the stages of a woman’s life (maiden, mother and crone). At the final stage, she was crowned with a garland of flowers, draped with a purple shawl, handed a staff and blessed with “moon water.” For Johnson, becoming a crone was a spiritual experience. “Ritual is a way to make meaning of our lives,” she says. “Crossing the final threshold was a helpful way of marking the fact that I am stepping into a new stage of my life.”

Observances to mark life’s milestones were once performed exclusively by the church. But today, those who are spiritual but not religious (SBNR) and even some, like Johnson, who are connected to institutional religion, are seeking out secular sacraments for those life passages that have been mostly ignored by religious institutions: “first blood” celebrations to mark the onset of menstruation, and rituals to acknowledge adoption, miscarriage, divorce,

milestone birthdays, career change, becoming a grandparent, retirement, dealing with illness and trauma, coming out and transitioning to a new gender.

The SBNR are also revising run-of-the-mill rituals in new and unique ways. After giving birth two years ago, Rev. Hannah Grace, an interfaith minister in Northampton, Mass., wanted something more meaningful than the “silly parlour games” that are standard fare at baby showers. She opted for a motherhood ceremony involving a close circle of female family members and friends who rubbed her feet with cornmeal, slathered her belly with lavender oil and ate chocolate-covered strawberries while she shared the details of giving birth. “It

was tender and loving and intentional,” says Grace.

As with most things SBNR, the intensely personal nature of such rituals has been criticized as self-involved, a judgment that annoys Grace. “It’s such a damaging and shaming idea that just because people want a ritual that’s personal that it’s somehow selfish — people have a deep need to create something meaningful around life transitions; there’s nothing narcissistic about that.”

Rituals are as ancient as embalmed Egyptian mummies, biblical burnt offerings and pagans dancing around the maypole to celebrate spring. They offer an opportunity to pause and reflect, often in community, and imbue life’s changes with a sense of the sacred. They’re so powerful that even atheists want in on the action. “It seems to be fundamentally human to seek narratives, find patterns and create rituals to include others in the meanings we make,” writes Suzanne Moore in a New Humanist article titled “Why non-believers need rituals too.”

An increasing number of officiants are offering secular rituals; Humanist Canada lists 23 rituals on its website. Grace says, “churches are missing the boat” by not offering a broader range of rituals. “A religious community’s obligation is to serve their people through all the journeys of their lifetime.”

Johnson has experimented with a variety of sacraments in her role as a minister. Two years ago, she filled the baptismal font with glass beads and invited congregants to remember their own baptisms by dipping their hands in the water and plucking out a bead.

“I expected maybe a few would come forward but the entire congregation did. They made the sign of the cross on each other’s hands and faces, and many were weeping. People still show me their glass bead. It shows how hungry people are for ritual.”

Anne Bokma is a journalist in Hamilton.



A croning ceremony in Cape Town, South Africa.