

# A Death Age Ceremony

Acknowledging turning the age  
your parent was when they died.



*This ceremony is a collaboration between Be Ceremonial and Hope Edelman, with input from members of the AfterGrief Community who generously volunteered their time.*

While each person grieves in their own way, there are universal moments and markers that many people want to acknowledge. An age-related threshold is one of those markers.

Approaching and passing a parent's age at time of death is a significant rite of passage. In psychology this is known as an "age correspondence event" and it can hold special meaning for the parentally bereaved, especially those who lost a parent when they were young.

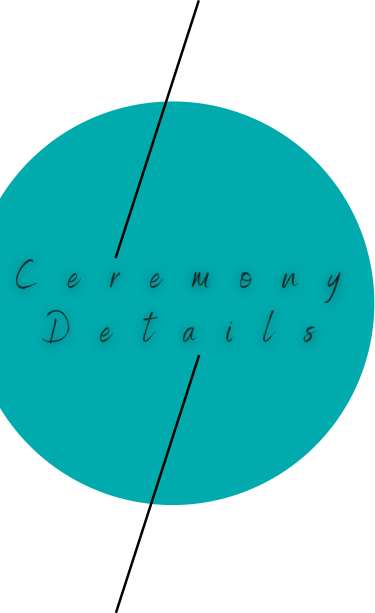
As we turn the same age a parent was when they died, we may feel amazed or disconcerted to discover how much younger they were than we realized. We may find ourselves mourning anew for what a parent went through and all the years they lost.

We may also feel disoriented on the other side of that age, with a feeling of not knowing how to proceed without a parental role model's experience to guide us. The future can feel both expansive and uncertain. Again, this is a very common response. If you feel it, you are not alone.

Sometimes we reach this threshold without thinking about it but our bodies respond nonetheless. We may feel a surge of anxiety about our health, or even exhibit physical symptoms that doctors can't explain. You may see this occur in an older or younger sibling when they reach your parent's age, too.

Many of us carry the fear that we, too, will die at the same age, especially with a same-sex parent. This is a very common response to parent loss. We may then feel increased anxiety or fear as the date approaches and relief and lightness as it passes. We made it! In this way, the occasion can feel both solemn and celebratory.

While many cultures perform rituals that continue to honor the dead, we are not aware of any that acknowledge this specific age-related occasion for the children of the deceased. As a result, these mourners often experience this Silent Rite of Passage on their own.



Be Ceremonial believes that every ceremony should tell a story, helping us acknowledge what was, what is, and what will be. Rituals are intentional actions that help us create meaning, and a ceremony is the container that holds those rituals. We co-created this ceremony to help inspire you with ways to acknowledge reaching and passing the age your parent was when they died. You can perform this ceremony on your birthday, on the exact day that you have outlived a parent (e.g. 46 years, 3 months and 12 days), or on any day during that calendar year. If the age has already passed, you can still perform these rituals by revisiting a moment from the past.

These rituals have been sourced from a large community of individuals who have lost a parent. We created these rituals to help you honor the past, ground yourself in the present, and set intentions for the future. Our ritual suggestions are descriptive, not prescriptive, and you are invited to add your own elements, beliefs, and experiences.

No matter what your relationship with your parent was, when you step into the ceremony space, give yourself permission to wonder, imagine, and dream about their life, their impact, and their legacy, including how you want to fold them into your life moving forward beyond this specific year.

## Anniversary of a Health-Related Event

Other important Silent Thresholds are often crossed without outward acknowledgement. One of these is reaching a parent's age at the time of their diagnosis or other significant event related to their health or death. Approaching this age may bring up other emotions or fears in connection to your own mortality and life pathway.

To honor this threshold, it is important to name it and spend some time recognizing and validating whatever surfaces. Consider doing a small act of kindness that honors their experience, whether it's sending anonymous flowers to a nurse station at the hospital, making a donation to a hospice, or something that was meaningful to your parent.

One of the most important aspects of recognizing this threshold is delineating that your experience is separate from that of your parent's, and acknowledging both the beauty and the challenge of sitting with both of those truths as you move forward.



**Serves:** One person

*\*This ceremony was curated for an individual. If you choose to invite others to join you, you can adapt the rituals accordingly. Either way, please ensure that you have emotional support in place leading up to, and following, the ceremony.*

**Prep Time:** 15 minutes

**Ceremony Time:** 1 hour

### **Ingredients**

Here is a list of ritual ingredients to prepare and bring to your ceremony:

- *A small tray or table, and a tablecloth*
- *Flowers, candles, a special song to play, or other elements to add to your ceremony space*
- *Significant objects or mementos connected to your parent*
- *A photo or visual representation of your parent*
- *Lighter or matches*
- *Paper and pen*
- *Permanent marker*
- *Rock or stone that fits comfortably in your hand*
- *A long stick or length of yarn*

# Opening Ritual: Setting the tone

## Story Altar

- Choose a spot for your ceremony that holds meaning or feels comfortable for you. Set up a small table or tray in your ceremony space to display the items you've brought with you. Consider placing a scarf or tablecloth down, and adding elements that bring beauty or intention to the space such as flowers, candles, or incense. You can play a special song, ring a bell, or spray an essential oil to help you drop into a ritual mindset.
- Consider introducing items from nature or from a special place you associate with your loved one's life or death. Ideas include soil, sand, or water from a significant spot, or a rock, feather, or flower you notice as you're preparing for the ceremony.
- One by one, hold each object or momento that you brought in connection to your loved one. As you place it on the table, write or speak a story you associate with that object, or acknowledge what it represents to you. After each item has been placed on the story altar, you can move to the next part of your ceremony.

# Acknowledging What Was: Honoring the Past

## Name Repetition

- Find a spot to sit comfortably. Take three deep breaths to ground you in this moment. The first breath acknowledges the number of years your parent lived. The second breath acknowledges the number of years you were able to spend together. The third breath acknowledges the number of years they've been gone.
- When you're ready, repeat your parent's name for as many years as they were alive. You can say it out loud, or quietly in your head. You can also choose another word to repeat that represents your parent, if you prefer.
- While you move through this, record each year by marking a line on a piece of paper or drawing a line in the ground with a stick. This helps you keep track and stay grounded, while also recognizing the significance of each year they lived.

# Acknowledging What Is: Grounding in the Present

## One Word Legacy

- Hold a moment of silence and then say their name one more time, adding a mark to the paper or line to the dirt. This signifies the important milestone of you surpassing their age.
- Once you have acknowledged your entry into this new space, think about their legacy and what you want to carry forward. With a pen and paper in hand, consider these questions: What was important to them? How did their life shape yours? What parts of them do you want to carry forward?
- Once you've written down your thoughts, choose one word that stands out to you. Using your permanent marker, write that word on a rock or stone that fits comfortably in your hand. This is your legacy rock.

## Crossing the Threshold

- As you step into this next stage of your life, living longer than your parent, it's important to acknowledge this silent rite of passage. Consider incorporating an action or gesture that can symbolize you crossing this threshold.
- This can most easily be done by physically moving from one space to another. Ideas include crossing a bridge, stepping over a piece of yarn or a string laid out on the ground, walking from one room into another, or moving from inside to outside. The key is to mark the moment of transition with intention and awareness.
- With your legacy rock in hand, step over, across, or through the threshold you've created. As you do, you can say something out loud to mark the significance of this moment, such as, "I carry your memory forward into this next phase of my life," or "I invite you to travel with me into the years you were not able to live." Or you can simply close your eyes and take a few deep breaths as your body moves from one space to another. Again, we encourage you to personalize this ceremony in a way that's most meaningful to you.
- However you choose to honor crossing this threshold, give yourself permission to feel the varied emotions that surround this significant moment in time. If you have close relatives or friend who can witness this occasion and offer support, consider inviting them to join you and hold space for whatever may come up.



# Closing: Completing the Circle

## Story Altar

- Carefully take each piece you added to the altar and hold it for a moment. Acknowledge what that object represents or means to you, and tuck it away or place it somewhere special.
- Just as you did to open the ceremony, take three deep breaths to ground you in this moment. The first breath again acknowledges the number of years they lived. The second breath acknowledges the number of years you were able to spend together. The third breath acknowledges the number of years they've been gone. Notice if this ritual feels different the second time.
- When you've finished, say your name and your connection to them out loud, in a statement such as: "I am \_\_\_, daughter/son of \_\_\_. Today I have outlived my mother/father in years, but they will continue to live inside of me. I have not outgrown them or left them behind. I am finding new ways to carry them forward and fold them into my everyday life."
- If you played a song or released a scent during your opening rituals, you can repeat them as a way of completing the ceremony journey you've been on.
- Blow out the candle and watch the smoke dissipate and the wax harden. Thank your parent for the life they gave you, and thank yourself for the care and thought you put into this ceremony.

# Closing: Completing the Circle

## Post Ceremony Reflection

After the ceremony is complete, we encourage you to share what you experienced, either by writing it down in a journal or bringing it up in conversation with close relatives or friends. Think about what the ceremony helped you realize or what it offered you. Remember, you can draw on the energy this ceremony created whenever you need to, and you can repeat any of these rituals, or adapt them, when you want to reconnect with the emotions you released or the intentions you set.



*A b o u t*

## **About Be Ceremonial**

This ceremony was created with the support of Megan Sheldon and Kate Love of Be Ceremonial, a mental wellness project that's reimagining how we can easily bring ritual and ceremony into the seemingly invisible moments that surround life and death. They offer workshops, retreats, and training programs, as well as an app that empowers care providers to help their clients create their own ceremonies. Learn more at [www.beceremonial.com](http://www.beceremonial.com).

## **About Hope Edelman**

Hope has been writing, speaking, and leading workshops and retreats in the field of early bereavement for more than 25 years. Her first book, *Motherless Daughters*, was a #1 New York Time bestseller that has been published in 14 countries and created a worldwide movement. Her eighth book, *The AfterGrief*, offers information and support to all mourners traveling along the long arc of grief. Learn more at [www.hopeedelman.com](http://www.hopeedelman.com).

## **The Collaboration**

Megan, Kate and Hope met through a task force created in early 2020 by [End of Life Collective](#) that brought together bereavement professionals, academics, and authors to address the growing Covid-19 crisis. They acknowledged the need for rituals surrounding certain events in the aftergrief, and co-created these ceremonies together with help from two groups of women in the *Motherless Daughters* Community. Special thanks to Heather Paris, Becky Burns, Nicole Schnitzler, and Leigh Conard for dedicating their time.