

VIRTUAL MEMORIAL GUIDE

These are difficult times we find ourselves in. Difficult times where we find ourselves grieving loved ones without the ability to gather, to hug, to hold hands. To be together remember and mourn and do the rituals that so often bring us comfort and meaning in the midst of loss.

And there is so much loss, so much grief, in the midst of this pandemic, even as we model collective care and love by socially distancing to make it safer for all.

As faith leaders and spiritual care providers, we find ourselves in the position of supporting grieving families/loved ones¹ in these strange and painful circumstances. One way we often offer bereavement support is through leading memorial services. While we may not be able to gather in person, in 2020 we do find ourselves with the resources to connect virtually and to explore creative ways to memorialize those who have died.

I offer this guide, created with help from many resources (listed at the end of this document), as a resource for those hoping to offer virtual memorial services in this time.

Of note: *while some families/loved ones may wish to wait until in-person gatherings are possible again to do a memorial service, many grief experts feel it is important to offer a chance for loved ones to mourn and remember the deceased. Funerals, memorial services, and other rituals of mourning are an important part of processing grief.*

When a family/loved ones shares their desire to wait indefinitely for a funeral, you may want to encourage them to consider a virtual gathering. This could look like a simple online memorial (like a sharing circle), with a plan for a full service at an in-person gathering later, or (as some are doing) a full online funeral, with the intent that family/loved ones will later gather in person to visit the gravesite or scatter ashes. There are many creative ways this can be done, but the significance of offering the bereaved a chance to mourn and make meaning in this immediate time of grief is so important, especially in a time of so much collective loss.

*-Rev. Abigail Clauhs
Unitarian Universalist
Minister & Chaplain
(she/her/hers)*

¹ **Note:** I use “family/loved ones” throughout this document to acknowledge that people are grieved by many different groups, depending on their life circumstances, including “chosen family,” friends, and communities. There are many types of kinship!

TECH LOGISTICS

I know, not a very fun place to start. But I wanted to get some of the tech questions out on the table first, before we go any further!

Note: For simplicity, this guide assumes the use of **Zoom** as the video conferencing platform to be used for holding the funeral. There are other platforms available, as well, which you are welcome to explore!

- There is definitely a learning curve to using Zoom! [These tutorials](#) are a good place to start. The rest of this guide will assume a basic working knowledge of Zoom, for simplicity's sake.
 - Note that the free Basic version of Zoom limits Zoom calls of more than 3 participants to 40 minutes. In this time of many people, faith communities, and organizations using Zoom, if you do not have access to the paid version of Zoom, you may want to see if others might share the use of the Zoom account with you for the service.
- If you can, designate a co-host who can help you with tech logistics (e.g. muting/unmuting participants) and troubleshooting during the live service.
 - [How to enable a Zoom co-host](#)
- You may have heard of “Zoom-bombing,” when unwanted trolls interrupt a Zoom meeting. [This is a good guide](#) on how to prevent Zoom-bombing in worship services.
 - Here is [a recent security update](#) from Zoom.
 - **Note:** Zoom continuing to make security updates and changes, so the information included here may not be the most up-to-date.
- It is recommended to create a slideshow presentation with the different elements of the service included. This way, when you “share” your screen for different elements of the service, you will not have to toggle between different programs. Two popular options for slideshow presentations are Microsoft PowerPoint and Google Slides. Here is how to “screen share” from both of these programs in Zoom:
 - For **PowerPoint** <https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/203395347-Screen-Sharing-a-PowerPoint-Presentation>
 - For **Google Slides** <https://it.umn.edu/zoom-screen-share-your-google-slides>
- As the Zoom meeting host, you will have control over many aspects of the meeting. [Here is information](#) on managing participants in a Zoom call, as a Zoom host. Some settings to be sure to use:
 - “Mute participants on entry” (so that you will not have to have lots of background noise and explain to participants how to mute themselves)
 - Disable “Allow participants to unmute themselves” (so that people do not accidentally unmute themselves during the service; you as the host can unmute individual people as needed).
 - [Zoom Waiting Room](#): The “waiting room” will be where attendees wait until you admit them to the call. You can customize the waiting room text and images (e.g. “Jane Doe’s Celebration of Life”). There is an option to “Admit all” when you are

ready to begin the service; you can also send messages to people in the waiting room.

STARTING QUESTIONS

- **Who will be involved in planning this service?**
 - You may want to meet with the family/loved ones involved via a Zoom meeting to discuss/plan the service, in order to see their faces and increase their comfort with using the Zoom program.
- **What type of service will this be?**
 - E.g. a small, intimate gathering to share memories, a full funeral service, etc.
 - Are there any religious rituals/elements that will need to be included?
 - It may be helpful to ask the family what “feel” they want to have, and what they hope for from the service.

THINGS TO CONSIDER

- Think about your physical space, as it will show up on your screen (some have encouraged us to “think like a set designer”!). Consider your lighting, camera position, etc. But most importantly—consider how you can create sacred space. Some possibilities include:
 - Candles/lighting
 - Plants/flowers
 - Fabrics/wall hangings/art
 - Water
- You can make this memorial as participatory as you might like. Consider asking people to bring something when they join the service, e.g.:
 - Candle to light (and something to light it with!)
 - An object that reminds them of the deceased
 - Religious objects
 - Flower(s)
 - For a virtual “reception” afterward: a drink (for toasting) and/or food

PREP BEFOREHAND

- Once you have settled on details with family/loved ones, try to type up a **funeral invitation email** which you can send to family/loved ones via email. They can then forward this email on, or copy the contents of it to share other ways (e.g. social media, text message). Things to include:
 - [Zoom Meeting information](#)
 - Also include directions on using Zoom ([this](#) is a good guide), link to [Zoom tutorials](#), and link to [Zoom test call](#) (so people can practice)

- Ask people to bring objects (e.g. candles, flowers), if you want them to have them
- If you will have an Open Time for Sharing during the service where people will be invited to speak their remembrances or share them in the chat box, you may want to say this in the invitation, so that people can type up their remembrances ahead of time, for pasting into the chat box.
- If you have an Order of Service developed, you can also consider sending that, so people can be prepared to follow along
- Prepare your **slideshow** (e.g. PowerPoint or Google Slides) with embedded music, videos, readings, etc. for the service (more details about doing this later in this document).
- Prepare a document with things you want to copy/paste into the chat box, already typed up (e.g. Order of Service, Zoom tech directions).
- Do a **virtual run-through** on Zoom with everyone who has a role to play in the service, sometime before the service, to practice logistics.

STRUCTURING THE SERVICE

The religious tradition of the deceased and/or of their family may inform the structure of the service. If there is already a service structure from the tradition, you are welcome to use and/or adapt that.

Below you will find some suggestions for potential service elements and structures, which are welcomed to be modified and reimagined.

Possible Service Elements

It may be helpful to ask family members/loved ones about these elements, especially whether there are ones particularly important to the deceased (e.g. readings, songs) and whether family members/loved ones want to offer any of these (e.g. eulogy, reading, song).

- **Opening/Closing**
 - Especially in virtual gatherings, it is important to mark the beginning and end of the time together. Some ways to do this could be:
 - Lighting/extinguishing a candle
 - Opening/closing prayer (or silent time for breathing)
 - Opening/closing sound (e.g. ringing a bell/chime)
- **Religious/Cultural Rituals**
- **Readings/Prayers**
 - Can have people take a video of themselves reading ahead of time, to play during the service (you can embed in your slideshow slides), or unmute the person so they can read/speak live
 - Can have the text on the slideshow and share screen, or paste text in chat box, so people can follow along/read along with text (while they stay muted and one person leads)
- **Music**

- Can share YouTube videos of music (embed video in your slideshow, then share screen and connect to computer audio)
 - [How to embed a YouTube video in a PowerPoint presentation](#)
- Can have singers/performers perform live (unmute them when it is time; re-mute them when finished)
- Can pre-record a video/audio file you can embed in your slideshow and show by sharing screen
 - [How to embed a video file from your computer into a PowerPoint presentation](#)
 - [Adding a video to Google Slides presentation](#)
- Hymns/singing together
 - Can have lyrics on a slide of slideshow, and share screen, or paste lyrics in chat box
 - Note that because of lags, singing collectively does not work well on Zoom. If you want people to sing together, unmute the song-leader, but keep everyone else muted and invite them to sing along to themselves, while muted.
- **Photo/Video Slideshow**
 - Many families/loved ones like to create memorial videos that include music, photos, and video clips of the deceased. They may want to collect photos and video clips from family/loved ones to put together into a memorial video.
 - Some free options for creating a memorial video include:
 - [Animato Memorial Video Maker](#) (free online service)
 - Windows Movie Maker (included with most PC computers)
 - iMovie (on Apple devices)
 - Family/loved ones will need to send you the video file so that you can embed it in your slideshow, to share your screen and play as part of the service.
 - [How to embed a video file from your computer into a PowerPoint presentation](#)
 - [Adding a video to Google Slides presentation](#)
- **Eulogy/Remembrances**
 - Can have people take a video of themselves speaking ahead of time, to play during the service (you can embed in your slideshow slides), or unmute the person so they can speak live at the proper time in the service.
 - [How to embed a video file from your computer into a PowerPoint presentation](#)
 - [Adding a video to Google Slides presentation](#)
- **Open Time for Sharing**
 - Some families/loved ones choose to have an open time for sharing memories of the deceased. It is possible to do this on Zoom, but will need to be well-facilitated.
 - If you do not want to do this during the official service, you could also offer a time after the service, in a virtual “reception” where people can share, make toasts, etc.

- Explain the process of [“raising your hand” via Zoom](#), so that you can unmute people who want to share out loud, one-by-one.
 - [How to mute/unmute Zoom call participants.](#)
 - Sharing via the chat box:
 - You can invite people to type/paste their remembrances into the Zoom chat box. This can be a good way for people hesitant to share aloud to still be included.
 - You may want to tell people this will be happening in the memorial invitation which goes out before the service, so that people can type up their remembrances ahead of time, for pasting into the chat box.
 - See the **“Sample Service Script”** section of this document for some ideas on how to walk people through this.
- **Laying to Rest**
 - If the deceased will be buried/have ashes scattered before the service, family/loved ones present may want to take a video that could be shared during the service.
 - **Virtual “Reception”**
 - Attendees can be invited to bring a drink to toast, or food to share a meal together at the end of the service.
 - This can be a time for more open sharing/conversation after the formal service, e.g. inviting people to make toasts to the deceased.
 - Depending on the size of the group, [Zoom Breakout Rooms](#) can be used to create smaller groups for conversation.
 - You may want to re-enable the “Allow participants to unmute themselves” function for this part, so people can speak/share more freely.

Possible Service Structures

Simple Memory Circle

- Admit participants from waiting room
- Welcome
- Explain Zoom logistics
- Opening ritual
- Short eulogy/remembrance (by pre-assigned person)
- Open sharing time
- Prayer/meditation/reading/song
- Closing ritual

Full Service

- Admit participants from waiting room
- Welcome
- Explain Zoom logistics
- Opening ritual
- Poem/reading
- Eulogy/remembrance (by pre-assigned person)

- Photo/video slideshow
- Open sharing time
- Prayer/meditation
- Music/song
- Closing ritual
- Virtual “reception,” with invitation to make toasts

SAMPLE SERVICE SCRIPT

Feel free to use/adapt this as you see fit, especially the portions containing Zoom instructions.

Welcome

Welcome, everyone. We are gathered here today to remember the life of **[name]**. My name is _____, and I am _____. Thank you for trusting me to hold this space for us today, as we gather virtually—in a way you probably never imagined you would need to gather, when the time came to say goodbye to **[name]**.

Yet here we are.

This pandemic is forcing us to become creative in the ways we gather, the ways we grieve, the ways we say goodbye. Today, we gather online, rather than in person. And that itself is an act of communal care—staying apart in order that more of the vulnerable among us may stay safer. And, it is hard.

It is hard to see each other on a screen, rather than in person. Hard to be together virtually, unable to hug or hold each other as we share our memories of **[name]**. And, it will probably be awkward at times. Glitches might happen, screens might freeze up.

But still we gather. Knowing that remembering, that saying goodbye, is all part of the already messy process of grief and loss. Knowing that our love for **[name]** will come through, across the pixels and wifi connections and space between us.

Know that this time, here together on a video conference software many of you might not have even heard of, before a few months ago, is sacred. It matters.

So welcome. I look forward to remembering **[name]** with you here today.

However, since, as I mentioned, this Zoom meeting technology is probably new to many of us, I want to share some guidance to ease our way together.

First, I want to call your attention to the video layout options.

If you are on a desktop computer, look in the upper right-hand corner of your screen. You should see a button that says either “Speaker View” or “Gallery” view. If you click on it, you can choose which of these views you want. I always like to recommend Gallery View, as you will be able to see the faces of all the people in this gathering. To me, it always feels more like being gathered together when I can see all those faces.

If you are on a mobile device, you should be able to access Gallery View by swiping left on your screen.

I will give you all a moment to adjust this to your preference.

It is good to see your faces.

I also want to say that if you want to hide your face at any time during the service or to step away, you can simply turn off your video by clicking the video camera icon from the control buttons at the bottom of your screen. Click it once again to turn your video back on.

Another way we can communicate in this virtual sacred space is the Zoom chat box. If you are on desktop, you should see a row of control buttons at the bottom of screen when you move your mouse. If you click on the image of a speech bubble that says "Chat" underneath it, the Zoom chat box should appear, and you can type into the chat box there. If you are on your mobile device, you should see a row of control buttons at the bottom of your screen when you tap the screen. If you click on the image of the speech bubble which says "Participants" below it, a list of the call participants should pop up. There should be a button at the bottom of the list which says "Chat." If you click on that, you should be able to access the chat box.

At this time, I welcome all of you to dip your toe into using the chat box by typing your name and where you are calling in from into the chat box.

Thank you. Look at all the people and places we have here with us today. Welcome.

I encourage you to keep that chat box in mind, as we will be using it later in the service.

Finally, I hope that you received the order of service for today in the invitation to this service. I will also paste it into the chat box right now, for your reference.

[You or co-host: Paste order of service in chat box. You should have them typed up and ready to be pasted in another program/document.]

Opening Ritual *(In this example, a candle lighting)*

We begin this service with light. Light that reminds us of the spark of **[name's]** life.

[Customize with memories, characteristics of deceased.]

You have all been invited to bring a candle to light, wherever you are. I have mine here. As I light it, I invite you to do the same.

[Light candle, set in a place where it is visible onscreen.]

As we journey through this service, may this light remind you of the light, warmth, joy **[name]** brought to each of our lives. May the dancing of the flame remind you of the way **[he/she/they]** moved through life. May it spark your own memories of **[name]** today.

Eulogy

For we all have our memories, our stories, our moments we shared with **[name]**. **[name]** touched each of our lives, in different ways. And one of the people who knew **[name]** best was **[name's]** family member, _____, who has graciously prepared a remembrance of **[name]** to get us started today. I am going unmute _____'s microphone and hand it over for you to speak, now.

[You or co-host: Unmute person sharing the eulogy. When they have finished, re-mute them.]

Thank you for your heartfelt sharing, _____. That was certainly the **[name]** we loved and knew.

Open Time for Sharing

And, I know each of you have your own memories of **[name]**. And, in the midst of grief, it can be powerful, healing, to tell those stories. To share with each other. This is part of why we gather, part of how we say goodbye. It's why we are here today.

If we were gathering in person, now would be the time where I would invite you to come forward to share your memories of **[name]**. Since we are in this virtual space of sharing, we will be doing things a little differently. There are two ways you can share today.

The first is to type your remembrances into the chat box here on Zoom. If you are on desktop, you should see a row of control buttons at the bottom of screen when you move your mouse. If you click on the image of a speech bubble that says "Chat" underneath it, the Zoom chat box should appear, and you can type in your remembrance there. If you are on your mobile device, you should see a row of control buttons at the bottom of your screen when you tap the screen. If you click on the image of the speech bubble which says "Participants" below it, a list of the call participants should pop up. There should be a button at the bottom of the list which says "Chat." If you click on that, you should be able to access the chat box and type your remembrance there. I invite you all, as you feel moved, to begin sharing your remembrances in the chat box.

The second way to share today is to speak out loud. So that we don't all start talking at the same time, we will be unmuting those who wish to speak one-by-one, so each person has a chance to share uninterrupted. If you would like to speak, I invite you to use Zoom's "Raise Hand" function. To do this, look at the row of control buttons at the bottom of your screen again. If you are on desktop, click the button that says "Participants." Then, at the bottom of the window on the right side of the screen, click the "Raise Hand" button. If you are on your mobile device, tap the control button that says "More." Then click "Raise Hand" button. I will also paste these instruction in the chat box, for your reference.

[You or co-host: Paste "Raise Hand" instructions in chat box. You should have them typed up and ready to be pasted in another program/document.]

For those who "raise" your hands, I will unmute you and call on you one at a time. Think of it like coming up to the front of a memorial, one at a time, to share from the mic.

[Depending on the size of the gathering, you may also want to set some parameters around time (.e.g. “I invite you to share a brief reflection of a minute or two...”)]

[One at a time: invite person with “raised hand” to speak by name, unmute them, and thank them and re-mute them when they are done.]

Thanks to you all...

I know we also have many remembrances which have been shared in the Zoom chat box. I want to invite us into some quiet time so that we can all have a chance to scroll through and see what has been written there.

[Silent time for participants to read through remembrances in chat box.]

Thank you for all you have shared here. May these memories be stories that we tell, again and again, keeping **[name]** alive within our hearts.

Prayer *(Could also be a poem, song, etc.)*

Before we close this sacred time together, I want to invite us into the spirit of prayer. You may wish to close your eyes, to take a deep breath, to clasp your hands or raise your palms. Or, maybe, even, just look into the light of that candle we lit at the beginning, reminding us of the light that connects us all.

[Offer prayer.]

Amen.

Closing/Transition to “Reception”

Today, we have gathered, in this sacred space we have made out of screens and software and our tender hearts. We have remembered **[name]**. We have said goodbye, even as we name the ways we will always carry **[name]** with us. We have connected, across space and time, to come together and honor **[name’s]** life.

As we come to the close of this ceremony, I want to invite you to look once again to your candle, at its flame.

[Hold up your candle to the camera.]

Physics tells us heat and energy are never destroyed, only transformed. As we extinguish our candles, let us remember that the light, the heat has not truly left us, only changed.

In the same way, as we go from here, may we know **[name’s]** love, legacy, life goes with us into the world, for the rest of our lives.

[Extinguish candle.]

So ends the service.

For those who would like to stay for the virtual “reception,” which will be a time for conversation, sharing toasts, and breaking bread together, please stay on the call. Otherwise, you can click the “Leave Meeting” button on your screen to sign off.

Go in peace, and in love.

[This is a good time to play some transition music while people choose to sign off or stay.]

SOURCES

I’m so grateful for the help of these amazing sources below, which I drew upon to create this guide!

- [Virtual Memory Circle: For Those Who Cannot Gather for a Funeral or Shiva](#), by Heather Paul
- [10 Ideas for Funerals and Memorials When You Can’t Be Together](#), from What’s Your Grief
- Hospice Foundation of American Webinar: [Making Funerals Meaningful in the Age of COVID-19](#)
- “Managing Bereavement around the Coronavirus (COVID-19)” [Handout](#) from The Center for Complicated Grief at Columbia School of Social Work
- Chaplaincy Innovation Lab Webinar: [Distance Funerals, Complicated Grief: Gathering to grieve during COVID19](#)
- Memoriam Service has some great resources, including:
 - [Technology Guide](#) for virtual memorial services
 - [Hosting Advice](#)
 - [Writing Your Own Ceremony](#)
 - A variety of [rituals](#) to do in online ceremonies
- There are lots of other good resources on this being created--I will update with more links/resources as able!