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A manual  
for  
everyday  
people

TEN WAYS TO

Honor Those You've Lost

"The dead are invisible,  
they are not absent."

—Saint Augustine

Many traditions mark remembrance of the dead, as well as belief in the thinning of the veil, when the world we see and the one we don't are closer than they are at other times of the year. These days—from Día de Muertos to Samhain, Halloween and All Souls' Day—intersect with the coming descent of winter, the dark season.

In this season we tend to live more slowly and retreat indoors, where there is more stillness. Outside, the earth is cold and life is dormant. We are closer to living as the departed live. As such, it's an appropriate time to remember them.

In American society, acknowledging the presence of the dead has become camp, something done through ghoulish Halloween costumes and ghastly horror movies. It's a way to keep our distance, as if making a game of the next world will keep its reality from us and us from it. We bury the dead, and there we expect them to remain.

To forget the dead is to disrespect their memories, as well as our own lives and the lives of our children and grandchildren, for those who came before created us all. Without their bodies, without their spirits breathing life into our own, we literally would not exist.

We take time to honor and remember in various ways because we show gratitude for our bodies and the blood running through our veins, which we share with the departed. We take time to honor what they sacrificed in our name.

The suggestions that follow are simple, everyday things you can do to honor those you've lost; not just on special days of the year, but all year long.

(For an in-depth conversation on death, grief and old world ways of mourning, [listen to my episode](#) of "Bella Figura—The Tradition of Living Beautifully" with acclaimed poet and undertaker Thomas Lynch.)

1.

*space*

A great way to honor those you've lost is by dedicating a particular space in your home to this intention. I have dedicated spaces in my kitchen and bedroom; in other words rooms that I'm in often.

While such spaces are often called "altars," you can call it whatever you like; honestly, I simply see it as an area dedicated to this relationship.

As an example, on my father's birthday, I placed photos of him, his prayer card, as well as a glass of homemade wine in his favorite glass to express my love, and also my understanding that homemade wine was something he enjoyed, both the making the wine and sharing the wine around the table with those he loved, including me.

While, of course, I'd rather have a glass with him face to face, since that is no longer an option, I lit a candle, poured some in his honor, some for myself, and said a small prayer and raised my glass to him, wishing him a happy birthday. It was a simple, heartfelt way to acknowledge that this was the day he was born, and also, that I feel and mourn his absence.

You don't need any special tools. A candle, some photos of the departed, or if you don't have any photos, perhaps a small hand-written note to them, or some of the items I mention further down below. Be sure the area is kept clean, both of dirt and clutter; this is out of respect for them and for yourself, because they—your ancestors—created you and deserve a well-kept area within which to be remembered.

2.

# stories





I have known people who lose someone and then cease speaking of that person, because it causes them pain. While everyone grieves in their own way and handles loss in their own way, the dead die a second death when we no longer keep their memories alive through story.

Talking about those we've lost with others who either also loved them or did not know them keeps the energy of that person in this world. It also honors their memory. Writing stories is another way to keep their memory alive, and written memories can be passed down to future generations.

I also know people who lost grandparents before they were born, but because their parent and aunts and uncles talk about them so vividly, they feel a strong connection with their grandparent, as if they knew them in life. While this connection is likely also on a deeper, genetic-memory level, it is possible to keep the spirit of our deceased loved ones so alive that those who never knew them feel they do.

My son is 2 years old. My father passed away long before he was born, but if I ask my son, "Where is Nonno?," he quickly scurries over to one of several photos I have of my father in our home and points to him, then leans in and gives him a kiss. This is honoring your ancestors. This is how you teach future generations to remember.

3.  
*the  
requiem*



The Requiem aeternam is a Catholic prayer asking for light and peace to be shown unto the dead. It is a powerful prayer to use when someone is newly passed to help assist in their passage out of purgatory. It can be prayed much later after a loved one's death as well, to assist in their continued peaceful repose. The text is below. I encourage you to memorize it and recite it on special days, like birthdays, as a way to acknowledge the person's passing and ask God that they rest in peace.



*Eternal rest, O Lord,  
grant unto him/her,*

*And let perpetual light  
shine upon him/her.*

*May he/she rest in peace.*

*Amen.*

4.

*belongings*



If we are fortunate enough to have items that belonged to our ancestors, like jewelry or clothing or other accessories, wearing these items is a rich way to honor them. Personally, I find jewelry, with its bent toward sentiment, its intention to adorn, and the fact that it is often given as a gift for special, celebratory occasions, a particularly intimate way to honor the dead.

After my father passed, I wore his wedding ring on a necklace around my neck for many months, taking great comfort in holding so close to my heart something he held so close to his, which symbolized something so important to him—his marriage and subsequent family. A handkerchief, a fan, even a tote bag used in our daily errands can be incorporated into our regular day-to-day as a way of honoring and staying connected to those who have passed.



5.  
*household  
items*



In the same vein as the above, we can place items that belonged to our ancestors around our homes, as opposed to stored away in boxes in attics where their memory fades. The one single item I have from my maternal grandmother is a coarse-fabric nightgown embroidered with her initials; it is not something I would wear, so, instead, I have it set in a shadow box, initials on display with a photo of her perched at the top.

Separately, I have my father's landscaping business card in a small gold frame in my office. My father was a hard worker, and he raised our family through this business. These items keep the dead, as well as their work, close to us and part of our daily routine.



6.  
*cooking*



Food is culture. It's also tradition. In the taste of what we eat, we can be transported to another place and time. When we cook, it's an opportunity to connect with the dead, to slow down and to meditate on the spirits of those we've lost.

One way to do this is to use ingredients that we know our ancestors would have used. We can pause as we're cutting garlic, for instance, something that I know many of my ancestors would have used when cooking, and say a prayer for them. In this way we're slowing the frenzied pace of modern life, its obsession with the future and also with the self. We're taking a moment to honor our ancestors.

Some ancestral ingredients I like to use often:

Ancient grain flour such as Einkorn

Sourdough starter

Animal fats for frying (duck, pork, etc.)

Grass fed butter

Parsley, basil, oregano, rosemary

Sea salt (specifically from Southern Italy)

7.  
*ancestral*  
*patron*  
*saints*



Many cultures partake in the Catholic custom of acknowledging patron saints, both the patron saints of towns and of those associated with our given names. If you know what region your ancestors originally lived in, you can do a quick google search and likely find the patron saint associated with that town. Your ancestors would have partaken in yearly festivals and rituals in honor of that saint. They would have had images of the saint in their home and likely prayed to him/her routinely.

In addition, many of our ancestors have names that correlate with the names of saints, and we can acknowledge our dead on the day of their saint name. Likely, some of these names have been passed down into your family; your own may be one of them.

Honoring our dead in this way brings us closer to our roots and to a spiritual practice akin to the one our ancestors would have experienced.

8.

*passions &*  
traditions



Another way to honor the dead is to carry on the traditions and passions they enjoyed while alive.

I mentioned my father and homemade wine earlier; continuing to make homemade wine in his honor is a way to keep his spirit present in our lives, even when his bodily form no longer is. Perhaps your ancestor enjoyed the theater, or gardening, or watching old black and white movies.

Partaking in these things with the memory of your ancestor in mind is an active form of connection. Perhaps Christmas was a very important holiday to one of your dead; upping your Christmas celebration, decorating more than you normally would, for instance, is a way to honor the passion and joy of the person you lost and keep it alive.

In my experience, when those we love pass away, pieces of their spirits, their essence and character, seem to be sifted out, and the living absorb them. I believe this happens even when we did not know an ancestor.

The psychological school of Family Constellations teaches that family stories, as well as secrets, are inherited by subsequent generations, either uplifting or hindering the lives of descendants; meaning—the dead are always with us, in our very personalities and pathologies.

I have witnessed different family members take up traits that my father possessed, whether his spirit of generosity or his lighthearted approach to life, of which his absence left a void.



9.  
*dreams*



When we dream we're spoken to in symbols.

Symbols are the language of the spirit. Great spiritual leaders, Jesus and Buddha, for instance, spoke in symbols and parables. Poetry is a means to push past words and express something that is, in the end, inexpressible. The symbols we see in our dreams force us to pay attention.

Modern science has few concrete explanations for dreams, but one relatively recent theory is that dreaming is the brain processing emotion. The Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Carl Jung believed dreams were the psyche communicating vital information to the dreamer; he believed their messages (i.e. symbols) illuminated the self and revealed to the dreamer what his/her psyche needed. With the conscious world fallen away, it's easier to listen to the messages the dead try to convey, and also to heal our emotions surrounding their departure and our grief.

Take a few moments before opening your eyes in the morning to recall your dreams. The symbols you need the most will be those that you retain. Learn to discern what you associate with the symbols in your dreams. Making this a practice is a way of remembering those who've past, continuing the conversation even after they've departed.

I know many people who receive messages—otherwise called vital information—in their dreams. It's not unusual in my world to let someone know I dreamt something particularly compelling about them or their family member. The world is loud and our minds are cluttered. Dreams give us the space to hear what is past the noise; to hear the mystical, the transcendent, the deep.



10.

signs


The world, too, speaks to us. When we're in need of guidance, it's wise to cultivate the habit of listening for a response, not only in the unconscious world of dreams, but in the so-called real world around us.

Jung called signs "synchronicity," a theory that poses that things in the world outside of you can correlate to things that occur in the world inside of you, thoughts and dreams among them. The *I Ching*, an ancient Chinese text, states that the inner state participates in the external world, and where the two meet we find synchronicity, or signs, revealing or confirming what we may need to do and where we may need to go.

The dead can be honored in our practice of observing signs. Learn to go throughout your day attuned to what the natural world, and even your everyday domestic life, reveals to you. Our dead can't pick up the phone and call. They speak to us through the breeze, the leaves, the birds, the synchronicities that let us know the relationship has not ended, but transformed.

Some signs people often connect to the dead letting them know they're near:

- Cardinals or red birds crossing your path.
- Butterflies crossing your path.
- Scents. For instance smell of cigar smoke when a deceased loved one was a cigar smoker.
- Numbers. For instance the numbers on the clock showing a certain pattern whenever you think of a loved one.
- Feeling the hair on their arms rise.



**"Bella Figura—The Tradition of Living Beautifully"** is a podcast, blog, and YouTube channel exploring beauty by hand, old world style, and ancestral traditions, all in a straight-talk manner with minimal spiritual woo woo.

For more spiritual conversations for the rest of us, visit [bellafigurapodcast.com](https://bellafigurapodcast.com). You can listen to my podcast, "Bella Figura—The Tradition of Living Beautifully" on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and wherever else podcasts are heard.



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