

## A humanist perspective on... celebrations and ceremonies

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It is natural to want to celebrate the most important events in life with a special ceremony, usually involving speech, poetry, music, song, and feasting and dancing. People have always needed to mark the important times in their lives, and to commemorate the lives of people when they die. Public celebrations of "rites of passage" are different from ordinary parties, which we often hold for events like birthdays, anniversaries or graduations - they are a bit more focused and often more formal, and we usually use special language, music and places. Humanists like to celebrate too, but prefer to do so in non-religious ceremonies, where they will not find themselves saying things they do not believe. So humanist organisations worldwide have devised ceremonies suitable for their contexts and needs.

There are no special rules or observances that non-religious people have to keep: they are not obliged to attend any kind of service, or have any ceremony beyond basic legal requirements, but there are humanist ceremonies for those who would like to mark special occasions. They are always created for the people involved, so each one is unique and personal. Sometimes families of mixed religious backgrounds choose a humanist ceremony because they can all share the non-religious, personal content. The British Humanist Association has books and leaflets about humanist ceremonies for those who would like more information. We also train "celebrants" or "officiants" to prepare and conduct ceremonies, and can put people in touch with a local one.

### **Festivals**

People often wonder what humanists do at Christmas or Easter, which are essentially Christian festivals. Like most people, humanists enjoy holidays, exchanging presents, seeing family, going to parties - and are quite happy to have holidays to cheer up the darkest days of winter and to welcome the beginning of spring. For humanists there is no religious significance in these celebrations, and they share this with members of other faiths who do not celebrate the religious aspects of Christmas and Easter. The festivals are in any case much older than Christianity, and were simply adopted by early Christians as good times to celebrate. Some humanists prefer to celebrate the New Year or the Winter Solstice (the shortest day of the year). Humanists saw no special significance in the Millennium, but probably enjoyed the New Year's Eve parties!

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### **For you to think about:**

- Why would anyone celebrate the shortest day of the year?
- If you could invent a new holiday what would it celebrate?
- How would you celebrate it?

### **Baby Namings or Welcomings**

A new baby in the family is a joyful and serious occasion, a time to celebrate the arrival of a new human being and for commitment to its welfare. Choosing a name and introducing this new person to the circle of family and friends are important, but christenings and other religious rituals are unsuitable and hypocritical for parents who do not believe in any god. It is possible to organise your own welcoming ceremony or to plan one with a humanist celebrant. Humanist parents sometimes choose guardians or mentors to act as supporting adults who will take a special interest in the child. The ceremony can take place anywhere, and is often held in the family home. In it, parents and others can express their hopes and promises in words they have chosen:

"We all have a part to play in her growth and development, in her happiness and welfare. Let us each accept our share of the responsibility and provide her with the respect, warmth, honesty and love that she will need."

Older brothers and sisters can also be involved in the ceremony. When a child is adopted, it is possible to have a special ceremony welcoming the child into its new family. Sometimes when families come together in a second marriage, the step-children can be involved in a humanist wedding ceremony. That way, they too are welcomed into the new family.

### **For you to think about:**

- What would you want to promise or say to a new baby, or to a new member coming into your family?

### **Coming of Age**

Many religions have ceremonies for young adults when they formally become members of that religion. Many cultures have initiation ceremonies for young people when they officially become part of adult life. In the Scandinavian countries where there is a strong tradition of coming-of-age ceremonies, humanist organisations offer alternatives to traditional religious ceremonies. In Norway, for example, special non-religious ceremonies are held in town halls for young people when they reach voting age. These non-religious confirmations, sometimes also called civil

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confirmations or coming-of-age ceremonies, together with the preparation for these ceremonies, are popular activities for teenagers in these countries. The form of preparation varies, from camps (in Finland and Sweden for example) to courses (in Iceland and Norway), but the main purpose is to think about and celebrate the new responsibilities that adulthood brings. Find out more at [www.ihau.org](http://www.ihau.org)

In Britain we seem a bit muddled about when people are actually considered adult. For example, you can get married at 16, possibly even before you are allowed to leave school, you can drive at 17, vote at 18, and people still celebrate becoming 21! It is sometimes suggested that we should introduce coming-of-age ceremonies here, perhaps in recognition of citizenship education, though religious coming-of-age ceremonies are declining in the UK and there is no sign yet of popular demand for an alternative.

**For you to think about:**

- Do you think it would be a good idea to have one age and a ceremony at which young people officially become adults?
- What age should it be?
- Can you invent a good ceremony to mark a young person's transition into adulthood?
- When would it be?
- What words would you say?
- What music would be suitable?

**Weddings**

In the UK, non-religious people are very likely to get married in a Register Office, where they can carry out the formal, legal part of getting married. (Indeed, by law no religious language is allowed in this kind of civil wedding). But many people want something a bit more: they may want to choose their own words of commitment to each other, or read appropriate prose or poetry, or hear music which means something to them, in a place they have chosen. They can ask friends or family to officiate at the wedding, but some people like to have an experienced "celebrant" to help them plan and conduct the ceremony. Humanist weddings can be as formal or informal as the couple would like, and can take place anywhere. The couple choose the ceremony and their promises themselves, making it as serious as well as a happy occasion. Some religions will not conduct weddings for divorced couples or for couples of different faiths, or ceremonies for gay couples, but humanist ceremonies are available to everyone.

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### **For you to think about:**

- Why do people get married?
- What are weddings for?
- What is your idea of a good wedding?
- What is your idea of a good marriage?

### **Funerals**

Humanists accept death as natural and inevitable, and often plan their own funerals before they die. At a humanist funeral there is no suggestion that the person has gone on to another life - it is the life that was lived that is celebrated and the person people knew who is talked about and said goodbye to. Family and friends can help to write the life story or read personal tributes, and can choose other readings and music. Humanists do not pray, though humanist funerals will often include a period for silent reflection. There are many profound and comforting readings that can be used at humanist funerals, for example:

"I fall asleep in the full and certain hope That my slumber shall not be broken; And that, though I be all-forgetting, Yet shall I not be all-forgotten, But continue that life in the thoughts and deeds Of those I have loved." – Samuel Butler 1835-1902

### **For you to think about**

- What would you like to be remembered for when you die?
  - Can you invent a good epitaph for your tombstone?
  - Who are funerals for?
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