

# Death Priestxing: Tending the Threshold of Transition

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## Introduction

- Hello, I'm Jamie. My pronouns are she/her.
  - I'm a dedicated priestess of Hades, philosopher, writer, and teacher.
  - My interests center around folk magic, mythology, oracular traditions, trance and ritual arts, and building sacred communities. My path is somewhat eclectic, and although I study many things, I do not teach from or belong to a specific Pagan or magical tradition. However, I do believe that magic is real, present all around us, and a profound tool for justice and transformation.
  - I write and teach from my home studio, located in Alabama, U.S.A., which is the ancestral land of the Mvskoke (Muscogee) people, the "People of One Fire". I offer honor and gratitude to the Mvskoke elders, and I acknowledge and affirm their sovereignty on these lands.
- In our time together today, we're going to have...
  - A slide presentation, followed by informal conversation wherein we can ask questions, share reactions and experiences with each other (if we choose and time permits). Content warning: my slides contain watercolor images of artfully arranged human bones.
  - Your consent is important: we'll start this session with an offering and invocation to Hades. If you don't want to be in the presence of this particular deity, or you're not sure, you can access my slides, speaker notes, and resource materials on the Mystic South Sched app (or not at all). No worries if you need to cut out.
  - Resource materials include: (1) a ritual to give something a symbolic "good death"; (2) an adaptable format for facilitating your own Vigil for the Good Death.
  - And finally: remember, take what makes sense to you, leave what doesn't. There are many ways to be a death priestx. These are just some of my thoughts and experiences.

## Invocation to Hades and Acknowledgement of Unseen Ones

- I invite you to take a breath, if that feels good, and close your eyes or simply soften your gaze. Sink within yourself.
- I light this candle as a hearthfire, a flame of welcome, to Hades and all the Unseen Ones who join us today.
- Offering: Pinch of Storax
- Invocation: [Hymn to Hades Eubuleus](#)

## Who is the Death Priestx? Why are they needed?

- The Death Priestx (gender-neutral term) is someone who tends the threshold of transition. In this liminal space, they help the living navigate death, and assist the dead to share their wisdom with the living. This tending can take many forms:

- Death Midwifery and Spiritual Companionship
- Hosting Funeral Rites and Vigils
- Necromancy and Mediumship
- Psychopomp Work
- Mindful Harvesting, Hunting, Butchery and Cooking
- Death Planning Information and Education
- Ancestor Veneration and Repair Work, Genealogy, Archiving
- Caretaking of Places of the Dead (Cemeteries, etc.)
- Why are death priestxes needed?
  - In much of the modern Western world, we have very little exposure to the process of physical death and dying, and this lack can be problematic.
    - The introduction of embalming removed the necessity of directly interacting with and caring for the bodies of deceased loved ones.
  - Considering the limited amount of time and outlets modern society provides for healthy grieving, our nervous systems are often not able to cope with the pace of change that death can bring. As a result, collective, trauma-born reluctance to deal with death continues to grow.
  - Death also happens on multiple levels: in our personal lives, in our communities, and in the realm of “that which is larger” (on a global or existential scale). People often need assistance and support through all of these types of transitions, large or small, and skilled death priestxes can help.

### What is the “Good Death”?

- You may have heard of the Death Positive Movement, begun by a group called The Order of the Good Death (est. 2011).
  - According to its website, “The Order is about making death a part of your life. That means committing to staring down your death fears—whether it be your own death, the death of those you love, the pain of dying, the afterlife (or lack thereof), grief, corpses, bodily decomposition, or all of the above. Accepting that death itself is natural, but the death anxiety and terror of modern culture are not.”<sup>1</sup>
  - But...we know that not all deaths are good. So how do we work with this concept of the “good death” without bypassing the very real structural inequalities that make it difficult, or impossible, for certain groups of people to have the type of death they desire for themselves and their loved ones?
- The daughters of Hades: Makaria and Melinoe (Greek)
  - The goddess Makaria is the embodiment of blessed death—when the soul is settled, happy, and at peace in the Underworld.
  - Melinoe, on the other hand, is the goddess of unsettled ghosts and spirits, the restless dead, and those who haunt the living because they are unable to cross over to the Underworld.
  - Reading: [For Makaria and Melinoe—Hymns of the Good Death](#)

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<sup>1</sup> Order of the Good Death, “Our Story,” accessed January 28, 2023, <https://www.orderofthegooddeath.com/our-story/>.

- As contrasting opposites, Makaria and Melinoe together personify the concept that we have a direct responsibility to define the good death for ourselves, and to take steps to ensure it for ourselves and others.
- Death happens on multiple levels: in our personal lives, in our communities, and in that which is larger (on a global or existential scale). As it is not only a physical ending, we can also experience the death of relationships, careers, and outmoded ways of thinking, being, or doing—just to name a few types of death that may be encountered within a human lifespan.
  - Personal Level
    - Relationships: How do I give romantic relationships, friendships, partnerships, jobs, and other interactions a good death? What do I need to feel a sense of closure for myself, regardless of what the other party may be willing or able to provide? Am I still grieving any relationships? How am I moving through any grief processes that may be ongoing?
    - Habits: How do I give outdated, undesired, or unnecessary habits and ways of thinking or being a good death? What feels like the right way to say goodbye? How can I compost them into fertile soil, ready for new growth?
    - Resource: [Symbolic Rite of Good Death](#)
  - Community Level
    - Honoring our ancestors of blood and affinity
    - To live, we need a few critical things: fresh water, restful sleep, clean air, and nourishing food. Whether you're vegan, vegetarian, omnivore, carnivore, or otherwise, a plethora of plants and animals regularly give their lives so that you can consume the food you need to live. Dead and decaying matter—leaves, fungi, insects, animals, even humans—are forever composting into soil, which will in time grow the plants we harvest for our tables, or feed to the animals that we slaughter for food. Death is truly among us, every moment of the day, whether we are cognizant of its presence or not. How do I honor these sacrifices?
    - Honoring the other-than-human world around us that also experiences death
    - Supporting communities and groups who are greatly impacted by death
  - That Which is Larger
    - How do we give a good death to white supremacy, colonization, capitalism and all forms of oppression? Are these things already haunting us, and if so, how can we propitiate their restless spirits?
- My experiences hosting a monthly Vigil for the Good Death
  - Based on the idea of how we might encounter death on these multiple levels, I created a Vigil for the Good Death that can be hosted in person or via Zoom.
    - This vigil is a sacred container, or ritual, for honoring the good death on multiple levels: ourselves, our loved ones and communities, and that which is greater (such as systems, ideas, overculture, etc.).

- Within this sacred circle, participants enter “time outside of time”. We are able to enact change and transformation on many levels, over vast distances, and outside of the confines of linear time.
    - Participants are invited to gently lean into the circle: “Be open to what is here for you tonight. This might mean leaning into connection, solace, catharsis, and/or discomfort. We all have growing edges. What is here for you?”
    - No one has to speak aloud if they do not wish to, however, everyone is given a chance.
    - After each round of sharing, we sing a chant and take a few moments to sit in silence together. We read a final valediction at the end of the vigil.
  - I led my first Vigil for the Good Death in October 2021. It was readily apparent from the beginning that simply creating a sacred container for this type of discussion and sharing was so vital for people.
    - Initially I thought, who the heck will show up to talk about death for two hours? But, as it turns out, many people. And they kept coming back month after month.
    - Some really cool things have emerged, such as a community-sourced document on holding non-invasive vigils in the wake of gun violence, new prayers and poems from participants, a spellworking for the war in Ukraine, and a Signal text thread.
- I took a six-month hiatus from hosting this vigil while finishing my new book! Since I’m traveling (teaching in Vermont) during the new moon this month, there is no vigil. However, I will be picking up the monthly online vigil again starting in August: save the date for Tuesday, August 15, at 6pm central/7pm eastern.
- The Vigil for the Good Death is free, however, you have to register to get the Zoom link. Go to my Events page on [www.jamiewaggoner.com](http://www.jamiewaggoner.com) to register. These vigils are not recorded – they are purposefully ephemeral rituals, meant just for that moment in time.
- You can find outlines of previous vigils, chants, poems and more on our shared Google drive: [Vigil for the Good Death Community Files](#). These are community resources that you can adapt for your needs.

### **Getting Started as a Death Priestx**

- So my grim deathlings, does this sound like fun? How does one get started?
- Conduct an honest self-evaluation:
  - Why do you feel called to the path of the death priestx?
  - What do you hope to learn and/or gain from your experiences?
  - What are your unique gifts and talents? (Recall that list of forms that Death Priestxing can take from earlier in this presentation.)
  - Risk assessment: Do you have the mental, emotional, psychic, and spiritual preparation necessary to serve as a death priestx? Do you need to build more skills, or engage in some self-care, before taking this step?
- Build space to welcome this role into your life.
  - Create a physical altar

- Establish at least one daily practice around death priestxing: grounding, centering, and daily prayers are all great practices.
- Keep a record of your progress: journal or otherwise
- Invite some helpful allies to mentor, support, and protect you in this work.
  - Deities: Hades and His Retinue (Greek), Osiris (Egyptian), Hel (Norse), Gwyn ap Nudd (Welsh), and Ereshkigal (Sumerian/Babylonian) are just a few suggestions.
    - Deity work is not a requirement for serving as a death priestx. You don't have to work with deities if you don't want to – you can have other Unseen guides and helpers, or none at all.
  - Plants: Cypress, Violet, Rosemary, Thyme
  - Animals: Cicada, Crane, Snake, Vulture
- Spend time educating yourself on the topic of death and relevant/intersecting issues:
  - The Order of the Good Death: <http://www.orderofthegooddeath.com/>
  - Ask A Mortician YouTube Channel: <https://www.youtube.com/@AskAMortician>
  - Mikayla Ricks (BIPOC Death Doula): <https://www.mikaylaricks.com/>
  - TalkDeath Resource Hub: <https://www.talkdeath.com/>

### Best Practices

- Be open to growing your skill set for holding sacred space.
  - Death can bring out deep (and sometimes complex) emotions. When we “hold sacred space” for folks, we create a container of support with our mindful presence. It is important to hold others through part, or all, of their journey without attachment to outcomes.
    - Show that you are fully present, listening and engaged.
    - Empower others to trust their own intuition and wisdom.
    - Help people feel safe enough to stretch, and to fail, by suspending judgment.
    - “Hold the rim” for complex emotions, fear, trauma activation, etc.
    - Give guidance, feedback or help with consent, humility and thoughtfulness.
    - Allow others to make different decisions, and to have different experiences than you would.
- Remember that consent is key – and impact is always more important than intention.
- Take good care of yourself.
  - Practice good spiritual hygiene: cleanse, ground, center yourself frequently.
  - Cleanse and protect your home and other working spaces on a regular basis.
  - Have a check-in buddy that you can decompress and process with.
  - Take breaks when you need them.
- “*Memento Mori, Memento Vivere*” – Remember you must die, so remember to live.
  - In the days immediately following death priestxing activities, do something enjoyable and life-affirming. Eat your favorite foods, wear your favorite clothes, play with children or animals, engage in fun physical activities. Stroll through a marketplace. Watch a comedy. Drink lots of water. Smile.

## Group Sharing Time

- Now's the time we can have an informal conversation to ask questions, share reactions and experiences with each other (if we choose). 10-15 minutes.

## Connect with Me

- Website: [www.jamiewaggoner.com](http://www.jamiewaggoner.com)
  - Sign up for my email list
  - Check out all of my upcoming events
- Email: [waggoner.jamie@gmail.com](mailto:waggoner.jamie@gmail.com)
- Socials: @jmwaggoner on Instagram, Facebook, YouTube
- Pre-order my new book – *Hades: Myth, Magic and Modern Devotion*
- Way of the Weaver: [www.wayoftheweaver.com](http://www.wayoftheweaver.com)
  - Offering “radically enchanted” classes and events that weave together the threads of magical study, justice and community.
  - Our programs are rooted in the values of service, inclusive community, critical analysis of the oppressions that bewitch our society (capitalism, colonialism, racism, etc.), and deep respect for ancestral spiritual traditions from around the world. Way of the Weaver is not a distinct magical tradition, but rather an open-source skill set with which to develop or deepen your own practice based on your background, callings, and ancestry.
  - Check out our new Way of the Weaver podcast! We have five episodes up. You can follow the link on our website to or find it in your favorite podcatcher.
  - Now enrolling for the Winter 2024 online module: Death Priestxing!
    - Begins January 2024
    - Meets every other week on Zoom, for seven interactive sessions
    - Sliding scale tuition
- Presentation art credit: [Dark Beauty Collection by WonderWonder on Creative Market](#)

## Gratitude to Hades, Unseen Ones and Attendees

- Offer gratitude to Hades and other Unseen Ones
- Extinguish candle.
- Invite everyone to take a deep breath.
- Thank y'all for your time and attention today!

## Further Resources

- The Order of the Good Death: <http://www.orderofthegooddeath.com/>
- Ask A Mortician YouTube Channel: <https://www.youtube.com/@AskAMortician>
- Mikayla Ricks (BIPOC Death Doula): <https://www.mikaylaricks.com/>
- TalkDeath Resource Hub: <https://www.talkdeath.com/>
- Morbid Curiosity Card Game: <https://www.morbidcuriositygame.com/>
- Morbid Anatomy Blog, Classes, and Events: <https://www.morbidanatomy.org/>
- 5 Wishes Living Will: <https://fivewishes.org/>
- Writing Your Own Will: <https://www.freewill.com/>