

"The grief in the human heart needs to be attended to by rituals and practices that when practiced, will lessen anger and allow creativity to flow anew."

*Matthew Fox*



"Ritual gives words to the unspeakable and form to the formless. It brings the non-physical into physical form so we can see it, touch it, feel it and process it. Rituals create a bond between Heaven and Earth."

*Terri Daniel*



## Making a Sad Place into a Sacred Place

Reframing, reconstructing,  
and turning loss into light

Grievers often find it difficult to go to the old, familiar places they used to frequent with their departed loved ones. The grocery store be the scariest place on earth after a loved one dies, because every aisle is a reminder of the food you bought, cooked and ate with them. One of my hospice clients, Helen, told me that the first time she went to the store after her husband died, she sat in the parking lot and cried, unable to go inside. I experienced the same thing after my son died; walking among those aisles was devastating. For months I drove across town to a different, unfamiliar store because my "regular" one was too full of painful reminders.

But reminders can be re-framed, and sad places can become sacred places with simple rituals like this one.

Buy a few of those little battery-operated tea lights and keep them in your purse or your car. Whenever you're going to one of those sad, scary places (driving past the school your child attended, the dog park where you played with your beloved dog, or the dreaded grocery store), "light" a candle and leave it there.

Helen told me that her husband loved Oreo cookies, so I told her to light a candle on the shelf next to the Oreos. This way, she *literally* brings light into what otherwise feels like a dark place, while also publicly honoring his memory and bringing a smile to her heart. Other shoppers and the store employees will have no idea why it's there (or maybe they will), and the candle will eventually be removed, but so what? You've done a healing ritual that will last forever for *you*.

These experiences can be beautiful instead of bitter. Tender instead of terrible. You can reconstruct how they live in your mind by re-creating them as sacred moments, sacred places and sacred memories by using rituals, representational objects, and ceremonial activities like this one as part of your daily life.

## Release Your Rage



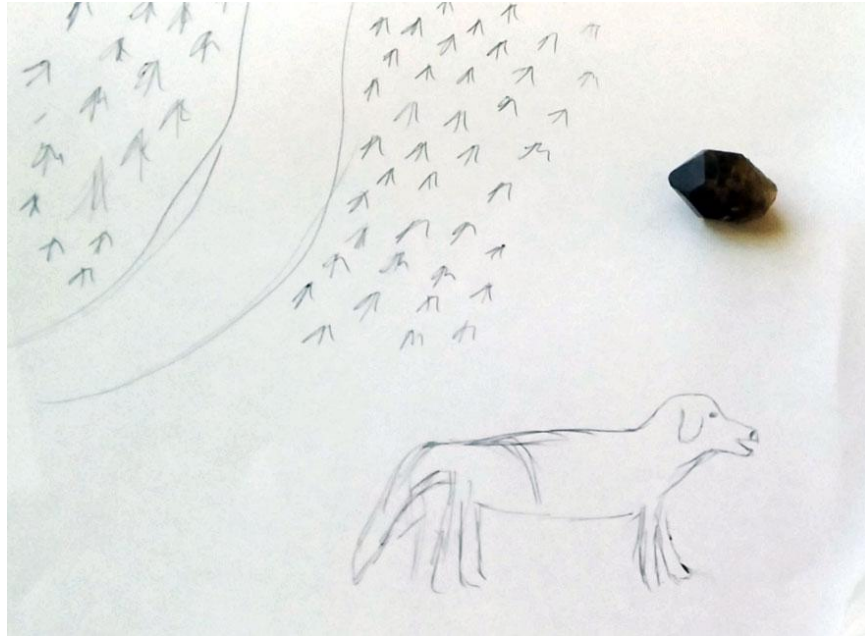
Our bodies are small and frail compared to the power of the natural elements and the universe. When we are grieving, we hold so many strong emotions that it can overwhelm our physical selves as well as our emotional and spiritual selves. Sometimes that energy can include anger, rage, guilt, blame, shame and other dark feelings that if not processed in a healthy way, can end up causing us harm.

One way to direct and release that energy is a simple exercise that uses nothing more than your breath and a rock picked up from the ground.

Find a rock and blow into it as hard as you can. Blow out all your anger, all your guilt, all the blame, all the darkness, all the negativity, all the toxic stuff that may be impeding your healing. These feelings live inside your body, and since grief is something that needs to be digested and metabolized, there are nutritious elements your body needs for its growth, but also elements of waste that need to be eliminated. Use this rock process for eliminating the waste. Blow into the rock as many times as you need to, and do this exercise as often as you need to.

Then take the rock and bury it in the earth or throw it into a river. The earth and the river are strong enough to hold that energy (they, like the rock, have been here for billions of years). This way you are giving that energy to something much bigger than you and allowing it to disperse into the elements, into the universe, to God, whatever you want to call it. And in the process, you've also opened up your heart and your lungs and taken some deep breaths, because when grieving, we tend to hold our breath and not breathe deeply enough.

## Replace Traumatic Images with a Healing Heart



Sometimes a painful picture of our loss experience or our loved one's death becomes stuck in our minds, and that picture can become intrusive and recurring. It may be an image of your child in a hospital bed in the ICU, or the traffic accident that took your spouse's life. These images can disrupt your sleep and your daily functioning to the point where they interfere with your healing. But we can actually retrain our brains to create new associations and pathways to begin to see things differently.

In this exercise you will make two drawings. In the first you will draw the traumatic scene that repeats again and again in your head. Then take that drawing and put it aside.

Now make another drawing. In this one, start by drawing a large heart. This heart represents the "home" where you will now hold your loved one, where they will live in your memory, in the legacy you create for them, or in the afterlife if that is part of your belief system. This is a picture of where you will hold them forever. What do you want this place to look like? Where do you want to locate them in time and space now that they're no longer in the hospital bed or at the accident scene? Fill the heart with everything they love, their favorite things, their favorite people, all the objects, symbols and ideas that have meaning for them and for you.

Now look at the two drawings. Which one serves you better? You can keep them both if you feel the need, but ultimately you will take the trauma drawing and release it by burning it in a fire or burying it in the earth. It does not serve you or your loved one to hold that image any longer. Put the healing image on your ancestor altar (see next page) or in any special place in your home.

*The drawing here was made by a young man who witnessed his dog getting hit by a car, and could not get that image out of his mind. This is his drawing of the place he wanted to hold his dog in his memory, running through the forest alongside a river.*



## Build an Ancestor Altar



People from a wide range of religious traditions create altars in their homes, whether they're dedicated to Mary and Jesus, Vishnu, the Great Spirit or departed loved ones and ancestors. An altar can be a small table in a corner of any room, and on it, you can place anything you like that connects you to the essence of your loved ones. Photos of the person, some of their personal objects, healing stones, flowers, hand-written messages... anything at all. Light candles on this altar whenever you feel moved to connect. It can be a yearly birthday or transition day, or every day, as you see fit.



## Home for the Holidays



Many grieverers find birthdays, Thanksgiving and the winter holidays a time of great sadness because their loved ones aren't present in physical form. But instead of focusing on their absence, consider focusing on their presence by inviting them to the festivities.

This is not such a bizarre idea. Consider that Christians use the symbolism of bread and wine to represent the flesh and blood of Jesus, and Jewish people set a place for the prophet Elijah at the Passover table each year.

On birthdays, bake your loved one's favorite cake and gather friends for a celebration (if your friends think you're crazy for doing this, it may be time to find new friends).

On Thanksgiving, put a photo of your loved one in the centerpiece, and have everybody at the table share a special memory of him or her. On Christmas, decorate your tree with the special ornaments that were meaningful to that person, and cook their favorites foods as art of your holiday feast. *Include* them. Don't hide from those memories and feelings. They are more easily healed and balanced when we invite them in rather than shoo them away.



## Take Them on a World Tour



If your loved one was cremated, instead of scattering the cremains all at one time in one place, consider scattering some of them and keeping the rest to use in future rituals, such as the person's death anniversary or birthday. Sprinkle them in your garden or into a river every year on this milestone date, or use them to create art in some form.

When I built my house in 2007, I put some of my son's cremains in each of the four corners of my property to create sacred space. You can do this every time you move to a new house, or every season when you plant a new garden. It's all about renewal. It is also possible to have the cremains used in blown glass art objects, and even in tattoos.

There are many imaginative and meaningful ways to use cremains in ceremony, and the ceremonies do not have to be formal or somber. Because my son loved to travel, I divided some of his into tiny, decorated bottles and gave one to each of our closest friends to carry with them on their vacations and business trips. His cremains have now been sprinkled in a dozen countries.

## Keep Their Name Alive



Four months after my son died I had my last name legally changed to his first name... Daniel. You may not want to go so far as to have your name changed, but you can find dozens of imaginative ways to keep your loved one's name alive. Use her nickname as one of your computer passwords, or start a business, charitable group or website using a variation of it. Engrave his name on a paving stone for your memorial garden, or design a name-based logo or icon for your business

When my beloved dog Spootie died, I wrote her name on rocks and placed them along all the paths and trails that we'd walked on together over the years together, and also around our neighborhood in all her favorite places.





## **Get the kids and grandkids involved**

Teach them about the departed. They can write letters to grandpa, add objects to the altar or share their dreams and visions. Invite them to draw pictures or write stories about the loved one, or better yet, encourage them to talk about their views of death and other worlds. If they are really suffering, please, ask your local hospice for referrals to grief groups, camps and other resources for children. The worst thing you can do for grieving children is to isolate them from the process.

## **Get a Tattoo**

Many of the firefighters who battled the blaze at the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 felt unbearable grief and guilt about the partners who'd fought beside them and perished. Some of them processed and ritualized their grief by having images of their fallen friends tattooed on their backs. The firefighters said, "This way I will have my partner's spirit with me every day of my life."

## **Travel to Their Favorite Places**

Was your departed beloved crazy about golf vacations in the Caribbean, dude ranches in Texas or art museums in Italy? If you have the resources to do so, follow his or her footsteps on your next vacation. You might be surprised at what you find there. Remember to take a battery-operated candle and light one in each of the special places!

## **Plant a Tree or a Memorial Garden**

I know of a teenage boy whose high school allowed his friends and family to plant a tree in his honor on the school property, but if you can't plant a tree or shrub in a public place in honor of your loved one, create a special corner of your yard as a memorial garden. Plant special trees and flowers there, and decorate the space with pictures, sacred objects, religious icons or anything that inspires you. If your loved one was cremated, this is an excellent place to sprinkle some of the ashes.