

What's Grief Got to Do With It?

A *Focusing Highlights* series Presentation | July 22, 2023



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What does grief have to do with life?

When we experience a loss, we often grieve the loss. If we do not grieve, we have both the loss and a disconnection from our self, our soul and Joy. I am just beginning to understand this.

This presentation is an attempt to explore this further and share what I have found ... so far.



With you I will share

- **Four points** on the relationship between grief (sorrow) and gratitude (joy).
- **Six doorways** into exploring grief with writing prompts and brief discussion.
- **How to use Focusing** to develop an apprenticeship with sorrow.
- **Wounds and gifts:** Grief work as soul work.
- **Ritual:** Form and function.

1

Gratitude and grief are both about connection.

Grief and gratitude are twin souls on life's journey. Like yin and yang, they are together reminding us of the interplay of seeming opposites that support life. Both are avenues of connection with others.



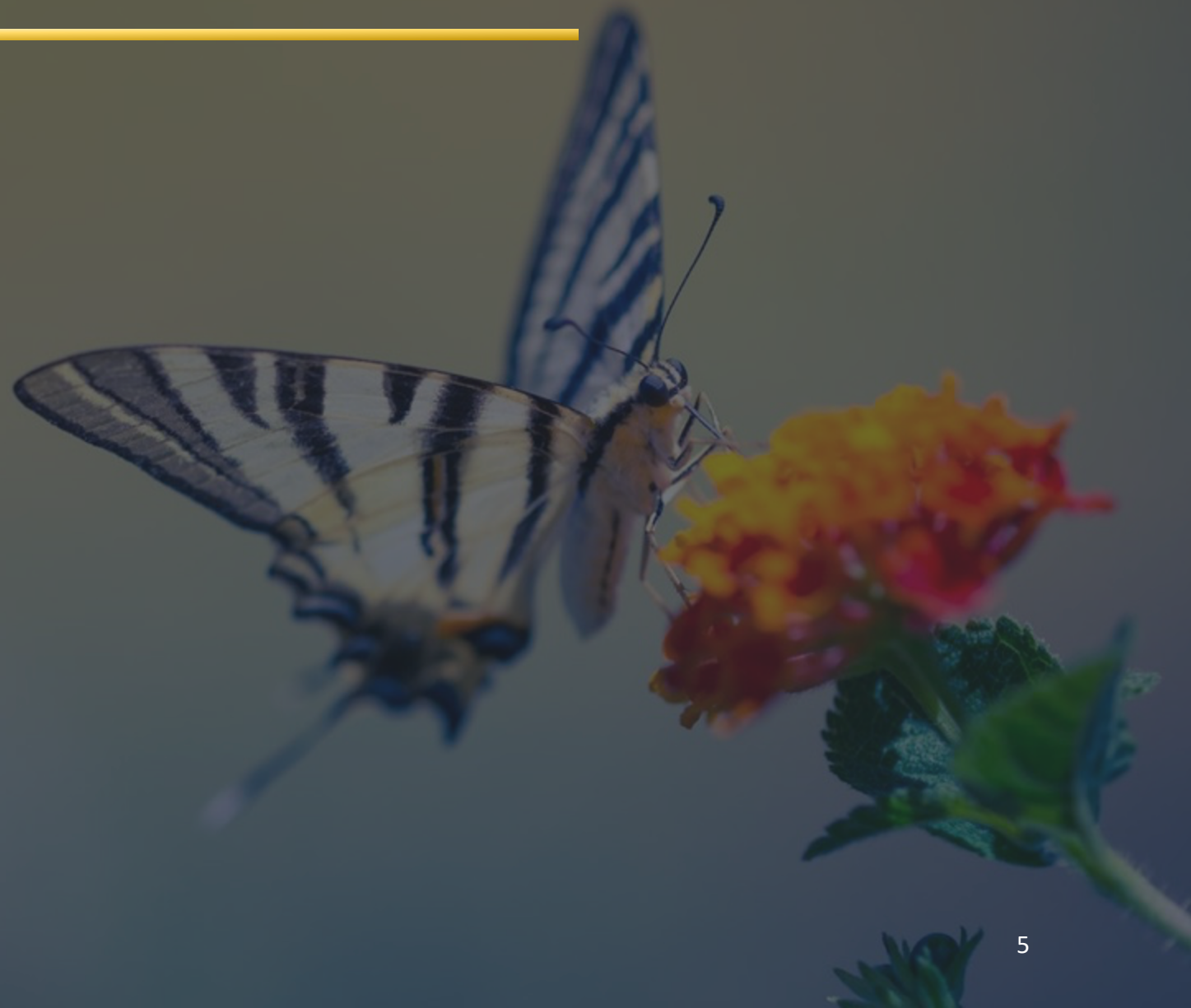
“All flourishing is mutual.” - Robin Wall Kimmerer



Sorrow and joy are not two separate things.

They are inseparable, woven into the tapestry of our living. My left hand is different than my right, yet they are of the same body.

We need to learn to be with both. Slowly I am coming to understand what Francis Weller means when he says ...



“

The work of the mature person is to carry grief in one hand and gratitude in the other and be stretched by them. How much sorrow can I hold? That's how much gratitude I can give. If I carry only grief, I'll bend toward cynicism and despair. If I have only gratitude, I'll become saccharine and won't develop much compassion for other people's suffering. Grief keeps the heart fluid and soft, which helps make compassion possible.”

- Robin Frances Weller; from *The Wild Edge of Sorrow*



Spirit and Soul: Rising and Descending

It is important to open our hearts to the fullness of life.

Often the opening is reserved for the joy and gratitude while leaving out the sorrow and loss.

We need both to be whole.

- Opening our hearts
- Grounding to the earth



3

There's deep value in integrating grief work into our daily living.

Loss is involved in all we do. Joyful experiences end. There is a loss, and it is felt. All we have gained we shall lose. We are touched by others' sorrow daily. What if grief, sorrow and letting go were experienced as a natural process integral to living itself?



There is an old Zen story that goes ...

After breakfast the young student approaches the Zen master and asks, “Master, how do I reach satori?” The master replies, “Wash your dishes.”

Enlightenment can be found in the everyday mundane tasks of living. It is also true that “washing your dishes” is part of the process of enjoying breakfast. If we live in a way that separates what we like about a process from what we don’t like about a process, a disconnect forms.

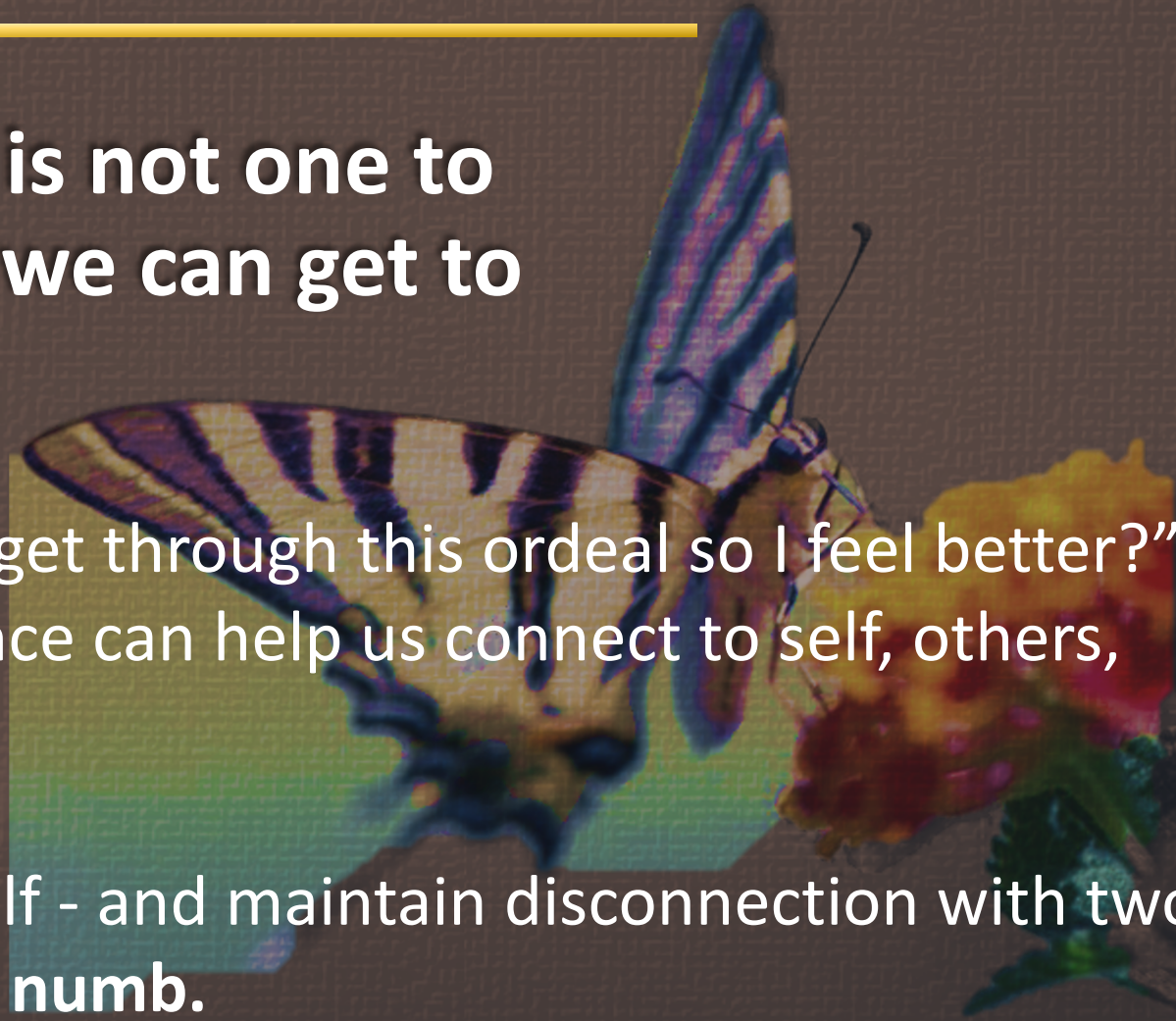


4

The territory of sorrow is not one to simply 'get through' so we can get to something better.

If we think, "How quickly can I get through this ordeal so I feel better?" then we miss how the experience can help us connect to self, others, and heal.

We also disconnect with our self - and maintain disconnection with two **twin sins: forgetting and going numb.**



Two Doors of Initiation and Awakening



1

Door number one is an experience of **deep joy and aliveness.**

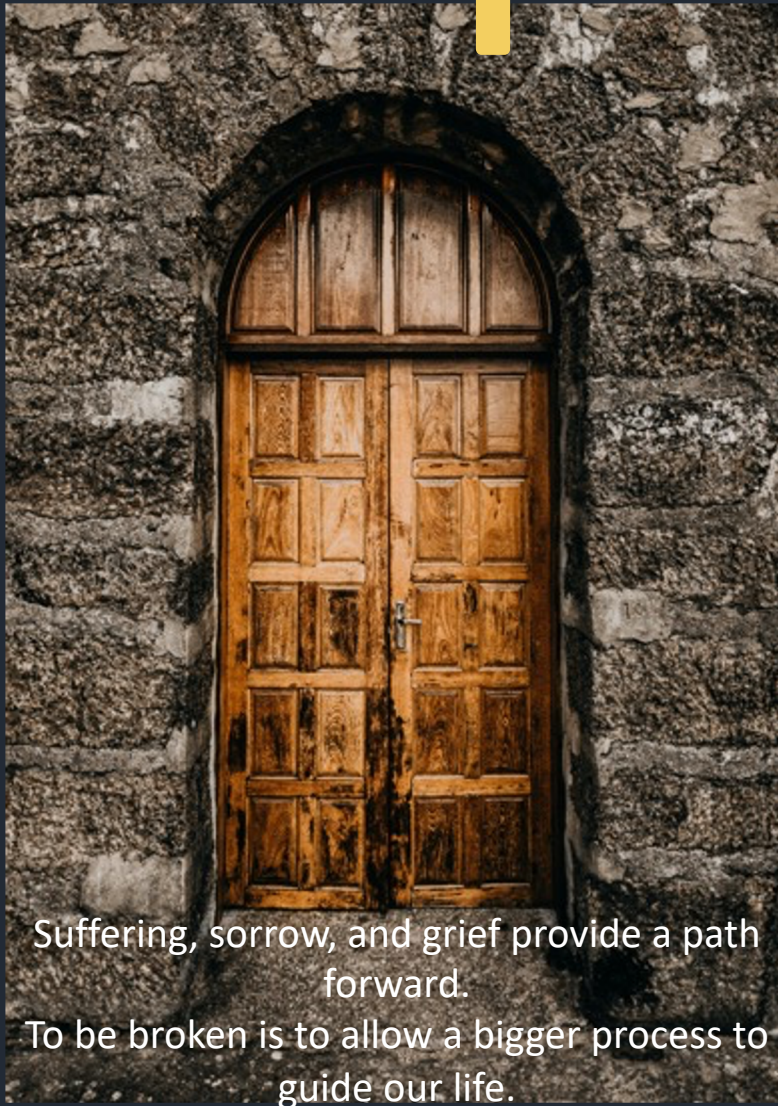
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Door number two is a wounding experience that includes **grief and sorrow.**

Both can put us in touch with our deeper continuity (wholeness) and life forward energy.



Three stages of initiation



- **Separation:** The soul is looking for initiation.
- **Ordeal:** This is the soul's attempt to find the wound and heal it.
- **Return:** Healing the inner division in the soul occurs often through a healing relationship where we are seen for who we are.

Suffering, sorrow, and grief provide a path forward.

To be broken is to allow a bigger process to guide our life.

Trauma and Grief Work

Once we have pieced together enough of the wounding event so that the client has their memory of it, then we can process the grief and sorrow they held in their bodies.

Once the burdens and losses are worked with and set down perhaps some ritual can help us mark the transition into wholeness. Without spending time with the dark night of the soul they will remain separated from themselves in ways that may not be visible but are felt and reactive in their system and cause further suffering.



Beyond Therapy: The Fruit of Sorrow



The bigger picture includes the return home. When we attend to our wounds we can find our gifts and take them back into community to be shared with others. This is the fruit of sorrow. Individual healing is not enough. It is not enough to simply feel better. That is a good start but not a full, whole, living forward. Only after our gifts are found, embodied, and shared can they manifest and be a resource for community.

“All Flourishing is Mutual”

Weller's Five Gates of Grief

1. Everything we love, we will lose.
2. The places that have not known love.
3. The sorrows of the world.
4. What we expected and did not receive.
5. Ancestral Grief.



GATE

1

Everything We Love, We Will Lose

“I have come to have a deep faith in grief have come to see the way its moods call us back to soul. It is, in fact one of the voices of the soul asking us to face life most difficult but essential teaching: everything is a gift, and nothing lasts. This is the painful truth. To accept this fact is to live on life's terms and not try to deny the simple truth of the loss, what the Buddhists call impermanence.”

About the Grieving Process

- When we lose someone or something we love.
- When we suffer illness. **The root of the word *cure* means to 'sorrow' for something.**
- The dark night of the soul. What we must go through.
- The relationship continues: They live in your heart.
- Sharing your experience
- Initiation



The Places That Have Not Known Love

“This grief occurs in the places often untouched by love. These are profoundly tender places precisely because they have lived outside of kindness, compassion, warmth, or welcome.” These are the places within us that have been wrapped in shame and banished to the furthest shores of our lives. We often hate these parts of ourselves, hold them in contempt, and refuse to allow them the light of day we do not show these outcast brothers and sisters to anyone, and we thereby deny the parts of ourselves the healing salve of community.”

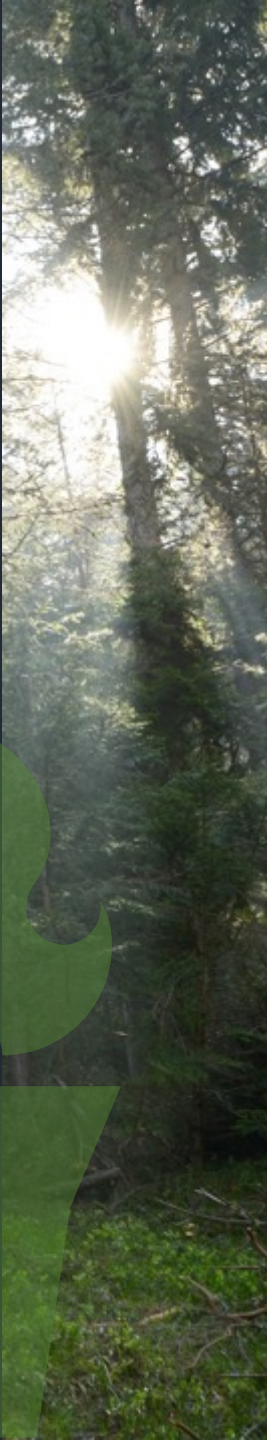
About the Grieving Process

- *This happens when what was needed, being seen, and reflected, did not occur. (absence)*
- *We felt shame and unlovable for being who we are.*
- *Shame is unbearable. A critic comes to bury it.*
- It is a vulnerable thing to be seen. Taking that step means facing our inner critic.



We need three things to happen

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- *We felt shame and unlovable for being who we are.*
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GATE

3

The Sorrows of the World

“The third gate of grief opens when we register the losses of the world around us. Whether or not we consciously recognize it, the daily diminishment of species, habitats, and cultures is noted in our psyches. Much of the grief we carry is not personal but shared communal.”

About the Grieving Process

- Earth-grief: Sorrow for the soul of the earth.
- We are interaction with all living process.
- We long for beauty. Our existential dread for the world we live in is a knowing that the beauty of the world is diminishing and being replaced by man-made objects.
- We are made by what we live with.
- If we disconnect from nature, we disconnect from the soul of the world.



“

Your physically felt body is in fact part of a gigantic system of here and other places, now and other times, you and other people – in fact, the whole universe. This sense of being bodily alive in a vast system is the body as it is felt from the inside.

- EUGENE T. GENDLIN

What We Expected and Did Not Receive

“There is another gate to grief one difficult to identify yet it is very present in each of our lives. This threshold into sorrow calls forward the things that we may not even realize we have lost. I've written elsewhere about the expectations coded into our physical and psychic lives when we are born and as we pass through childhood, adolescence, and the stages of adulthood. We are designed to anticipate a certain quality of welcome, engagement, touch, and reflection. In short, we expect what our deep time ancestors experienced as their birthright, namely the container of the village.”

About the Grieving Process

- Birth: I am born with gifts to share with the community. Will they be received?
- Adolescence: Transition into adulthood. Will someone help me find my gifts?
- Older or Elder: Sharing your wisdom. Sharing our gifts and mentoring others.



GATE

5

Ancestral Grief

The 5th gate of grief is what I call ancestral grief. This is the grief we carry in our bodies from sorrows experienced by our ancestors. Much of this grief lingers in a layer of silence unacknowledged. Many of our ancestors arrived in the Americas after leaving their homes family members and communities behind. Some arrived here after being abducted and forced into slavery. These generations often survived without a feeling of home, living with only marginal connections with the Old Ways to guide them.”

About the Grieving Process

- The unfulfilled dreams of your ancestors.
- Tragedies and cut offs. What came before us, affects us.
- Immigration: What your ancestors had to do to survive and the fear they may have passed on.
- Family stories: Is there a theme in your family history? Has some expectation of who you should be or what you should achieve been passed down that is not congruent with who you are?



6

Vicarious Grief



Vicarious grief refers to grief that is held in a person's body, but that is not derived from their own life experiences. In essence, they are experiencing someone else's trauma/grief vicariously. Our empathic skills as human beings are so great, it is as if we are experiencing what another is going through. This is facilitated in the brain by means of mirror neurons – we are wired to connect (Goleman, 2006).

The Ways We “Pick Up” Vicarious Trauma and Grief

Family: Children pick up bits of dissociated emotion as an act of service to the family.

- Can we grieve what we picked up or took on as children?

Culture: What we pick up from our culture.

- We are confronted with mass shootings, political polarization, and rapid change.

Community: How we are affected by those we work with. Our community.

- As a trauma therapist I feel the residue of the stories I listen to.



The Grieving Process

- To identify that what you are feeling is from some other time, place or person. It is not yours.
- To get a felt sense of the whole of this “something” so that you become aware of how it “lives in you.”
- Create a ritual or simply an act of “setting it down.” Return it to the earth.



Developing an Apprenticeship With Sorrow

Welcoming our experience



“An apprenticeship with sorrow invites us to learn the rites of grief and to practice a reverence of approach, as Irish poet/philosopher John O'Donoghue suggests. He writes, “What you encounter, recognize, or discover, depends to a large degree on the quality of your approach ... when we approach with reverence great things decide to approach us.”

Being Present

“One of the most essential skills we need to develop in our apprenticeship is our ability to stay present in our adult selves when grief arises.”

- **Use Presence language:** “I’m sensing, something in me, that feels ...”
- **Finding the right distance**
- **Developing an observer self**



A Right Relationship and conversation with a guest

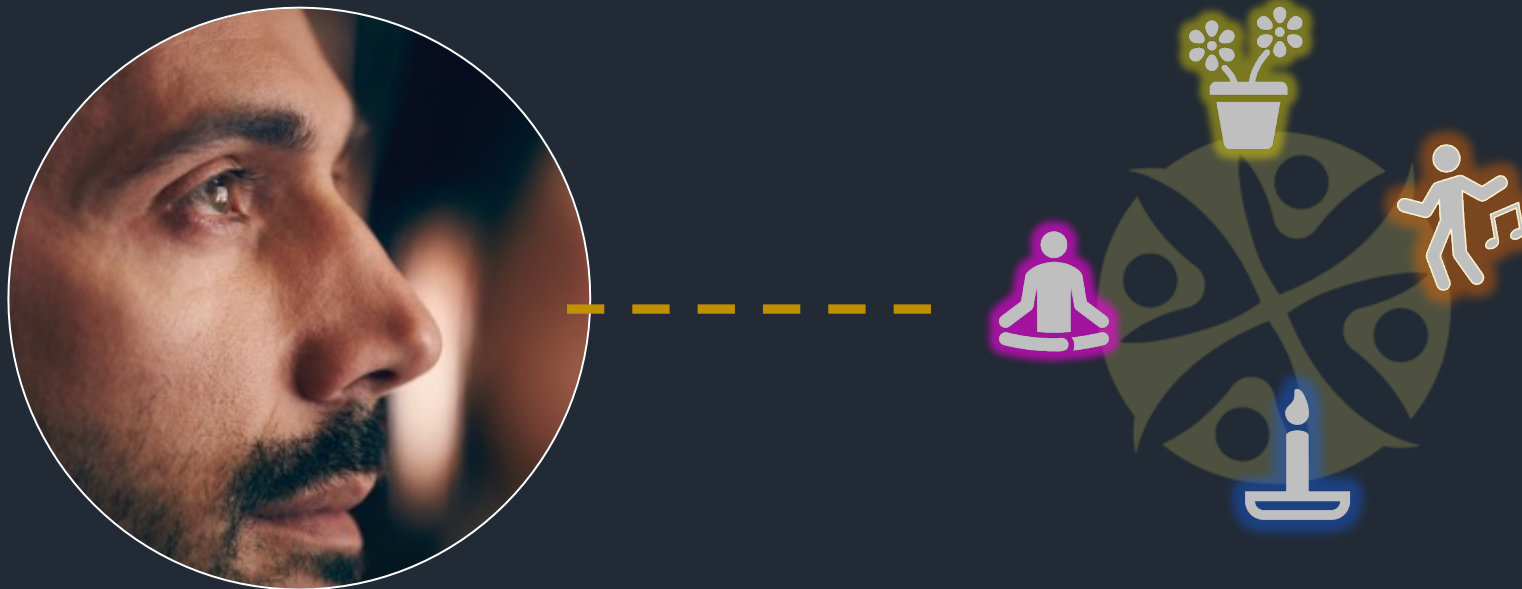
“When we come to our grief with reverence, we find ourselves in the *right relationship* with sorrow, neither too far away nor too close. We have entered into an *ongoing conversation* with this difficult, holy visitor. Learning we can *Be-with* our grief, holding it softly and warmly, is the first task of our apprenticeship.”

- Acceptance and reverence
- Being-with
- Listening to our guests



Develop *your* practice(s)

“This is done through *developing a practice* that we sustain over time. Any form will do – writing, drawing, meditation, prayer, dance, or something else. As long as we continue to show up and maintain our effort, a practice offers ballast, something to help us hold steady in difficult times.”



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Ritual as a Gesture of Transformation

Ritual as a gesture of transformation

“Simply said, ritual is a gesture done with emotion and intention by an individual or a group that attempts to connect the individual or the community with transpersonal energies for the purposes of healing and transformation.”



Three Key Aspects of Ritual

Ritual functions to open us up to something more in life by helping to make the repressed visible so we can transcend the fixed nature of beliefs and routines.

It is also reparative. It can be used to help us touch and be-with that which needs healing in us thus inviting exiled parts back into the whole of our deeper continuity.

Its form is one of a safe container for holding sorrow while also offering a process for letting go of what no longer serves us to hold onto. This may involve taking some writing or an object and burning it or placing it in the ground.

