

# Ritual for Healing in Grief and Loss

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*This presentation is based on [Ritual Healing for Grief and Loss](#)  
by Sarah Kerr, PhD at [Centre for Sacred Deathcare](#)*



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Outline  
Grief and Loss  
Ritual Principles  
Ritual Structure  
Ritual Practice

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## Grief and Loss

- Grief is an adaptive healing response
- It is how we integrate loss
- Loss can be a doorway to personal transformation
- Grief is a way of saying goodbye and saying hello
- Deep loss is overwhelming at a soul level

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## Ways to think about loss and grief

### Timing

- External world moves faster than our souls can  
*"I can't believe this is happening" "I'm so confused"*  
*"I'm disoriented"*
- Soul hasn't caught up – body and soul not integrated
- The world moves on and our soul is stuck

### Magnitude

- Inside and outside are not matched
- What we experience interiorly is not reflected back to us
- Need to balance what is happening on inside to what is happening on outside

### Calibration trauma

- When we experience too much, too fast without support. The soul hasn't caught up.
- We need to build the container again to be able to absorb this. Ritual can be one way of building the container to hold this.

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## The Healing Goal

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The healing goal is integration.

The body and soul are together.  
My inside and my outsides match.

The person I love is gone, and I am  
aligned with that internally.

I have integrated, I've metabolized,  
I've digested it. That's the goal.

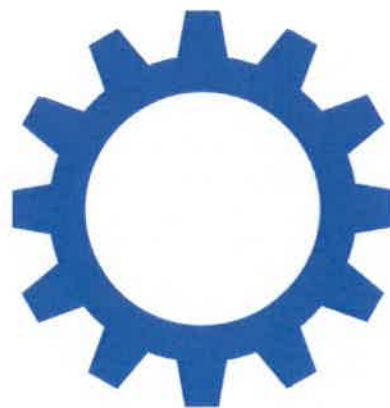
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## The Journey of Integration

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- *Integration doesn't happen quickly and it doesn't often happen without help.*
- *Rituals are ways of bringing us into alignment, where we catch up and we can integrate.*
- *It's like a wheel that turns as we're on this journey of integration. And it turns in chunks - there's a moment, and there's a moment, and a moment. It's not a smooth turning.*
- *Those are all these really significant moments. They're heightened energetic moments.*



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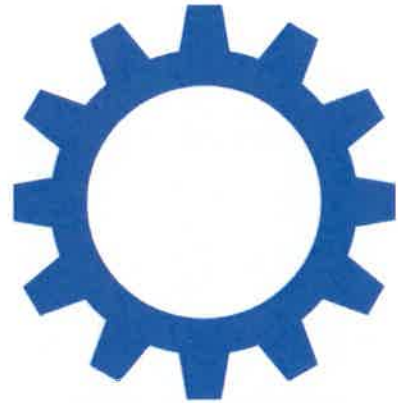
## The Journey of Integration

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Important, interior experiences

- Walking into the house on your own
- Taking off a wedding ring
- First holiday without them
- Changing the bank records
- Clearing their clothes from the closet
- The time your child would have finished school

All these times, which the world doesn't really validate as being significant on the outside but are hugely significant on the inside. When we ritualize those, it allows our insides and our outsides to catch up.



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## The Journey of Integration

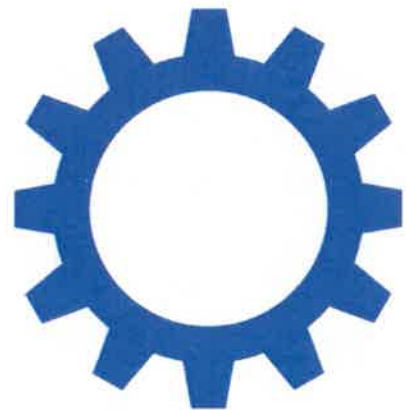
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When someone first dies, grief is:

- All encompassing
- It is everywhere
- A huge ball of grief and pain
- Everywhere we turn, the grief is there.

As we do the work of grieving, the work of integrating

- The grief becomes right sized
- It gets smaller and you become bigger
- The grief is part of you, but it occupies its right place, but not all the place



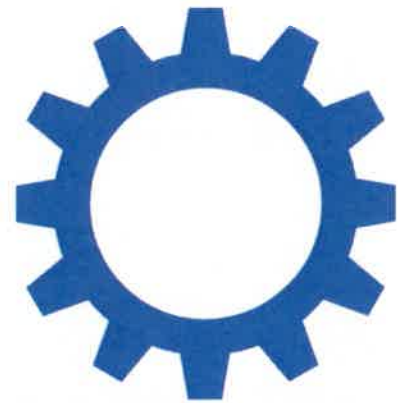
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## The Journey of Integration

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Integration needs to happen slowly, at the soul's timing.

- Listen for the interior prompts, nudges.
- Titrating, adding one substance to another until the thing you are adding it to adjusts. It is a slow change. We do it bit by bit until we have absorbed it in a titrated way.
- Controlling the speed and the magnitude to match where we can regulate our emotions



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## Grief is an Energy – like Water

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## Riverbanks offer Structure for Grief to Flow Through

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## The difference between Grief and Grieving

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### Grief

- is a feeling that comes and goes
- it's unique for each person.
- It's a sign from the system that you're out of balance.
- It's like I've lost something. My world has been rocked.

### Grieving

- Is the action we take that is the solution to grief
- It's how we meet that message from our system that something is out of balance
- Moving the grief in our bodies to bring myself back to balance, e.g. having a good cry.

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## The difference between Grief and Grieving

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- Grief is an adaptive healing response. Grieving is what we do.
- We don't integrate and come through grief to the other side just by waiting.
- Time is a healer? Yes, but time can also numb things.
- It's what you do in that time that heals things. It's how you do the work of metabolizing and integrating and coming to terms with and railing against and wishing it weren't so but realizing it is. It's that work that stretches us and makes the grief shrink. So it's the action.
- Rituals are the actions that move the energy.

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## Ritualising the meaningful moments

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- Rituals allow our insides and our outsides to catch up
- Rituals can be big or small
- A small ritual can be pausing, name and honour the dead person, thank them, really register that this is a huge soul movement and do the action
- Ritual is marking it as an action that is meaningful
- In ritual, time dilates, it gets bigger.
- In ritual we can absorb in a more titrated way

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## Recap about Grief and Loss

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Grief and loss can be overwhelming experiences for the soul.  
Overwhelming in terms of timing or magnitude  
Healing is when we come back into balance - when the insides and the outsides match  
We do this slowly.

Rituals help to integrate. Help to heal.  
Rituals titrate.  
Rituals use symbols to connect the different parts of our experience

Marking the loss with a series of rituals.

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## Ritual Definition

One of the ways to define a ritual  
is that it's an action that means something.

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## Ritual Steps

### Start with Intention

- What is the intention of what you want to do or change with this ritual?
  - Do you want to move the energy?
  - Do you want to honour the person who's died?
  - Do you want to say goodbye to this part of your life together?
- Start with the intention and then find a symbolic action that aligns with that gesture.
  - It's not a recipe.
  - Rituals can look like anything, and they can be in any frame or style of action.
  - You need to find the style that works for you.

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## Ritual has 5 phases:

### 1. Planning

- Not every ritual is planned. Sometimes the moment calls for a ritual gesture
- Planning amplifies the energy
  - e.g. setting a date in the future for a ritual
  - inviting others
  - putting effort in
  - praying about it
- Planning deepens the strength of the ritual



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## 2: Opening the ritual

Step away from normal life. I'm not in the everyday anymore. I'm stepping into ritual space by:

- drawing a line of sand with your toe and stepping across it.
- being in a special place, taking a breath and saying, oh, okay, I'm focused.
- a change of clothing or going to a special place

Sometimes it's deeper ritual practices, bringing people together for a formalised ritual.

Opening includes intention setting and invocation

Invocation is calling on the healing powers you know and trust to support your intention. It's about leaning into something bigger than yourself e.g.

- Spiritual or religious practices, or figures or beings, ancestors
- Qualities e.g. forgiveness, compassion, peace
- Community, power of nature, your own wisest inner self

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## 3. The Ritual Action

The Ritual Action is the gesture. Here's the thing I want to do.

*"I wanted to take their clothes to the Salvation Army. So I pull up outside, take a breath, I say, okay, this is bigger on the inside than it is on the outside. I name this. I honour what's happening. I invoke, okay, give me the courage and the strength to do this. I do this with love."*

And the gesture is you open the car and you drop it in the bins. Huge ritual significance to that. And you get back in your car and the next step is the closing.

At a wedding, the build up to *"I now pronounce you, spouse and spouse."* There's a dramatic arc.

At a funeral, there's a lot of energy that comes to the moment when we say our goodbyes, close the coffin, the hearse departs. There's the moment. We want the moment, and then, the moment passes and the ritual ends.

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## 4. Closing

Okay, I'm getting ready to come back  
 Thank and release everybody you invited  
 And you sort of step back across that line. Okay, I'm back. It feels different.

## 5. Feasting

Not really optional - the way a ritual works is you've gone into it as one person and you come out of it as another.

That's why we have afternoon tea after a funeral. It's our first step into life as this new person that the ritual has transformed us into.

Feasting is a bridge back to ordinary life. Give yourself a breather - Sit down by the river and pause, have a cup of tea, allow yourself to settle and absorb it all.

Don't just go from what you did to back out in the world.

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## How and When to Use Ritual

### 1. Catching up with what's already happened in the past

This enables the soul to catch up with the body.

To integrate.

### 2. Rituals to stay present with what is happening now.

The wheel turning moments

*Clearing their stuff out of the bedroom closet*

*Selling their car*

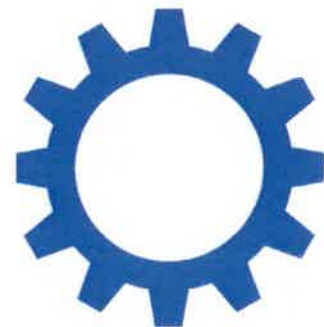
*Using the money she left you in her will*

*Re-purposing their old room*

*Taking off a wedding ring*

*Going to a place that was meaningful to them on their birthday*

It may look like nothing on the outside, but it is something significant on the inside.



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## Examples of Rituals: Death of a Loved One

Marisa is heartbroken after losing her older sister, Gabriela.

In addition to mourning her sister's passing, Marisa is sad that she did not get a chance to say goodbye.

This is how Marisa designed and carried out a ritual to aid her grief process:

Ritual Step	Action
Planning	On Saturday I'm going to walk by the stream where Gabriela loved watching the birds.
Opening	Marisa arrives at the walk, and she pauses for a few moments to remind her of her intention for this walk. She brings Gabriela to mind and pictures her here. Invocation: She quietly expresses a prayer for healing and release.

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Ritual Step	Action
Ritual Action	Marisa walks through the bush to the stream and finds a quiet spot on its banks. On the way she collects bird feathers that she finds on the path. She holds them gently in her hands, and feels into the connection with Gabriela. She says goodbye to Gabriela and wishes her spirit well. She then gently releases the feathers into the stream and watches them disappear.
Closing	When she is ready, she silently offers thanks for this time of remembering her sister and the special place it was for her. As she returns home, she resolves to revisit the ritual site over the next few weekends.
Feasting	Marisa stops at a local café and enjoys a coffee and cake, reflecting on her experience.

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## Examples of Grief Rituals

- Share Photos of the Deceased & Talk About Them
- Wear a Clothing Item of Your Deceased Loved One
- Create a Memory Box
- Go to Their Favourite Place
- Do Yearly Remembrance Activities/Celebrations
- Engage In Art in Their Memory (*painting, writing, cooking..*)
- Write a Letter to Your Loved One
- Plant Something In Remembrance
- Use an Everyday Item of the Deceased
- Create an Altar for Your Loved One
- Light a Candle at a Certain Time of Day Everyday
- Go to Their Favourite Spot in Nature

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## Grief Rituals you can do with others

- Releasing balloons
- Doing an activity together that the person loved, *e.g. fishing, bush walking, cooking*
- Planting flowers in a memory garden or planting a tree together
- Reading poetry aloud with others
- Sharing favourite stories about the loved one
- Doing a service activity related to the person's interests
- Unveiling a plaque or memorial stone honouring the loved one

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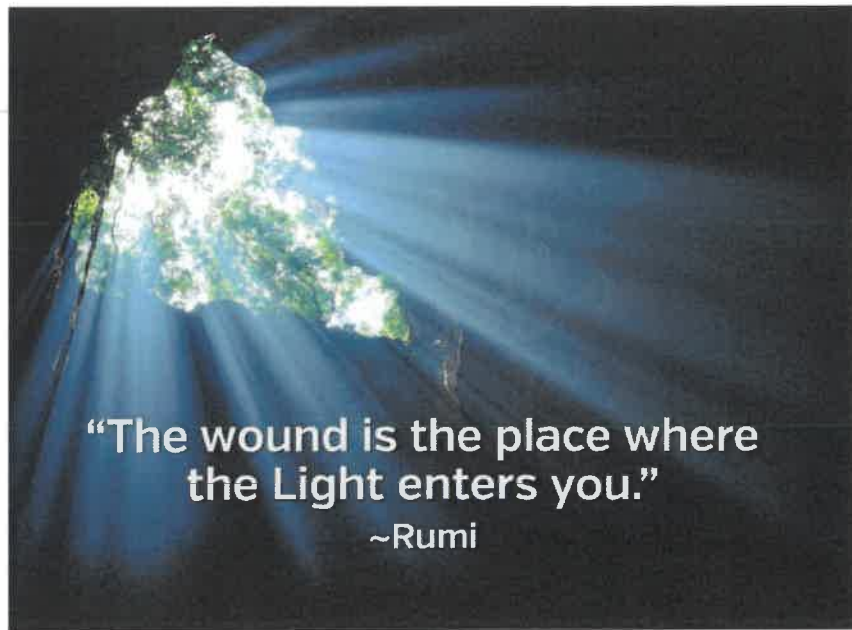
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## Benefits to practicing grief rituals:

- Promotes acceptance
- Provides emotional comfort
- Contains and/or expresses intense feelings
- Continues an emotional bond with the person who died
- Provides ways to connect with your social supports like friends and family
- Provides a sense of order and control around your grief
- Provides a way to develop meaning from the loss



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“The wound is the place where  
the Light enters you.”

~Rumi