

A Ritual for Winter Feast Remembrance?

Here is a story that Jack Kornfield related in his book, "The Wise Heart":

A psychologist name Alyssa came to a meditation retreat where I was teaching. Alyssa worked with the UN caring for refugees, especially those who had been tortured and who were seeking political asylum. Alyssa told me she found it hard to sleep, to let go of the stories and images of suffering she was hearing. These images arose even during her meditation. "It is sometimes too much," she said.

During the retreat, Alyssa used practices of compassion and equanimity to work with these images. The meditation got easier. Then we talked about how these profound sorrows are not meant to be borne alone. I told Alyssa she needed backup. I suggested she create a large altar on the back wall of her office and place on it whatever inspired her spiritually. Initially she included statues and images of Kwan Yin, Tara, Buddha, Jesus, Guadalupe, and Mary. Over time she added images of Latin American, African, and Haitian gods and an Arabic passage of mercy from the Koran. Now when the refugees arrive in her office, they see behind her the sacred images of each of their gods. To start each day, Alyssa calls on the gods and ancestors to support her and hold those who bring their sufferings to her. At the end of the day she symbolically places the sorrows she has heard on the altar, in their compassionate hands.

Now she feels that she does not carry her burden entirely by herself. The altar is a daily reminder of how the forces of compassion throughout the world uphold her dedication. We do not work alone for change; the power of life works with us.

Creating a simple ritual, such as inviting a person to make a prayer or light a candle, can bring a sense of reverence and new possibility to that persons' inner work. Sometimes crafting a personalized ritual on the spot is the best medicine. It may be the ceremonial burning of old love letters or the burying of relics of our grief; it may be a paper listing habits and fears to be released upon the waves, the ringing of a gong to symbolize the end of an unhealthy phase of life, or the dedication and lighting of a candle to symbolize a new-found freedom. All these rituals can release our past and reawaken our true nature.

You have made a connection with meditators and spiritual seekers around the world through your participation in the Winter Feast. You have been supported by the structure of the feast, by your commitment, by the materials sent to you, and by the journey you share with meditators and friends in your immediate environment. Think about this story Jack related as you come to the end of your feast. What will support you in the future?

Can you create some little ritual(s) for yourself? Can you pick an object to remind you that your place in the world extends far past the walls around you? Can you make a habit of saying a prayer or maybe one of the quotations from the feast that moved you, as a way to remind yourself every day that your spirit extends far beyond the confines of how you usually think about yourself? Can you color a little square of paper blue and carry it in your pocket to remind yourself of the sky-like vastness of mind? What would work for you?

When people go to a meditation retreat, there is usually a ceremony at the end to bring closure and to help everyone begin to think about "daily life." Some will continue to meditate after the retreat, some will not, and most will meditate for a while and then find it harder and harder to continue. There is no right way or wrong way (but you know that, right?). There is always mindfulness, however, and compassion for one's self. That is always available, no further away than a thought in your mind. The work you have done will help you to find your way back to compassion for yourself and for others. Believe it or not, and whether you consider your feast a success or not – you have changed the world.