

## RESOURCES

In the following pages, I offer a series of practices and rituals that can help us move grief through our bodies and souls. It is essential for us to build muscle in our capacity to work with sorrow. It is also essential to offer ourselves the support we need in times of deep grief.

### Some Thoughts on Practice

Any of us who has ever picked up a musical instrument, a paintbrush, pen, tennis racket, or knitting needles knows that in order to become even remotely proficient with the instrument, we have to put in hours and hours of practice. The same is true of our inner life. Cultivating an internal world with some equanimity requires practices that help to steady the maelstrom of thought and emotion that often keeps us agitated and preoccupied. Quieting the mind is the goal of many meditation practices. In our apprenticeship with grief, we need practices that help us hold the wild, piercing emotions that often accompany loss with a semblance of compassion. Here are some thoughts on the value of practice.

### **Practice Provides Ballast**

Every one of us has encountered times when we felt as though we were in the middle of an immense storm. The winds were fierce, and the downpour felt biblical. In these times, we can easily be tossed about, roiling in the waves that crash on the shore. Practice helps to root us, to anchor our internal presence onto something solid. An image from nature provides us with a useful metaphor. Along the

California coast, there are great beds of kelp. They sway with the currents but are held in place by the powerful grip of a “holdfast.” The holdfast is “a fist of knobby fingers that stick to a rock with the glue the plant makes from sunshine in saltwater, an invisible bond strong enough to hold against all but the worst winter gales.”<sup>96</sup>

Practice is a form of holdfast, offering a footing in the depths, something that steadies us in harsh weather, a strong and dedicated grasp that holds us firm in difficult times. We cannot control the ferocity of the storm, but we can cultivate the grip of our holdfast through our steady practices.

### **Practice Is Vesseling**

Vesseling is an idea that comes from alchemy. The old alchemists recognized that all deep work requires a holding space, a secure vessel within which the work is carried out. Vessels both contain and separate, allowing us to attend to the matter at hand. The container must be constructed slowly, however, over time, with attention, repetition, and care. If we place too much pressure on a weak container, it will shatter. We see the same thing happening in relationships that have failed or in projects we have abandoned. As James Hillman notes, “In your patience, is your soul.”<sup>97</sup>

### **Practice Deepens Our Connection to Source**

The German mystic Meister Eckhart wrote, “God is a deep underground river that no one can dam up and no one can stop.”<sup>98</sup> This is a beautiful image, but how do we tap into the eternal source of clear water? Any intentional practice can be a way to dig our well. Silence, prayer, writing, dancing, painting—any act that carries devotion can become a soulful ritual. This keeps us accessible to the visible and invisible sources of vitality. Once the well is dug, however, it is essential that we keep drawing water from it, or the capillaries that feed the well will close. The practice of returning again and again

to our yoga mat, our writing desk, or our cello is what poet Mary Oliver calls “keeping the appointment.”<sup>99</sup> This consistency builds soul muscle. It takes enormous psychic strength to tolerate the rigors of engaging what arises from the unconscious, especially in times of grief. We need the waters from the underground river to nourish us as we face the feelings, images, memories, and thoughts that arise in times of sorrow.

### **Practice Invites Revelation**

When we show up with regularity, we are clearing the table for new arrivals. Anyone who has labored with a creative project knows this truth. Patience and soulful repetition opens the door to something surprising, something revelatory. In our times with grief, we often feel stuck, languishing in a bog. Slowly, however, images appear, feelings migrate, and something comes to let us know that we have moved in some way—not necessarily for the better, but a move has occurred. I have sat with many people in grief who have shared dreams or images that have left them in awe. Practice keeps the flow moving, inviting the possibility of revelation.

### **Practice Invites the Marginalized Voices to Speak**

We are a menagerie of moods, emotions, thoughts, and selves. For the most part, we keep the unsavory brothers and sisters on the outskirts of town. Practice, however, invites these voices into the mix, recognizing in them an essential element in our well-being. We are asked to welcome the weak and vulnerable parts of ourselves in times of grieving. Paradoxically, it requires a good deal of strength, once again, to yield and welcome what culturally has been deemed worthless. Grief work invites us to extend the reach of our welcome and admit those who have lived on the margins back to the central fire.

### **Practice Increases the Heat in Our Psychic World**

All change requires intensity. A steady practice builds the internal heat with which we are able to warm the contents in the container. We must learn to both modulate the fire and feed the fire. Modulating the fire means that we must pay close attention to our internal states. Too much fire and we burn out, the container breaks, and we lose the work we have begun. At the same time, we want to feed the fire sufficiently to keep the work moving. As James Hillman said, "you get from the fire only what the fire is fed."<sup>100</sup> If we ignore the fire, our internal life feels cold and the grief in our container congeals. Offering our attention, affection, and love, on the other hand, feeds the fire, and the gradual work of transmuting grief into gold can commence.

Practice is at the heart of our apprenticeship with sorrow. There is no maturation of this skill without practice. Becoming proficient in the art of grieving enables us to stand solidly in the lineage of those who have loved and served what is alive.

### **Practice Offers Us Many Chances**

It appears that we humans are the one creature on the planet that repeatedly forgets who we are.<sup>101</sup> We lose presence, forget to lean in to life, and live half-hearted. We slip into modes of existence that are truly separate from the nature of who we are. Practice is designed to help us recall our vital essence. In fact, we could say that life is one continuous act of remembering, of gathering ourselves back together again and again, and living from the "deep well of things as they are."



## The Generous Heart: The Gift of Self-Compassion

You can search throughout the entire universe for someone who is more deserving of your love and affection than you are yourself, and that person is not to be found anywhere. You, yourself, as much as anybody in the entire universe, deserve your love and affection.

—BUDDHA

At the heart of every spiritual tradition, we find the teaching of compassion. Through the gate of compassion we are invited to enter the wider conversation with all life. Compassion binds us with all things through the shared encounter with suffering. Compassion: from the Latin *compati*, “to suffer with.” It is through our experience with loss, sorrow, and pain that we deepen our connection with one another and enter the commons of the soul.

But how are we with *self-compassion*? Too often our caring is reserved for those outside of ourselves, as though we haven’t earned the right for kindness. We judge ourselves and resist offering gestures of mercy to ourselves. Yet, every one of us knows loss and defeat, loneliness and failure. We hurt and harm others, are hurt and harmed by others; we close our hearts to the world and often choose self-protection as a way of life.

Bringing compassion to our suffering is an act of generosity. It helps us remember that we, too, are part of this breathing, pulsing world. We are reminded that, by the mere fact of our being here, we qualify for the soothing waters of compassion. We can then come out of our sheltered world of self-scrutiny and make our way back into the fuller embrace of our belonging.

When I work with groups on the topic of self-compassion, I often begin by describing our time together as a project in “non-self-improvement.” So often our efforts at change in our lives mask



subtle and not-so-subtle acts of self-hatred. We attack portions of our life with a vengeance, fully believing that our weakness or inadequacy, our neediness, or our failures are the reasons for our suffering, and *if only* we could be free of them, we would enter into a state of perfection; all would be well. Our obsession with perfection is itself a strategy that we cling to in an attempt to overcome our feelings of being outside the wall of welcome.

Giving up our muscular agendas of self-improvement is an act of kindness. It says that by befriending our life, we deepen our capacity to welcome what is, what comes, whoever arrives at the interior door of our soul's house. We don't often get to decide who or what shows up at the "guest house," as Rumi says, but we can cultivate an atmosphere of curiosity and receptivity. Self-compassion gradually becomes one of the basic elements of maturation. We slowly relinquish the harsh program of ridding ourselves of our outcast brothers and sisters for the sake of fitting in; we simply set another place at the table.

This is not to say that we do not seek change. At a recent gathering, a man said to me, "I noticed that you don't talk about progress in your work." I said, "No. I don't see the soul moving in a linear way, from point A to point B. Sometimes it moves downward or sideways, sometimes it regresses, and at other times it holds still and doesn't move. Progress is one of our culture's most cherished fictions, but it can do great harm when applied to the life of the soul. As soon as we are not moving forward or progressing, we feel something is wrong and that we are failing, so we redouble our efforts. What self-compassion offers us is the space and breath to listen and take notice of how our soul is moving in this moment; what it is asking us to pay attention to at this time."

He then asked if I was okay with having goals. I said, "Well, I'm not real comfortable with goals either, but if I had to use that language, I would say that the goal of this work is to extend the level of

participation of the soul as widely and deeply as possible. One of the deepest sources of depression for the soul is a diminished range of participation in our life. To be fully alive—that would be the goal.” This is the change we truly long for.

The foundations of self-compassion arise from the fertile ground of belonging. Belonging confers a feeling of worth and value, which, in turn, filters into our whole being as a blessing. This gently translates into a relationship with oneself that is respectful and caring. Herein lies our problem: for many of us, the experience of belonging has been fractured and frustrated. We often feel as though we are living outside the warmth of a recognizable welcome. In this state of exile, we feel unworthy of kindness. Countless times in my practice, I have heard someone saying, “I feel unlovable.” It is challenging to cultivate a feeling of compassion for oneself in an atmosphere of self-judgment and hatred.

Nearly everywhere I go to teach, there is an ongoing call for some dressing to heal the wounds around belonging. Fortunately, most every one of us has been able to forge some friendships, small circles of welcome, even if we feel they are provisional. This can be enough to help stimulate the practice of self-compassion. One of the working definitions that I hold is that self-compassion is the *internalized village*. Pause for a moment and think about how we tend to respond to a friend who is suffering. Usually we feel an immediate caring and sympathy in our heart toward his or her pain. We don’t typically recoil in judgment or condemnation, and yet, that is often how we respond to our own moments of pain. Imagine, instead, that these dear people in our lives are dwelling inside us, that the little village in our world has been taken into our hearts. Now, when suffering arises, our interior friend can say to us, “Be gentle. Be kind. Be compassionate with this suffering part of your life.” It is soothing to imagine the village residing inside our chest. Perhaps the Golden Rule needs an addendum: “Do unto yourself as you would do unto

others.” This *pilgrimage of friendship* toward our own life is essential to any move we wish to make into the larger and more fulfilling life that awaits us.

Self-compassion is a fierce and challenging practice. Every day we are asked to sit with pieces of our interior world that lie outside of what we find acceptable and welcome. We must explore our *learned responses* to our places of suffering and actively engage these pieces of soul life. We have often treated these parts of ourselves with indifference, if not outright contempt. I recently invited a group of people to share in a ritual in which we turned toward these outcast parts of our lives with compassion and apology. The ritual was deceptively simple. We placed five large stones on the ground near the base of an immense, ancient oak. As I drummed and we all sang, the men and women approached the stones and knelt on the ground and slowly lifted one of them off the ground. In their minds and imaginations, they were seeing an outcast brother or sister lying under the stone. This piece of soul life had been weighed down under it and unable to stand upright again until this gesture of kindness was offered. People wept as they lifted the stone off these parts of themselves and slowly welcomed the fragments of life these outcasts carried for them. It was beautiful and healing.

Lifting the stones off these parts of our lives may help to restore what poet David Whyte calls a *state of innocence*. I cautiously use this term as well, not to insinuate some childlike state of purity, but to suggest that through self-compassion, we are offered the possibility of new beginnings. No part of us releases in a state of judgment. The overly critical mind creates a state of contraction, whereas compassion softens and makes possible a state of beginning, a fresh and unshaped ripeness. Rebecca del Rio offers a poem, “Prescription for the Disillusioned,” as an invitation to renewal and beginnings.



Come new to this  
day. Remove the rigid  
overcoat of experience,  
the notion of knowing,  
the beliefs that cloud  
your vision.

Leave behind the stories  
of your life. Spit out the  
sour taste of unmet expectation.  
Let the stale scent of what-ifs  
waft back into the swamp  
of your useless fears.

Arrive curious, without the armor  
of certainty, the plans and planned  
results of the life you've imagined.  
Live the life that chooses you, new  
every breath, every blink of  
your astonished eyes.<sup>102</sup>

Self-compassion is not an event, but an ongoing, daily practice. It is *the* root practice for our inner life and also for our relational lives. I have given many talks on shame and have shared how we want to be in loving relationships, while simultaneously hating ourselves. Our ability to receive love is proportional to our capacity to welcome all of who we are. Self-compassion is a skill that needs to be exercised regularly in order for us to remain open to life. It is the gift of a generous heart.



## A Loving Kindness Meditation

There are many versions of this meditation. The one I use most frequently with people I see is this one.

Close your eyes and take a few slow, deep breaths. For the next few minutes, there is nothing for you to do, nowhere to go, nothing to accomplish. This is a time simply to be with yourself.

As you breathe in, imagine yourself sitting in a room meditating. Let the image come to you however it comes. Let the image fully emerge. See yourself in a chair or on a cushion, simply noticing your breath. As you settle into the image, you hear someone open the door to the room, walk in, and sit in front of you. You open your eyes and see it is *you* sitting there in front of you.

Somehow, in an instant, the entire story of this person is known to you. You know all the ways he or she has suffered, has been betrayed, has betrayed others. You know all the moments of despair and loneliness. You know all the places of shame and neglect, loss and death. And you say to yourself, “this person knows suffering.”

In this moment, sensing this person’s sorrows in your heart, simply radiate loving kindness to the one sitting in front of you. Distracting thoughts will naturally arise, but just come back to your heart and extend your compassion to this person. Let this flow happen for several minutes, if you can. (A little tip: if you have a difficult time imagining yourself sitting in front of you, sit in front of a mirror and continue with the practice.)

When you feel ready, offer the three blessings: “May you be happy. May you be free of suffering. May you be at peace.”

And now, let this image fade and allow the next closest person in your world to take this seat. It may be your spouse or partner, your child, or parent. This person, too, knows suffering and is

therefore worthy of your compassion. Offer this person your loving kindness for a few minutes, followed by the three blessings.

You can continue outward from there, to friends, community, state, nation, planet, all beings everywhere. This is an amazing heart practice. The Buddha was wise to have us begin with ourselves, the person for whom we often have the most difficulty extending compassion.

Another variation on this practice begins in the same way, but this time, when someone comes in the room and you open your eyes, it is someone who loves you thoroughly. He or she knows you and all the ways you have suffered in your life. Now, instead of being the one offering compassion, the practice here is to receive the compassion of this benevolent friend. As steady as you can, look into his or her eyes and take in the gaze of someone offering loving kindness to you.



## Freedom and Choice: Working with the Complex

Grief work relies upon our ability to stay present in our adult selves. This requires that we address the ways in which we dissociate, fragment, and slip into unconscious states.

Carl Jung noticed that working with the complex is one of the most difficult psychological things we do. This is because the complex operates almost entirely outside of consciousness. For us to be free of the complex's influence, we must first be able to see it in action, that is, we must make it conscious and then separate from it. The axiom "we cannot heal what we cannot separate from" is an old idea that comes from alchemy, and it is true in the case of working with complexes.

One of the primary tools that I have used in my own life and with countless others in gaining some separation from the complex has been a very specific writing process. The intention of the practice is to uncover the underlying premises and strategies that are developed inside the energetic field of the complex. We do this by writing out “The Worldview of the Child.” Be mindful here, that when I use the term *child*, I am not referring to the historical child we remember being. I use the term to convey a style of perception that is undeveloped and primitive in its character.

We want to discern whose voice is speaking, whose story is being expressed in any given moment. Recall that the complex forms around a highly charged emotional situation, splitting off from consciousness and forming its own microcosm of existence. This partial self remains outside of consciousness until it is activated by a triggering event in our environment. At that point, we are often overtaken by the complex and become possessed by this other region of psyche. It is in this state that we are locked within the cosmology of the complex and the wider horizon of the adult presence is lost.

Complexes can form at any time in our life. What precipitates out of the traumatic experience is something primitive and undeveloped, which is why I use the imagery of the child. When I speak of the need to separate, I am saying that what we are separating from is the complex, not the child we once were. The child I am referring to in relation to the complex is a swirling wash of images, memories, perceptions, thoughts, and sensations that brings us into a style of being that is carried within the complex. The felt sense of this imaginal experience is akin to that of a child barely able to hold ground in the world—anxious and uncertain of its place and belonging. In the language of trauma, we are reduced to fight, flight, or freeze. We are brought to our most basic levels of survival.

The attitude we are seeking in the work of separation is one of affection and caring. It is akin to that of a parent responding to his

or her child's distress. If we become too entangled in the pain, we are no longer able to be of help and comfort. The right distance in that moment is one of compassionate separation—witnessing, engaged, but separate.

The complex operates in ways that are discernible, reflecting a style of perception that is very young. Basic to its style is that it is not relational. It is fragmented, isolated, and by its nature, unable to come into contact with the present world. Complexes, as Jung noted, interfere with consciousness and affect our ability to perceive reality. He wrote, "Complexes interfere with the intentions of the will and disturb the conscious performance; they produce disturbances of memory and blockages in the flow of associations; they appear and disappear according to their own laws; they can temporarily obsess consciousness, or influence speech and action in an unconscious way. In a word, complexes behave like independent beings."<sup>103</sup>

Often we can tell the complex has been present only after it has dissipated. The work of separating is intended to give us a way to stay present, especially when we are in triggering situations. The list I use regarding the Worldview of the Child is intended to help us retain even the barest connection to the adult. The complex is a consolidation of perceptions that reflect a narrower band of possibility and imagination, so that when it is activated, our range of response becomes increasingly diminished. If we can remain rooted in the adult, we have a greater opportunity to live a life of choice rather than compulsion.

Write out the following in third person (he, she, his, her), the Worldview of the Child.

1. What are the child's basic assumptions
  - a. About love
  - b. About power



- c. About men
  - d. About women
  - e. About themselves
2. Based on these assumptions, what are the child's expectations in these same areas? For example: if the child holds an assumption that he is powerless, he would expect that he will always be one-down in relationships.
3. What strategies has the child employed to cope with the world that she is living in? For example: perfectionism, pleasing others, withdrawal, keeping everyone at a distance, self-preservation.
4. What triggers the child? What conditions bring the child to the foreground? For example: criticism, feeling abandoned, someone being angry, and so on.
5. How does the child show up in your experience?
  - a. Physically: what sensations do you notice when the complex arises? For example: tightness, heaviness, queasiness, shortness of breath, or shoulders rising.
  - b. Emotionally: what emotions do you notice when the complex is activated? For example: fear, shame, anxiety, or terror.
  - c. Mentally: what thoughts are you aware of when the complex is present? For example: mistrust or expectations of rejection or criticism.
6. What is the child protecting? One of Jung's discoveries was that at the heart of every complex is a jewel of great price.

When the complex was formed and splintered off from consciousness, it took a piece of something precious along with it to keep it safe. When one of my complexes was resolved, spontaneity and joy returned to my life. It had not been safe to be spontaneous or joyful when I was fearful of being shamed for anything I did that might be seen as inappropriate. It was wonderful to have my joy and spontaneity available once again.

This writing practice is meant to help us establish a beachhead, some little spot of turf that we can hold onto in hopes of keeping a connection with the adult. If we can catch one thought, one sensation in our body, or one emotion that emerges from the complex, we have the chance of staying awake and in the present moment. Once we have achieved a modicum of success, we then are asked to *discharge the complex*. This is the second stage in working with the complex. What initially was intolerable to the child, the soldier, the victim of abuse is now being encountered by the one who can tolerate and process these emotions: the adult. This requires an immense amount of courage and strength, as well as a willingness to face the wild surges of regressed emotions. As Jolande Jacobi, one of Jung's early students, wrote, "to abandon one's infantile fixations and adapt oneself to responsible adulthood is a severe trial and not at all what most people expect of the resolution of their complexes."<sup>104</sup>

This work is about freedom and choice—not control. As long as the complex remains outside of awareness, we will find ourselves acting out of compulsion, reacting to scenes in our life with the same consciousness that was traumatized in the first place. What we seek is the ability to encounter life openly, freely and with soul. We cannot control what comes to us, what moods arise, what circumstances befall us. What we can do is work to maintain our adult presence,

keeping it anchored and firmly rooted. This enables us to meet our life with compassion and to receive our suffering without judgments. This is a core piece in our apprenticeship with sorrow.



## Rituals for You and Your Community

Working with grief in a ritual context is a powerful way for many people to address the weight of sorrow in their lives. Here are a few rituals that you can do for yourself or in the company of others. These are basic forms that invite you to deepen through your imagination. My hope is that it inspires you to trust your own inheritance, the rich storehouse of your ritual mind.

### Talking Circles

The most basic ritual humans have been sharing for thousands of years is the talking circle. In this simple practice, everyone is invited to take some time to become present. This may be done through a guided meditation, some meaningful poems or writings, or simply a period of silence. Following this, the circle is opened for people to share whatever grief they are carrying. It is important, however, to establish some basic agreements beforehand. *No advice should be given.* Practice simply saying “we hear you” or “thank you” after someone shares. *Resist the temptation to provide answers.* Remember, grief is not a problem to be solved, but an experience that needs to be witnessed. *Deep listening to what someone is sharing.* Allow some breath and space after someone speaks. This fosters a feeling of being heard and the felt sense of the rich soil we are building together. *Confidentiality.* The experience of vulnerability and risk is a reflection of how safe the participants feel to be seen. It is important to

agree that what is shared in the circle will be held within the circle. Lastly, *practice revelatory speech*. This is speech that reveals who we are, not how someone else should be. Creating a safe container for mutual revelation is a healing process. It is simple ritual, yet few of us have been granted this type of sacred ground.

### Stone Ritual

In this ritual, a shrine is created that has a large bowl of water at its center. Surrounding this bowl is a collection of small stones, each small enough to fit easily in the palm of your hand. After an invocation is made, participants approach the shrine, one at a time, pick up a stone, and speak aloud, if they wish, a grief they are carrying in their hearts. When they have finished speaking that particular sorrow, they place the stone into the bowl of water. It could be sorrow over any particular loss, the suffering of their children, or the wild ravages that are happening to the earth and her creatures. Any and all grief is invited to the bowl. This is repeated until everyone has approached the shrine. A group can decide ahead of time whether people will be able to go to the shrine more than once. Usually, people can go as often as needed. As all the sorrows are named and the bowl fills, there is a growing sense that this is a *collective* grief, not just an individual's. It is ours.

After a short pause to let this truth sink into our bones, someone picks up the bowl, and there is a procession outside, where the water is poured onto a plant, taking our grief and turning it into nourishment for the green world. Someone then agrees to take the stones to a river, a pond, or the ocean, so the movements of the water can scour these stones clean once again. This is a simple yet powerful ritual.

This ritual has been used in many settings: a community dealing with the suicide of one of its youths; a group of activists protesting a logging action along the Canadian border; and as a process for a monthly grief circle.

## Speaking to the Earth

This ritual is common among many cultures, and we have adapted it for our use. This ritual is often experienced alone, though you can invite witnesses to join you. It is useful for those times when you are alone and feel the need to move grief out of your body. The deep truth that emerges from this ritual, however, is that you are never fully alone. In this particular ritual, you come to feel the loving pulse of the earth surrounding you.

Find a place outdoors that feels utterly safe. It may be your backyard, a friend's backyard, or a place in the wild. Dig an opening in the earth big enough for you to speak into, approximately a foot wide and a foot deep. Begin by saying some words of gratitude to the earth for being able to receive your grief. Place some tobacco or ash—which are often used in traditional cultures as offerings—or any offering you feel is right for you into the hole as you say your words of gratitude. Then let the earth know what you need. You can say something like, “I have been carrying this grief for so long, and I cannot hold it any longer. It is too big for me. It is weighing me down and depriving me of any joy. I know you can hold this sorrow. In fact, you can turn it into something sweet for the roots that rest in your body. I do this to set down my sorrows so I can better participate in the mending of our community. Thank you for being here for me and all of us.”

Then, lying on your belly, speak, weep, cry, or scream your grief into the earth. She is able to take it all in and will reshape it into nutrients for all life. When you are done, it is important for you to thank the earth for her loving and holding. Close the opening and leave it as close as possible to how you found it, so no one would know that something had happened in this spot.

I have suggested this ritual many times to individuals with whom I work. Inevitably, they return feeling lighter and moved by the feeling of benevolence they felt from the earth during the ritual.