



WAYPOINTS

Winter 2016

SEASONAL + INSPIRING STORIES ABOUT SAYING IT RITE...THE CEREMONIOUS WAY.

Wow -- it's already February 2016!

The presidential primaries are in full swing, our favorite groundhog did not see his shadow, we are past the midway point between winter solstice and spring equinox, Lent approaches, and love is in the air this month.

It seems odd to mix talk of U.S. elections, Groundhog Day, Imbolc, Lent and Valentine's Day, but each of these is a beloved and time-honored seasonal rite for many.

This winter season, I have found myself adopting some of that groundhog sensibility of cocooning but rather than fight the impulse to do so, I have succumbed to the solace and respite this insular time has gifted me.

This inward sojourn begins in earnest for me each January, upon crafting my intentional theme for the year. For 2016, I chose *{rise up rooted...}* for my theme and intention going forth, which gives nod to the lines from one of Rilke's most famous poems (included on the back cover) in which he says, "if we surrendered / to earth's intelligence / we could rise up rooted, like trees."

I unpack my rooted theme some more on the back page, but let me confess this up front: few living things inspire me quite like trees do.

Testament to that inspiration, each of the ceremony stories I share in the pages that follow entail a tree ritual or setting of some sort. I share a bit about a tree planting unity ritual from a summer wedding, a simple yet participatory wedding recessional idea using craft store sakura tree branches, a woodland labyrinth installation, and the multitude of ways I incorporated tree-themed rites throughout my father's season of dying this past fall.

What can I say? I'm an unabashed, urban tree hugger.

From my desk to your screen, I hope you're enjoying a fabulous start to 2016.

Blessings to you,

Danna

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Speaking of rootedness and the wonder of trees, check out this inspiring sneak-peek film [clip](#) from cinematographer Louis Schwartzberg about mother trees, and prepare to be inspired.

Imagine if we humans dared, as Rilke says, surrender to earth's intelligence by exploring our own network systems, and celebrating the roots and shoots of our own tethered yet tenuous place here.

Ritual and ceremony helps us do that (of course it does!)



LOVE ENTWINED

I love working with couples who get it...and by "it" I mean how and why ceremony matters. One such couple from last summer was Jessica and Logan.

They wanted to honor their love of nature, and so hiring a vegan caterer from Portland, including a tree planting unity ritual, and hosting their ceremony at Glen Echo Gardens outside Bellingham were a few of the ways they chose to express this earthly-love.

With this in mind, I chose Love Entwined for their ceremony theme and set to work finding and crafting just the right words for their actual tree planting, which they proceeded to do after the guests had departed.

Thanks to the fabulous work of their photographer, Becca of [B. Jones Photography](#) fame, their wedding was shortlisted and selected for *Seattle Bride* magazine's Reader's Choice Top 10 inspiring [Real Weddings](#) of 2015.

Kodak moments and Pinterest touches aside though, my favorite elements of the ceremony remain Logan's choice to have his grandmother escort him up the aisle and the wedding party's flawless reading of the poem "Nuptials" by John Agard.

One ritual they deferred beyond the big day was their ultimate unity ritual: that of blending their last names into one. Many months and much careful thought later, they have officially chosen and announced their new last name, which is an ideal blend of their two former names.



Photo credit: B. Jones Photography

Have a listen to my recent Unity.FM [podcast](#) interview with Rev. Maggie Oman Shannon for her *Creative Spirit: Connecting Art & Soul* weekly radio show on Creativity & Celebration.

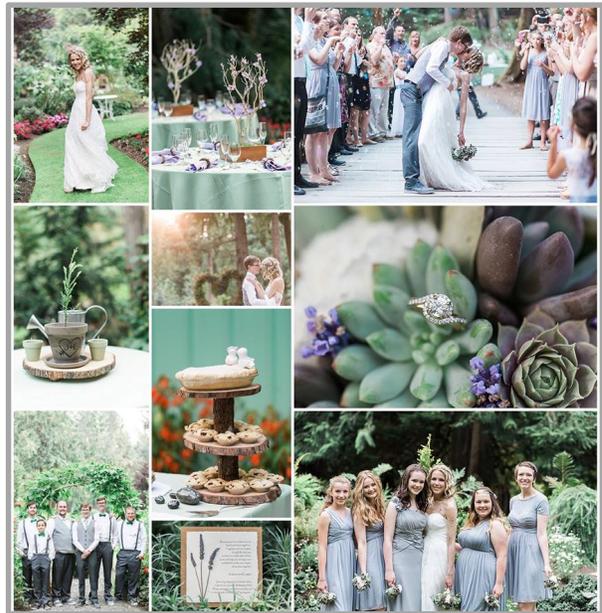


Photo credit: B. Jones Photography

A LABYRINTH IS BORN

Fall 2015 saw the inaugural stones placed and steps walked as part of a small dedication ceremony I officiated to launch the outdoor labyrinth at East Shore Unitarian Church here in Bellevue, Washington. Local labyrinth designer, Dan Niven, aka *the labyrinth whisperer*, as I took to calling him, spent time measuring, pinning and staking the pegs in preparation for congregants to then lay the stones. I asked the oldest serving congregant to lay the first stone and a young member to place the final ceremonial stone as symbol of the future generation of labyrinth users. The other inaugural stones were placed by a key representative from the various staff, key ministerial committees, the board of directors, and visitors. Once all the stones are laid and the ground preparation complete, this will be publicly listed on the [Labyrinth Locator](#) map for all to enjoy.





LOVE IN TRANSLATION

Weddings will sometimes offer interesting conundrums. Such was the case for my September 2015 couple, Nobuko and Michael. They wanted to tell their unique story, which included an engagement proposal that was a scene reenactment from their favorite cult-class film, *Lost in Translation*.

And by reenactment, I mean that they were sitting in the same seats as Bill Murray and Scarlett Johansson, at the same table and in the same 53rd floor lounge of the Park Hyatt Tokyo. Not surprisingly, Suntory whiskey figured prominently. Their challenge was how to tell their love story fresh to their many friends and family members who had already heard their story many a time.

They were adamant that they wanted the wedding to be cute, fun, interactive and unique. They also confessed that they wanted their wedding to “raise the bar” in terms of inimitable elements. So I proposed that they consider having their actor friend act out their love story as I told it. And so that is what we did. With no less than a couple of dozen props on a draped table and the entire altar space at his disposal, their friend, Alfred, set about miming the more amusing moments from their earlier moments as a couple.

Given their mutual adoration of the movie, her work as a Japanese translator, their differing love languages, and the fact that her parents did not speak English, I immediately knew that the ceremony theme needed to be *Love in Translation*.

With this in mind, I crafted their love story and worked with Alfred to build in cues and appropriate props, which included a Boeing model airplane, a suitcase, light-up martini glasses, laundry, *Rilakkuma* wedding bears, stiletto heels, and her floral bouquet, to name but a few.

When it came time in the ceremony to tell the tale of how they met, fell in love and found their way to the altar, everyone was leaning forward in anticipation of Alfred’s every mime and antic. Suffice to say, hilarity ensued as Alfred enacted my narrated words in a fresh if frantic way, as he attempted to run between the corner prop table and his main spot at the center of the altar, while Nobuko and Michael looked on in amazement and delight.

Attendees were able to see Nobuko and Michael’s love story come to life in a silly and superlative way, and Nobuko’s parents benefitted from having the story “translated” through Alfred’s comedic actions.

What began as a request for a simple wedding soon led to a ceremony that was chock full of colorful touches including a communal ring warming, a flowering tea ball “uni-tea” ritual, a pinky-swear/red thread of fate handfasting ritual, communal vows, a bilingual wedding blessing reading, and a cherry blossom branch “tunnel of love” recessional.

The moral of the story on how to tell a same old story fresh?

If in doubt, act it out!





LASTING IMPRESSIONS:

A Celebrant's Tale of Her Father's Last Days

by Danna D. Schmidt

"We are each other's immortality. Each of us is a skein of lives stretching forward and backward in time, connecting everyone we have known, everyone they have known, and everyone who will come after us. We carry each other back from the threshold of life and death. Some part of those we loved is gone forever, but some part is ours to have and to hold and to make real in the world."

David Takahashi Morris

Sometime in the middle of September 2015, as the first brave leaves began to shift, my almost 83-year-old father decided that he was done with this business of living. He was doing what poet Mary Oliver so eloquently refers to as “breathing just a little and calling it a life,” thanks to his trusty oxygen tank.

Dad had been residing in the long-term care wing of his local hospital, following a bad fall and subsequent hip surgery gone awry the previous October. And he was suffering from a perfect storm of ailments – failing heart, kidney and lungs. He was tired and he was ready to die.

And so began an intense but soulful season of reconciliation, ritual healing and peaceful transition. As the leaves turned, we were given two and half months. Dad died in the wee small hours of the morning of November 5th, as I lay asleep in the recliner beside his hospital bed, holding his frail hand.

Friends, family and my cohort of social media peeps were by turns, encouraged, inspired and aghast at a few of the rituals I enacted during the months before and after his death.

Some of these rituals were intensely personal ones while others were moments I chose to share publicly on Facebook thereafter, in the interest of presenting a more artisanal and transparent approach to death, dying and grief work. The overwhelming response by many who were following along was one of amazement: amazement that I had the courage to face some of these moments, most notably my choice to witness his cremation.

As I look back at each of these moments and what I’ve come to name my *Stations of the Loss*, I pin most all my courage on that first moment after he confessed his wish to die now. My wholehearted willingness to enter into the real and compassionate conversation with Dad, and dare to say yes to his dying and all that comes with it, paved the way for the remaining station stops. And although the rest of the journey was hardly easy, it contained incredible moments of great presence, truth and beauty.

If you are at all curious about the power and possibilities such rites might hold for you with your own loved ones, or are looking to determine if you feel called to funeral celebrancy training, I offer the following as a glimpse into how I chose, in my dual role as grieving daughter and Life-Cycle celebrant,[®] to infuse presence and meaningful ritual at each step along the way.

STATION #1: *The Crucial Conversation*

Upon declaring his fervent wish to die immediately, I realized that Dad and I were long overdue to have “the conversation,” and by conversation I mean all of the unsaid words that had long since been pushed under the family carpet. I knew it would be painful to watch my father attempt to take leave of the planet with an old, rolled up carpet of regrets, failures and unresolved issues tucked under his arm, and so I said, “OK, Dad, let’s talk.”

I remember Dad saying, “But we are talking.”

And I said, “No, Dad. The real conversation. The one we have when we know that we have nothing more to lose than what’s inscribed on the inner walls of our hearts. *That* conversation.”

“Oh,” he replied, in his tiniest voice. And so began the heartfelt sharing.

STATION #2: *The Healing Time*

That first crucial conversation entailed apologies and forgiveness work for both of us, not to mention a small infinity pool of tears. While my father and I were not exactly estranged, we were certainly far from close, nor engaged in what I would call life’s most honest and raw dialogue. It was time to get real.

To go there, I knew it was time to write my father a healing letter. Via a long-distance phone call, I spoke my lifelong truth together with my words of forgiveness, blessing and gratitude; and expressed my wishes for him, relative to other healing work and final conversations with other family members. We cried and he expressed his regret at not having been a better father.

I also shared my beliefs around how we are all assigned short or long straws in life, and how I used to believe he was given the short straw in so many respects. I then told him that I no longer believed that to be true. Through this healing process, I came to a new level of understanding on our shared interconnectedness. So I told him I would be bringing him a bendy straw the next day when I travelled up from Seattle to Victoria, British Columbia to visit him; as symbol of this tethered journey we shared and as a courage totem to hold onto for his continued journey forth into death.

I went on to write two more letters to Dad in the weeks that followed. I didn’t share these with him but they were especially cathartic for me in this anticipatory grief stage. One of the letters was more of a poetic litany of worries and laments in answer to the repetitive prompt, “You’re dying and...” I printed these letters before my final visit up to see him. The letters eventually found their way into a wrapped prayer bundle that I placed in his cremation casket.

The essential gift from this *Station of the Loss* is that I was able to let go, in a very short but intense period of time, of a lifetime of unresolved hurt, anger and grief, making room for the necessary forgiveness and healing. I had shifted from those places of indignation and toleration on the healing continuum, to this final place of adoration with him. With this enormous weight lifted, I felt ready to travel to the next station of my loss.

“He was doing what poet Mary Oliver so eloquently refers to as ‘breathing just a little and calling it a life,’ thanks to his trusty oxygen tank.”

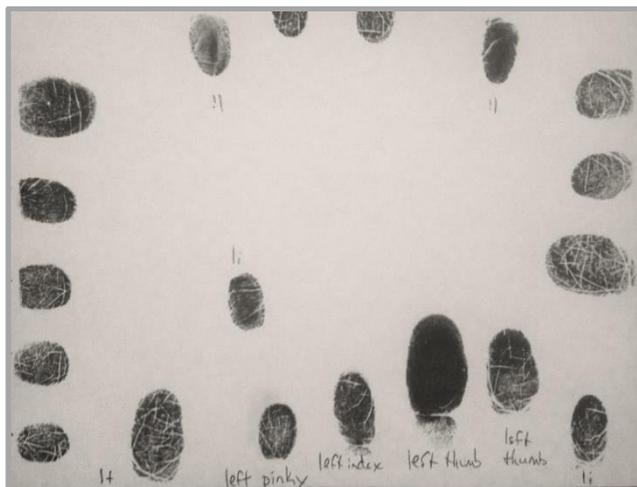
STATION #3: *Lasting Impressions*

I ventured up to Victoria the next day. Dad was on some heavier-duty pain meds, fighting an infection, and in bad shape. I suspect he thought he was not going to make it through. While he was still somewhat coherent, I asked his permission to take his fingerprint impressions. I had brought an art journal and a black ink stamp pad for this express purpose. My plan is to make a mixed media fingerprint tree from these impressions as well as craft a fingerprint jewelry pendant.

This imprint ritual, while unconventional, remains one of my most cherished memories from this journey. He was very weak but would attempt to help me throughout the endeavor, pushing his finger onto the page, and thereby ruining the impression. The best impressions entailed the lightest, gentlest touch. And so I would begin again and eventually, he would nod off again and I would be able to get the perfect imprint from each finger.

I took a bit more time later that afternoon to capture some selfies of us and a few video clips of him sleeping. I can't begin to count how many times I have gone back to those images and video footage in the weeks and months that followed. I shamelessly evangelize in support of continual documentation – video interviews and storytelling, countless photos and images of shared moments and activities – to any and all facing similar life moments with loved ones.

When I finally hugged him goodbye that day, he clung to me with a fierceness that defied his frail health. On the ferry ride home that night, I spent some time studying these lasting impressions; marveling at how these imprints were his and his alone. No one else before or since would bear these finger markings which brought to mind the words of a dying Aborigine tribal elder on Oprah's *Belief* recent mini-series, who lamented that when he died, his inimitable song would die with him. His words made a lasting impression on me. Crafting this ritual reminder reminded me that each one of us carries not only a sacred life strand and song line, but the potential for indelible impressions.



My father's fingerprints in an art journal. The dark left thumbprint (bottom; 3rd from right) was the one where he was trying to help make a good impression.

This visit allowed for an even more poignant visit during the weekend of Canadian Thanksgiving, where I was able to bring the family up. We found Dad had miraculously rallied and was eating lunch in the dining room. We spent the day watching the Blue Jays win one of their last World Series games against the Texas Rangers. I didn't have the heart to share with Dad later that his beloved Jays would not go on to the final series. I managed to capture some great pics of Dad and the kids, and while a short visit, it proved memorable. It would be the last time either of them would see their grandpa alive.

STATION #4: *The Palliative Presence Project*

My next two visits the last week of October and again in the first week of November were mostly about being present for Dad.

His infection had since been treated, he was now receiving all his pain medications intravenously, and he had begun to refuse all food and drink. He also took to trying to take his air tube out any chance he could, believing that if he went without air, he might die faster.

The curse of having a daughter who is a celebrant and hospice volunteer meant that he was made to endure an array of soulful poems, end-of-life blessings, and guided meditations.

Dad was not a poetry guy, nor was he particularly spiritual, being a card-carrying lapsed Catholic and all. But he did love music, so Mom and I kept a variety of classical and soft instrumental music playing softly in the background, and we took turns bearing witness to him in these last uncomfortable weeks and days. I also led Dad in some guided Stephen Levine meditations, allowing him to visualize releasing his breath and making room for death to breathe him.

On one notable morning, I was showing him a text message and photo of his brother in hospice care near Toronto, who had opted to refuse treatment for his recently-diagnosed, late-stage cancer. My cousin had wished to convey to Dad that if Dad died first, he was to swing by and pick up Uncle Frank on the way.

As I shared the message and photo with Dad, he suddenly began to gasp and choke. Mom and I quickly hailed a nurse and got him propped up in bed a bit better. When I returned back to sharing the photo and message with him a little while later, he replied, "Well where the heck do you think I was going?! I was on my way to go get him when you guys made all that commotion and brought me back!"

We enjoyed a long-overdue giggle about that, but it was a humble reminder of how we had unwittingly violated his "do not resuscitate" orders.

As it turns out, that would not be the day he would die. Nor the next nor the ones in the week thereafter. His proved to be a slow dying. He had gone more than a week and a half without food and water when I snuck back home for a few days for my daughter's surprise 16th birthday party.



Dad held onto the bendy straws I gave him until his dying breath.

When I returned to the hospital the following weekend, he was noticeably more unresponsive but still generating urine output, a strong heartrate and a solid breathing rate. I kept checking his hands and feet for signs of body temperature cooling and bracing myself for *death rattle* breathing, but there was no evidence yet of any of these last-stage symptoms.

I hinted to him on All Soul's Day that it might be a grand and redemptive day to make his exit. There was likely to be a party and parade going on in the great beyond and it might all prove rather auspicious. Plus, he had several siblings and loved ones already on the other side there to greet him. He was buying none of that though. He just kept firmly gripping onto the white bendy straw that we kept in his right hand. Prior to this day, the straw had been a lime green one until a new nurse inadvertently threw it out during one of the shift changes.

In these last days of his slow yet active dying, many were beginning to speculate that he must be either waiting for someone or desiring to die alone. I'm not sure it was either of those things, but I do know that had BC's Death with Dignity legislation been officially ratified, Dad would have requested his death cocktail long before.

During the afternoon of his penultimate day, I deliberately left his bedside and nestled myself in the chair by the far corner window as a way to give him more space. I also spent a fair amount of time off-site that day. Mom was beyond exhausted, so she chose to go home that afternoon and attempt to get a good night's sleep. Stubbornly Irish to the end, Dad was now at the 16-day mark without food or water, with the exception of the small spritz of scotch, which was his last raspy request to Mom the day prior.

"I hinted to him on All Soul's Day that it might be a grand and redemptive day to make his exit."

Earlier in the day, Dad had begun exhibiting more pain, discomfort and Lazarus-like movements with his arms, so we increased his Morphine dosage slightly, which seemed to settle him. The night nurse came on and immediately noted changes in his breathing rate and extremities. I sat with him that night as his breathing pattern began to slow ever so slightly.

And such was it that in the early hours of that morning on November 5th, Dad took his last breath, as I lay asleep next to his bed on the recliner, holding his hand. I woke up suddenly around 4:28 am, looked over at him, and could hear that his air tank was now working solo. I stole a moment in that surreal space and time to be with him before calling the nurse, even as I knew this would mess with his official time of death. Not that we had any real way of gauging that, given that her last visit to the room was 3:45 am.

I called Mom and then immediately began preparing the room for her arrival. The night nurse was infinitely compassionate and gave us ample time to be with him, as needed. I suspected Mom would not want to participate in a more elaborate death care ritual, but I wanted to give her the opportunity to take as much time alone with him in the room as she needed. When she arrived, I had the lights dimmed, the music playing, a candle illumined, a warm basin of water, towels, a washcloth, a comb, and a new blanket and hospital gown ready for her to groom and wash him.

Mom spent about 30 minutes tending to him and uttering her farewells and laments aloud. After she signed the necessary documents and we spoke with the doctor (who seemed more interested in regaling us with tales of his moonlighting job as the honorary consulate general of Jamaica than expediting our paperwork), we left the hospital and ventured out back to the gardens to collect leaves for my cremation blessing bundle and for the graveside service altar. I was surprised to see Mom embrace this simple act of collecting berries, pinecones and leaves. I imagine that, like me, she found it to be calming in those surreal minutes upon leaving the hospital where she had spent the last year visiting her husband of almost 60 years.

With fallen leaves and other earth goodies in hand, we looked up to his hospital window and said the second of many more goodbyes.

STATION#5: DIY Casket

Mom and Dad had pre-purchased cremation urns and plots at the local funeral home many years prior. Had that not been so, I would have directed them to be open to the notion of a home funeral and green burial, but alas, this was the choice they made at the time, which in retrospect, Mom seemed slightly regretful about, relative to some of the paid-for aspects.

While most of the details were well planned, there was one important detail, however, that we had neglected to clarify. This detail was the disbursement of cremains and it led to Mom and I having an unexpectedly fierce conversation at the hospital in that hour after he died, when she happened to mention his cremains and I reminded her of my request for a portion. Suffice to say that her portion definition differed greatly from mine: I was envisioning a full third of his cremains whereas she perceived a portion to mean a teaspoon of his bone fragments. (Cautionary note to readers: ensure you have this explicit and detailed conversation well in advance of a loved one's death).

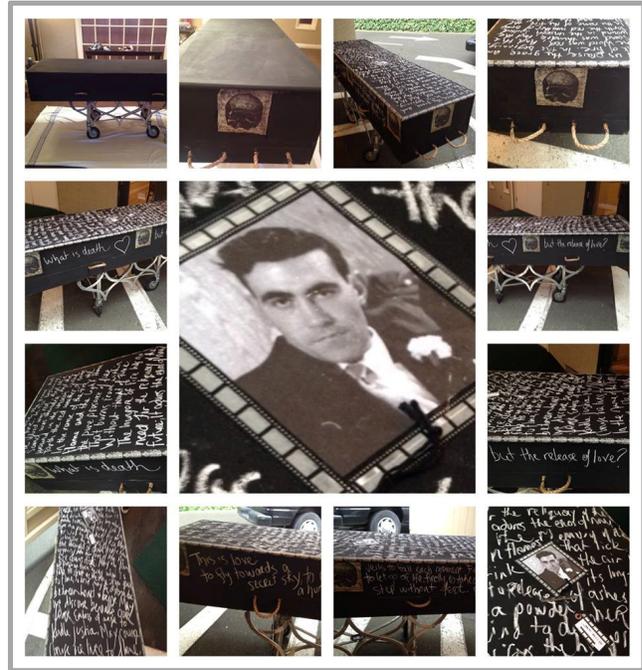
Thanks to the intuitive and compassionate witnessing of the Funeral Director in our meeting with her later that day, Mom softened her steadfast resolve and I was able to "negotiate" for a quarter of his cremains. Oddly enough, her reticence ended up having nothing to do with her eschatological beliefs and everything to do with the pragmatics of having purchased a tandem cremation plot and burial urn of a certain size.

I then requested to be present for what is called a witness cremation two days later, something more than 90% of people opt not to do. I also asked if I might decorate his unfinished pine cremation casket and so this, too, was arranged for the following day at the Funeral Home.

That next day, I showed up to the funeral home with music, paint and other art supplies and set about painting his casket black and embellishing it with washi tape, printed photos of him, some irreverently reverent skull imagery tissue paper, a black toe tag with the words "Handle with Care" inscribed upon it, and a plethora of white chalk writings.

I had to work fast because there was a memorial service scheduled an hour and a half later, so while it wasn't entirely what I would have wanted, it was infinitely more decorative than its plain pine beginnings. With white chalk in hand, I began writing Celtic theologian John O'Donohue's "Blessing for Fire" atop the casket, Rumi's "This is Love" poem across one side, and the immortal words of Lou Reed's widow, Laurie Anderson, across the other, in which she asks: "What is Death but the release of love?"

As I was hurriedly putting the last written touches on the casket, memorial guests were beginning to arrive at the funeral home. It was a comedic moment reminiscent of John Cleese from *Faulty Towers*, as Dad's tricked-out and rather gothic-looking casket was wheeled out the side door to the driveway at the same moment that mystery memorial man's cedar casket was being rolled into the chapel from the back room.



I decorated his plain unfinished pine cremation casket with black craft paint, white chalk writings, photos, decorative washi tape, black gift tags and death motif tissue from luncheon napkins.

The newbie Funeral Director assigned to escort me stage left asked if he could take pictures. He had never seen anything like this and was noticeably excited. I readily agreed but not before I exacted a promise from him that he was to offer this creative grief ritual opportunity to others who might wish to do the same.

While rushed (and stressful on account of accidentally spilling black paint on their rose-colored carpet in those moments before departing the chapel room), that morning remains etched in my mind and heart as a sacred memory I will forever cherish.

"It was a comedic moment reminiscent of John Cleese in *Faulty Towers*, as Dad's tricked-out and rather gothic-looking casket was quickly wheeled out the side door to the driveway at the very same moment that mystery memorial man's cedar casket was being rolled into the chapel from the back room."



Family members were confused. *Why would you take all that time to decorate a casket that is just going to burn?* they wondered. Because healing and ritual, I said, and the reality that all life is impermanence. This was a moment of art imitating life imitating art imitating death, and I wished to mark that.

That night, I began preparing his cremation bundle, which included the letters I had written to him, notes of gratitude, flower petals, some leaves, berries, and tiny pinecones from the hospital garden, and his white bendy straw. I wrapped it in white tissue paper bound with decorative white rice paper, tied it with white string, and then finally, tucked a small farewell note card and a couple of tiny white rose buds to the top.

I now felt a tiny bit more prepared to face what would prove to be an indescribable *Station of the Loss* that next morning.

STATION #6: Into the Fire

The crematorium was less than a five minute drive from my brother's house where I was staying. As I preparing to leave that morning, I began to feel physically ill, so I forced myself to vomit as a way to dissipate some of my understandable queasiness. With a few swallows of water and four deep breaths, I immediately felt better and resolved to face the task ahead.

The Funeral Director met me in the parking lot, where I then hopped into the hearse with her, and we drove up the short driveway to the doors of the crematorium. We were met by the crematorium operator, who was very polite if guarded. Witness cremations, it would seem, are rarely enacted at this crematorium so I suspect he was as curious about me as I was about him.

In this game show called death, Dad got chamber Door #1. When one elects to bear witness to a loved one's cremation, there enters this opportunity to enact additional ritual into this auspicious act of corporeal transfiguration. The crematorium operator is nudged and reminded into a heightened sense of duty, deliberation and honor. And the other chamber remains empty and silent in solidarity with those bereaved who dare enter as witnesses.

As I looked at Door #2, I was reminded of the Edgar Allan Poe poem "The Raven," Dante's "Divine Comedy" and the chorus line of "Disco Inferno."

Odd where my brain wanders in moments where extreme presence and focus are demanded.

I placed what I've come to name as my 4G (grief, grace, grit and gratitude) bundle, first upon Dad's heart and then finally laying it to impermanent rest upon his belly, seat of the solar plexus chakra, associated with fire and the power of transformation. I did so such that it would burn upon and with the center of his body.

I noticed he was not dressed as per my white gown instructions, but I let that go and made mental note to be more fastidious about burial/cremation garment inquiries with my own clients going forth.

I took one last photo of him, and because they were still worried about his MRCA (staph) infection, I was instructed not to touch him. We then closed the casket and I pushed the nondescript black button and held it for about five seconds.

The hum began. I chose in that moment to reimagine this hum as Leonard Cohen's proffered sacred chord, as I watched the holy, high heat on the thermal meter race its way upwards to consume his chariot, the bundle with its earth gifts, and Dad in one co-mingled offering by increasing degrees: 1600 degrees Fahrenheit, to be exact.



Into the fire, he was reunited.

At this point, I need to divulge that I'm no more courageous than the average person; not by a long shot. Those who know me well, in fact, know that my doppelgänger is a skittish chicken. As an unabashed evolutionary panentheist, I was able to show up on this day in the name of the cosmos because I saw this as a full-circle moment from Big Bang/intergalactic birth to cosmic death and what would prove to be his return to magic dust, God particles and earth as primordial mother.

After what seemed an eternity but was actually only a few minutes, I nodded my head, thanked the operator for his part in bearing final witness and service to Dad's corporeal time on earth, and we took leave. The Funeral Director and I spent another half hour in the empty hearse debriefing, as we chatted about everything from witness cremations to family dynamics at funerals, to end-of-life rituals, to her own personal road to mortuary science. I especially valued having her as an empathetic ear and shoulder during this highly-stressful time.

I note this because understandably, this station stop became another endless source of horrified curiosity for others. *How could you witness his cremation?*, many wondered. *Wasn't that hard?* It was beyond difficult, and yet it was also a strangely liberating and grace-filled experience. Bearing witness to such human transfiguration, most especially one's own parent, is nothing short of one of life's most sacred moments.

As next of kin, I felt a kind of torch-bearing transference of energy to be, in the words of David Takahashi Morris, "each other's immortality."

STATION #7: Graveside Interment Ceremony

Most of the station stops had been, until this point, solo pilgrimage pauses. I was now fully focused on writing his graveside interment ceremony, which we had set for the Monday afternoon, in order for my husband and daughter to attend.

As I reflected on his season of his dying, I began to sense that autumn would be a theme well worth weaving into the ceremonial words. I chose to incorporate my turning leaf ritual which has enjoyed various incarnations in previous ceremonies I have crafted. I found a red, maple leaf and yellow heart-shaped leaf from amongst the leaves we had collected from the hospital garden, so I inscribed his birthdate with black Sharpie marker on one side of the maple leaf and his date of death on the other, and bespoke of autumn and these sacred dates as his full-circle season of life.

We then tucked this leaf, together with the yellow leaf with the word *agape* written on it into the velvet urn bag just prior to inviting the others to place a small cloth heart inside the urn bag.



For a benediction reading, I selected the poem "Autumn Rose Elegy" by Rumi and invited everyone to place orange roses on his graveside urn at the end of the service and take a second one home. We played a handful of songs through the service, beginning with a powerful Celtic chant invocation of "[The Beatitudes](#)" (Owen and Moley Ó Súilleabháin) as nod to Dad's Irish Catholic roots; followed by the haunting elegiac cello with "Wellspring" by Adam Hurst, as my father's remains were interred; and ending with "What a Wonderful World" by Louis Armstrong. The final lyrics proved perfect because just before the service began, the grey sky suddenly turned blue and the sun came out and stayed to witness our ceremony.

It was not so much wonderful as wonder-filled, and the memorial gardens representative agreed, remarking that this was her first celebrant-led service and amongst her top three favorite graveside services she had witnessed over the years. She was impressed by all the customized music, rituals, prayers and other poetic words of committal and release, which she later admitted, were markedly different from the usual generic interment services typically offered.

STATION #8: Celebration of Life

We caught the ferry home later that same evening, and decided to defer his Celebration of Life to a later date, pending family schedules. My brother and his family had a pre-booked vacation to the Caribbean scheduled for the last couple of weeks of November, and we were hosting a French exchange student most of December, so it became evident that his public Celebration of Life would need to be postponed until early January, after the holidays.

Not everyone was on board with this, believing, in that old-school way many inherit, that we needed to rush right into "getting it over with." Knowing that I was the one who would be planning, officiating and creating all aspects of the service from slideshow tribute to memorial tokens, I remained steadfast in taking my time. If I had it all to do over again, I would fashion the timing exactly the same way.

I took those initial two months to just be with my grief, rest, and enter deliberately into the holiday season. I also took the time necessary to dance the celebrant's dance of authentically and diplomatically celebrating a man who knew tremendous life losses and imperfections as a father; yet remained charming to and adored by all who came to make his acquaintance.



And all was well that ended well – more than well, in fact. We hosted his celebration of life in the upstairs lounge area of my parent’s former retirement community, where several of their friends still lived.

I continued with the seasons theme but also tacked on the motifs of sojourn and song in order to tell his story linearly as a song line; incorporating story, songs and slide show imagery from each epoch of his life. His grandson played the Bach cello suites as well as a Frank Sinatra acoustic guitar and vocal tribute. Friends shared memories, and the service was alive with a carefully-selected array of music, ranging from the Glenn Miller Orchestra to Dean Martin, to Eric Clapton to yet more Frank Sinatra. The final benediction [poem](#) by Lawrence Raab entitled “Request,” with its nod to the toe-tapping song, “[You Look Good to Me](#)” by the Oscar Peterson Trio, offered lyrical segue, as we then played this song as a final meditative tribute.

Residents, family and friends alike came away with a heightened sense of who my father was throughout the four seasons of his life (formative, frontier, family and final) and the kinds of things he stood for. They were invited to write words of fond remembrance on tags which hung on the mini-tribute tree, and each left with a handcrafted beaded bookmark of William Stafford’s poem, “The Way it Is,” together with a keepsake strand of embroidery thread as not-so-subtle reminder of the fragility of life.

Following the service, all enjoyed a luncheon buffet together with mini-dixie cups of butterscotch ice cream, in honor of his decades of service as a milkman and ice cream parlor owner.

Many people came up to me, astounded that such a celebration could be possible a full two months following his death. I advised all who commented that while the ideal approach is almost always a living tribute, how and whenever we choose to host such a tribute is a personal and time-honoring choice.

Dad would have loved to have been present for such an interwoven tapestry of laughter and tears, stories and music, imagery and food. Yet, as poet Lawrence Raab hints at, perhaps he was present in some kind of ineffable way.



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“Spiritual teacher Ram Dass believes we are all just ‘walking each other home.’ Helping midwife Dad from this life into the realm of mystery and facilitate my own soul’s healing in the process, remain the two greatest gifts this *Stations of the Loss* journey has bequeathed me.”

Others I spoke with after were curious about how to go about their own good work of deciding which words, songs, stories and rituals they might like to include for their own service. Bemusedly, I recounted how Dad was adamantly opposed to having any kind of memorial service, and my subsequent discussion with him about that in the weeks prior to his death. I had cautioned Dad that he may not get a deciding vote on account of the fact that he wasn’t going to be the one left behind to grieve. He respected that. In the weeks prior, I shared some of the readings, songs and themes with him that I intended to highlight for his celebration of life, and took his nods and hand squeezes as small yet affirmative signs of approval.



A small grief quilt square I began stitching in late September 2015.

I later suspected that Dad’s initial reticence was born of a fear that no one would show up to such an affair. As it turned out, there were 48 people in attendance and it was standing-room only. I want to believe that had he been eavesdropping on the service from the great beyond, he too might have warmed to the power of ceremony after witnessing how moved attendees were by the various service aspects.



All this said, the journey continues. There will be other station stops in the months to come, as I set about choosing a decorative urn as well as scattering some of his ashes in places ranging from his birth city of Toronto to the great waters of the Salish Sea to a sacred site or two in Europe this coming spring.

As I reflect back on the intense whirlwind of this past season, I feel enormous gratitude. While I have always been a daughter, commemorator and artisanal human, I have only in more recent years claimed status as a certified Life-Cycle Celebrant® with the Celebrant Foundation & Institute. Never have I felt more honored to actualize this training and calling as I have these last few months.

Spiritual teacher Ram Dass believes we are all just “walking each other home.” Helping midwife Dad from this life into the realm of mystery and facilitate my own soul’s healing in the process, remain the two greatest gifts this *Stations of the Loss* journey has bequeathed me.

It took courage, to be sure, but that courage was mostly about being brave enough to show up, hold space, bear witness, dare to add my own creative touches, and ritualize the holy heck out of the last station stops of his journey called life. Short of a Dixieland band parade, my father was well-celebrated and attended to at each and every last step of the way.

I know that had I not chosen to creatively mark those penultimate moments with Dad with as many personally-meaningful rituals as I did, I would not have moved through this initial complicated grief stage quite so smoothly. And had I not been exposed to and empowered by all the ritual options my celebrancy training has afforded me, I doubt this end-of-life experience with Dad would have been nearly as therapeutic or transformational.

Like all celebrants, I sing from the song sheet that ceremony matters. This last sojourn with Dad has truly helped illuminate that belief a little brighter for me.

“Earth is so thick with divine possibility that it is a wonder we can walk anywhere without cracking our shins on altars.”

Barbara Brown Taylor

An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith

ALTARed MOMENTS

Looking for a cure for the winter blahs? One indoor activity that offers escape from the rain in these parts or wind and snow in other regions, not to mention a welcome distraction from purging and cleaning, is to create a seasonal altar.

Chances are, you already have a corner or space dedicated to this in your home, either formally or informally.

One friend I know has been doing this for years. She changes up the wreath on her door, her fireplace mantel décor, and she even switches out her wall art to reflect whatever holiday or holy day she has coming up on her calendar.

Another friend of mine has what I would call little altars everywhere throughout her home and office space. Some of these are curated collections of art on her walls (a collection of cross shrines), while others are corner and feature table shrines. My favorite of her shrines is her egg and nest shrine. Not only is it a gorgeous display feature in her front sitting room, but it also serves as a spiritually-centering altar in this space that is ideal for cozying up with a book or meditating.

I have a handful of altar nooks in my home. I keep two in my office: one of my window ledge and a smaller one in front of my computer screen. My desk altar is my ceremony shrine. I keep my talking stick here, a small bell, and a glass vial with a painted scroll with the word Love inscribed on it. I light a scented candle on this desk altar (even as I’ve just learned scented candles are carcinogenic) when I’m writing my wedding couple love stories or celebration of life stories, and I place a small photo of the couple or deceased person on this altar to stay intentional and devotional in my writing for them.

My window ledge shrine features items from nature – a nest, Mala beads, rocks, a shell, a feather, a couple of twigs and some fern. And my living room shrine is alive with other totems, ranging from my collection of *inuksuit* (check out my [website](#) for details on these), to candles to Buddha figures, to mini-framed art, to my decorative tree.

Creating your shrine is a personal and intuitive process. It begins by discerning what intention you wish it to serve. If it’s merely decorative, then your selection of altar items will likely be chosen for aesthetics and nostalgia, as per my first friend.

If you intend it to be a space that grounds and spiritual renews you, your altar items will be more spiritual and ritualistic in nature. A seasonal altar is a hybrid of these. You will certainly want to look to the season for color palette and altar item inspiration, as well as the gifts the season offers.



Winter is about darkness and introspection, spring speaks to renewal and growth, summer lends itself to color, light and full-bloom living; and autumn is about bounty, gratitude and transfiguration.

Each of the elements factor into how you design your altar. For example, this year I have assigned air to winter, water to spring, fire to summer, and earth to fall; so I will ensure each of my seasonal altars feature a defining aspect of this aligning element. That said, all my altars have a candle and some earth-based and living symbol.

The focal point for my winter altar is my small decorative tree, and the palette that I have chosen is black and white. I hang ornaments, pictures and other symbols from it. My altar also includes a commemorative photo of my father, a clay crow I crafted to hold my fears at bay, a small vase for a single white flower and sprig of cedar, my white Buddha candle, a small Snoopy ornament (Snoopy is my spirit animal) as well as a seasonal [SoulCollage](#)® card as wisdom oracle for what the season has to teach me. Check back next month though and it’s likely that I will have played with it a bit.

There are no right or wrong ways to create a seasonal altar. I advocate for looking around at the items you already own and display, and for taking yourself on a field trip to your own backyard or nearby nature space. Which small treasures and trinkets resonate with or empower you? Which ones carry significant meaning? Place those there and don’t be afraid to keep tinkering with your altar until it feels right.

There are ample resources on altars. Here are a [few](#) to get you started. Start small and simple, and see where it leads!

How surely gravity's law,
strong as an ocean current,
takes hold of even the strongest
thing
and pulls it toward the heart of the
world.
Each thing –
each stone, blossom, child –
is held in place.

Only we, in our arrogance,
push out beyond what we belong to
for some empty freedom.

If we surrendered
to earth's intelligence
we could rise up rooted, like trees.
Instead we entangle ourselves
in knots of our own making
and struggle, lonely and confused.

So, like children, we begin again
to learn from the things,
because they are in God's heart;
they have never left him.

This is what the things can teach us:
to fall,
patiently to trust our heaviness.
Even a bird has to do that
before he can fly.

-- Rainer Maria Rilke

(Poem II, 16, *Book of Hours: Love
Poems to God*); trans. Joanna Macy
and Anita Burrows)



RISE UP ROOTED...

One of my most beloved annual rituals is that of choosing a word and/or theme for the year. I've been engaged in this process for 8 years now and value how living my word aloud each year has helped shape the story of who I am and aspire to be.

On the heels of last year's theme (Airworthiness), which I adored, I was seeking what I would call ground school wisdom. And thus was born my intention words for the year: *{rise up rooted...}*.

For me, *{rise up rooted...}* is about building resiliency and backbone, photosynthesizing, digging my toes into the good/green earth, honoring my depth, apprenticing myself to descent + ascension, leaning into the light, getting back up again, thriving elementally, and learning to stand tall in the forest.

The ellipsis (aka dot-dot-dot) which follows is inspired, in part by Peter H. Reynold's brilliant picture book *The Dot*, and in part by my own wish to punctuate my days and moments with meaning, magic, laughter and mark-making of a legacy nature.

Some of the sustenance rituals I enact to help me keep my word alive and kicking throughout the year include crafting a vision board, decorating a garden stake, ordering a custom-stamped pendant necklace to wear, and art journaling.

This year, I intent to create a few special rituals relative to trees, including an Arbor Day "Be the Tree" empowerment ceremony. As you might expect, there will assuredly be some tree hugging going on that day.

Because for the love of trees, it's the thing to do.

And that's a small glimpse into how I orient my years. What are some of your beloved annual rituals and practices? Do any of them connect you to nature? If not, consider one thing you might want to add to your annual calendar – a designated staycation day or annual March 4th mini-retreat (March 4th in honor of "march forth"), that helps you reconnect to yourself, rejuvenate, and move you closer to the promise of spring.

About Me >> *I'm a certified Life-Cycle Celebrant® based in Seattle, Washington. I love co-crafting artisanal ceremonies from birth to earth for individuals, couples and communities alike. In addition to earning a comparative religions degree, my training in the art of ritual studies includes three certifications from the [Celebrant Foundation & Institute](#) (Weddings, Funerals & Memorials, and Ceremonies Across the Lifespan).*

You can reach me at danna@waypointceremonies.com. If I don't reply right away, chances are, I'm hanging out in and amongst the trees.