

# THE MEDICINE BAG

SHAMANIC RITUALS &  
CEREMONIES FOR PERSONAL  
TRANSFORMATION



**DON JOSE RUIZ**

Foreword by DON MIGUEL RUIZ,  
author of *The Four Agreements*

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## **DEDICATION**

To all the women and men who have learned how to master and create healing in their lives, and who have left this sacred shamanic legacy to us from all the different shamanic traditions of the world.

To all those who are now healing their own minds, bodies, and spirits in order to better serve others as well as Mother Earth.

To the next generations of the keepers of the flame, who will carry on the sacred teachings of the medicine bag.



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## FOREWORD

When my son Jose was eleven years old, I took him and his older brother Miguel Jr., who was fourteen at the time, to Madre Grande, a mountain in Southern California. While we'd visited the mountain previously for family events that included hiking and cookouts, Madre Grande also had special significance beyond that, as it is where my mother, Sarita, a *curandera*, or "faith healer," would often share with us the sacred teachings of our family's Toltec tradition. Sarita was the keeper of the wisdom tradition of our family for her generation.

After we arrived at Madre Grande that day, I asked the boys if they were ready to be

initiated into the path of the Toltec, to which they both eagerly agreed. This coming-of-age ceremony took place approximately thirty years ago, and it marked the beginning of a long apprenticeship they would undertake to learn the ways of our ancestors, culminating years later in both becoming master teachers in their own right.

While Jose and Miguel Jr. share much in common, they have taken slightly different routes in sharing the teachings of our family in their own unique way. Miguel Jr. has brought the ideas to a largely mainstream community, while Jose has embraced the shamanic origin of the Toltec tradition, and explained these ancient teachings in a way the modern world can understand.

Unlike some forms of shamanism, the Toltec tradition places a special emphasis on unconditional love and personal healing as the means by which we create transformation in ourselves and the world. We teach that we are

all the artists of our own lives, and that we have the power to change our lives if we don't like the ones we're living.

In fact, the truth is that *it's only when we change ourselves that we change the world*. This axiom has been stated in various ways by many of the great teachers in every spiritual tradition.

In my opinion, this message is needed today as much as ever. When we look around this beautiful planet, we see so many of our fellow humans suffering—mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and physically—and as a result they often feel blocked from the innate sense of self-love, joy, and peace that is available us all.

It's time to heal from this kind of suffering, and the book you are holding in your hands right now can help you do exactly that. In the pages that follow, my son, don Jose Ruiz, will share specific rituals and ceremonies from our Toltec tradition that can help you come into harmony with your innermost self and the world around you.

The shamanic practices described here will teach you how to take the raw material of life—physical pieces of the natural world, along with your inner thoughts and intentions—and draw out their meaning and power through ceremony. This is the joining of spirit and substance, of intention and action, all with the purpose of helping yourself—and in turn, others on this beautiful planet.

To be our own healers, we must look into our wounds, not turn away from them, or try to ignore them. Doing so takes bravery and stamina, but it's only when we understand our wounds and heal them that we transform our lives.

In my opinion, there has never been a more important time to do this work. My hope is that you will take the tools Jose describes in these pages and create the life you deserve.

All my love,  
Don Miguel Ruiz  
Author of *The Four Agreements*

## INTRODUCTION

In what is now south-central Mexico, between one thousand and three thousand years ago, the Toltec civilization was thriving. According to my family's oral tradition, the Toltec people were responsible for building the massive pyramid complex at Teotihuacán, about twenty-five miles northeast of modern-day Mexico City. The Toltec culture was revered by the Aztecs—who came after them and shared their Nahuatl tongue—for their accomplishments in art, writing, medicine, and religion.

But this characterization of the Toltec people tells only a small part of their great and fascinating legacy. Toltec society was in many

ways centered on studying the human mind, with the goal of creating the best life possible. Beyond mere survival, or the pursuit of war-like domination over others, Toltec people were purposefully creative and expressive. In fact, the very name *Toltec* means “artist” in Nahuatl. The use of the word *artist* in this context expands beyond the meaning of a person who paints, sculpts, or makes traditional forms of art. The Toltecs taught that every one of us is an artist, and the art we are creating is the story of our lives. In a way, one could say that the Toltecs explored psychology and personal growth in profound ways thousands of years before the birth of Sigmund Freud or Carl Jung.

As mentioned, the Toltecs spoke the Nahuatl language, and I want to share a very important word in this language with you, because it will play a central role in the ideas presented in this book. That word is *Nagual*, and like many words in English, it has two meanings. First, *nagual* refers to the life force

energy, or the divinity, that is inside you, me, and all things. Nagual energy is invisible, and yet nothing could exist or be alive without it. *Nagual* is also used to refer to the women and men who served as spiritual teachers, doctors, philosophers, and healers in the community. In this sense, *Nagual* means “one who is awake.” Today, we call these men and women shamans. I am considered a Nagual in my Toltec tradition, but I also refer to myself as a shaman because it’s the modern term used to describe the same calling.

Another thing I want to make clear is that because everyone has the nagual energy inside them, everyone has the potential to be a Nagual, or shaman. In one sense, you already are. Simply possessing the gift of being alive in human form means that you have a choice in how you want to live your life. This makes you an artist, a creator of your life. Many people, however, are creating unconsciously—as if they were painting in their sleep.

It's more important than ever that we remember and value this inherent energy that we all possess—because we can use it to fashion a better way of being in the world. In this book, I share a wealth of rituals, practices, and ceremonies that are designed to tap into this conscious, creative energy, to help you awaken to your creative abilities and fulfill your potential. Through the repetitive practice of ritual, we are able to wake up.

### **The Power of Ritual and Ceremony**

In the broadest sense, virtually every human on this beautiful planet participates in a host of daily rituals. We brush our teeth, wash our bodies, feed ourselves, go to work, and perhaps tend to the needs of children and elders. We may have other rituals we perform primarily for fun, such as enjoying a regular date night with our spouse, taking an annual summer vacation, or planning a family reunion. Going a bit deeper, many of us have also developed religious or

spiritual practices that take the form of ritual. These might include ceremonies on certain days of the year, or on special occasions such as births, deaths, or marital unions.

While most of us participate in these kinds of rituals and ceremonies already, the rituals in this book are geared toward a wholly different space. They seek to aid your journey of *awakening*. What do I mean by awakening? I use the word *awakening* here because in my family's Toltec tradition we say that humans are dreaming all the time. Let me explain.

First, each person is always in the midst of what we call the *Personal Dream*, which is your own perspective—how you see the world around you and how you make sense of it through the stories you tell yourself about what you perceive. Second, there is what we call the *Dream of the Planet*, or the sum of all our Personal Dreams. Together they form the basis for how we create the world around us and communicate with one another.

So I don't say that the rituals and ceremonies here can help us awaken from the dream, but rather that they help us awaken *to the fact that we are dreaming*. To dream and to tell stories are what the mind does. You cannot stop dreaming; you can only become aware of yourself as a dreaming animal and work with this double-edged gift to change the dream itself. Therefore, the primary aim of the practices in this book is to help you wake up to the knowledge that you are dreaming and create your life in the form of a beautiful dream.

If we look around, it's easy to see that so many of our fellow humans are living in a type of nightmare, where their actions come from a place of fear rather than unconditional love. Living this way, they cause harm to themselves and others, from something relatively small like an unkind remark all the way up to and including wars between countries.

Toltec shamanism aims to bring love to every part of your dream—especially to the

areas of your own dream where you find yourself suffering. After all, love is the power that transforms a bad dream into a beautiful one.

Rituals and ceremonies, when they are done consciously, with the right intent, can go beyond the realm of mere thought and make manifest your positive desires in the physical world. In this way, rituals and ceremonies serve to further your personal transformation, wherever you currently stand on your journey.

I would also like to mention that the word *intent* has a special meaning in the Toltec tradition. When you bring intent to something in this context, it means you bring your focus, calm and clear, to a specific thing—whether it's an object, a wish, a situation, or even another person. Your intent is powerful, and learning how to direct it consciously is one of the things you will gain from this book.

When you undertake a ritual or ceremony in this way, you are also tapping into the

powerful nagual energy around you, calling forth this energy to help you on the path.

### **Coming into Balance**

As you have undoubtedly noticed, there appears to be a great schism in the current Dream of the Planet. On one hand, we live in a time that boasts the greatest freedom and prosperity the world has ever known, and on the other, many in our human family are in constant conflict with one another, others are heavily medicated or self-medicating, and many have forgotten the importance of respecting the precious resources of Mother Earth. Nature herself is suffering at our hands, and the survival of our species and the beautiful world we inhabit are ultimately at stake.

What will come next? How can we move from chaos and imbalance to a healing place of alignment? Our first step is to change ourselves,

and the practices in this book are designed to help you do exactly that.

I would like to share with you a story that encapsulates the power of ritual:

For millennia, Wolf was the steward of a wide valley with forest and field, river and stream. One day, a hooded figure wearing a long, gray cloak arrived in the valley. The figure watched in horror and fear as Wolf killed an elk. In return, the figure murdered the wolf and all his children. In Wolf's absence, as time passed, the valley fell into disarray. The river became chaotic, flooding its banks one season and drying up completely in another. Songbirds flew away into the sky, followed by crows and eagles. The beaver went missing. Trees and grass were stripped bare under the relentless grazing of elk and deer. Each lonely night passed

by silent and empty without the howls of the pack.

The figure in gray watched all of this, perplexed, until one morning a ray of dawn sunlight hit his face. With the light came a whispering voice that brought the message that it was time for Wolf to return.

The figure made an offering to invite Wolf back. As soon as Wolf came home to the valley, he began to do his sacred tasks: Howl. Chase. Connect. Move. Kill. Give.

These were the rituals of the wolf. These were the ways the sacred stewardship of the valley took form.

Wolf moved the elk and deer through the valley by howl and chase. The grazers flourished and moved through the land, leaving tree and grass and brush to seek the sun and grow tall. The raven followed the wolf pack to every corner of

the valley, sharing its gifts of carrion with the eagles and bears. The beaver emerged again, caretaker of the river, felling trees and stacking them into dams that formed deep, cold pools for fish and frogs.

The cloaked figure reveled in the change as the river returned steadily to its bed. The ritual of renewal was complete, and the fear that led the figure to kill the wolf was gone. In its place was gratitude for all things as they are, and all things playing their part.

This modern parable is remarkable because it is true. Eighty years ago, humans (wearing a cloak of fear and greed) decimated the wolf population in Yellowstone National Park. Then, in 1995, a small number of wolves were returned to the park. They seeded new life in extraordinary ways, restoring the ecosystem, repairing the broken food web, and even stabilizing the physical structure of the river.

Like the lesson in this story, rituals and ceremonies teach us to act from a place of love instead of fear, as this is the way to come into balance.

### **The Mind's Addiction to Suffering**

As I mentioned, *nagual* describes the energy force in the universe that gives life to all things. The nagual energy is never-ending, always present, and filled with peace and well-being. And yet, at the same time, my family's tradition recognizes that the human mind is addicted to suffering. It's this addiction that causes so much of our misery and prevents us from seeing the beauty that surrounds us.

When I tell people that one of the greatest problems facing humanity is the mind's addiction to suffering, they sometimes look at me in confusion or disbelief, so please allow me to explain further.

Consider all the ways we cause suffering in our own lives. We work and struggle to acquire

things we don't need, and then get angry or sad if we don't get them. When others don't behave as we think they should, we might judge and withhold our love as a form of punishment (this can happen in both big and little ways). And, of course, we inflict suffering on others and ourselves through physical violence and war.

Still, this list does not include the most prevalent way we cause suffering to ourselves, and that is the suffering we generate through our own thinking. We are the only animal on this planet to reject ourselves. We tell ourselves that we're not good enough, that we're not worthy of love, and we replay stories of regret from our past or fears of what might happen in the future.

The mind spins these judgments, fears, and regrets at a moment's notice, often when something triggers a memory or a deep-seated anxiety. By continuing a chatter of negative storytelling—comparing, judging, and looking

for problems—the mind creates most of the suffering that we experience.

Every moment has the potential to be beautiful, yet the mind is so addicted to suffering that it will create misery instead, often out of thin air, summoning and maintaining a kind of inner chaos that can drain our energy and disconnect us from the life force that surrounds and supports us.

I also want to make clear that this isn't a personal failure, as virtually all humans have this addiction to suffering to some degree or another. As you notice this tendency inside yourself, please don't use it as ammunition to beat yourself up further, but rather acknowledge it as a habit of the mind. The first step to ending any addiction is to notice that it exists, and to realize that you are the only one who can change it. The journey out of this suffering is one of awakening, and for many generations my family has taught this path. We have been teachers, guides, and friends of humanity—all

the way down to and including my grandmother Sarita and my father, don Miguel Ruiz.

However, we have always done this knowing (as all shamans do) that each person must find his or her own way on the journey. After all, we are each creating our own individual dream. The mind is built to dream—we can't stop this dreaming, but once we awaken to this truth, we can begin to notice the ways we lace our dreams with negativity. The rituals and ceremonies in this book can help reorient the storytelling mind toward love and away from fear.

On this journey, what if I told you that you could carry with you a very powerful, ancient tool around your neck and held close to your heart? The medicine bag is such a tool, both literally and metaphorically.

In a literal sense, a medicine bag is usually a small pouch, about the size of your hand, which is often worn around the neck and can also be carried in your pocket or handbag. It can vary in size, material, and contents; the

idea to remember is that a bag like this has been used by thousands of people before you as they progressed on their own journeys of awakening. It may carry written prayers, sticks, bones, rocks, feathers, or seashells. It may contain an object that is the symbol of a vision, a piece of nature from a meaningful place, a talisman of an animal totem. The contents of the medicine bag are physical representations that guide the inner journey of the wearer. In the next chapter, I'll go into detail about how to make or choose your own medicine bag, and the remaining chapters in this book will explain how to begin creating or choosing items to carry inside to help you on your own journey.

In a metaphorical sense, we each have an inner medicine bag that we've been carrying with us for most of our lives. If we don't realize this, then it has also probably never occurred to us to wonder what tools we've been carrying around in it. I'm talking about the tools we reach for out of habit: judgments, angry

reactions, regrets, fears, and more. We put these tools to work building negative realities for ourselves and others in a constant effort to feed the mind's addiction to suffering.

Part of our journey together in this book will be about removing the negative practices and beliefs from your internal medicine bag and replacing them with things like self-confidence, faith, peace, courage, access to your intuition, and most critically, love for yourself and others. Love is the most important tool of all in your inner medicine bag; in fact, it is the birthplace of every other positive tool you can ever possess.

The contents of your outer medicine bag have a mysterious ability to support the transformation of your inner medicine bag. Meaningful objects, prayers, and symbols of the natural world help you call on the strength of the nagual that is inside and all around you. Furthermore, the rituals and ceremonies in these pages are designed to open pathways into powerful concepts and abilities like discovering

your own divinity, intuition, healing, and awareness. Through these rituals, even as the mind continues its powerfully convincing dream, you can recognize the truth: that everything is already perfect—as it should be—and this includes you.

### **How to Use This Book**

This is not a book of philosophy. Yes, there will be explanations to set the stage, but this is really a book of practices that you can do to help you along your path.

For this reason, imagine you are holding a kind of cookbook, filled with inspiration, techniques, and recipes. As with a cookbook, you will want to try the rituals in this book, recreate them, adapt them, and most importantly put them into practice in your own life. Some will appeal to you more than others, and that's okay. You should only undertake what feels right for you, and even then, you can adapt

them in whatever way you feel is necessary for your own personal path.

The path of the shaman—the Nagual—is an individual journey. Rituals, likewise, must be one-of-a-kind, adaptable to your own individual circumstances. The rituals in this book are meant to be practiced with creative intention by each shaman, for a shaman follows his or her own deep inner truth—not the authority or tradition of others for their own sake.

You may choose to read this book in order by chapter, or you may choose to go directly to the chapter that calls you. I would recommend reading chapter one in all cases, because here we will cover the importance of healing, as well as how to create two important tools that we will refer to throughout the book: the medicine bag and the personal altar.

I would also like to say a few words about getting ready for a ritual or ceremony. As you prepare and gather the items you need for the practices in this book, I encourage you to do so

with sacred intention. This isn't merely "setup time"; this too is part of your ceremony. In some ways, this time of preparation can be just as powerful, if not more so, than the ceremony itself.

For instance, I have a friend who once attended a changing of the seasons ritual at another friend's home. When she arrived, she and her friend spent well over an hour setting up the altar and making little changes to it, bringing flowers in from the garden, telling each other stories of past celebrations, listening to music, and dancing a bit as they arranged and rearranged items on the table. When they were finished, the altar radiated with love and celebration . . . and nothing more seemed necessary. The preparation had become the ceremony itself.

So as you prepare and gather the items you'll need for a particular ceremony, rather than rushing through this time, slow down and bring awareness to your movements. Let your heart and mind be in the present moment during this

process, as doing so signals to your inner self that this is a special time you are setting aside in your day.

Lastly, I would like to point out that as the very name suggests, a medicine bag is primarily about healing, and the truth is that when we heal ourselves, we transform ourselves in the process. When we are seeking personal transformation, most often it is because we are suffering. Our addiction to suffering is a kind of illness, and when we take the medicine we need to heal, the result is transformation. The medicine is always love, and every time we choose it, the healing cycle happens over and over again, bringing us into alignment with the nagual energy inside us.



## THE IMPORTANCE OF HEALING

In the Toltec tradition, we recognize that every human is an artist (remember the word *Toltec* means artist), and the art we create is the story of our lives. As my father don Miguel Ruiz likes to say, “If you don’t like the story you’re living in, you are the only one who can change it.”

Healing ourselves is what makes lasting change possible. The medicine bag is designed to help you do exactly this.

I was taught the importance of healing from one of the most powerful shamans I have ever known: my grandmother. She was the keeper of the oral tradition of our family,

and she shared her wisdom with my father, my brothers, and the rest of her family so that it might be carried down, enhanced, and put into practice for generations to come. This is her great, ongoing gift.

My grandmother was an extremely powerful *curandera* (faith healer), whose own self-healing practice connected her to the strength of generations that came before her, to nature, to her deep religious faith, and to the healing power of Mother Earth.

Through my grandmother's example, I learned three key things:

1. When we heal ourselves, we build a strong foundation for our lives.
2. When we heal ourselves, we are preparing humanity—not just our loved ones, whom we touch directly, but really all people—to heal themselves as well.
3. When we heal ourselves, we claim our place as Toltec warriors.

For those of you who are unfamiliar with the Toltec warrior, this doesn't refer to physical violence, but rather to those who have made a commitment to watching their own minds and rooting out any negativity they find there. The Toltec warrior is one who makes a commitment to end the mind's addiction to suffering.

When I reference the Toltecs in this capacity, I don't mean the ancient civilization that thrived twenty-five hundred years ago. I am talking about the Toltecs alive now, those of us who realize that we are the artists of our lives and who have committed to creating a beautiful masterpiece. At the same time, it's important to remember that we're not at the beginning of this work. We build on the understanding of past generations, who have passed down this knowledge and helped bring us to this point. Now we get to make the choice to transcend, grow, and blossom. I say this to remind you that while a self-healing practice can only come from you and your own intent, you are not

without support. As you work through your own healing, remember that you are held up by the strength and love of the warriors who have come before you.

To begin your ceremonial journey, you will create two special tools—ones that we'll refer to time and time again throughout the rest of this book: the medicine bag and the personal altar.

### **Your Medicine Bag**

A medicine bag is a traditional object in many indigenous cultures that holds a variety of sacred items unique to its owner. It is a physical touchstone that keeps you centered on your path as you move through the living world. In times of stress, it can act as a ballast to hold you steady on what is most important, and its weight and texture act as a constant reminder that you are a part of a greater story, walking a path of healing and personal growth.

Some people carry small medicine bags with them on a thong or cord around their necks or in

a purse or pocket, and others may have slightly larger bags that they take with them to ceremonies. Many traditional medicine bags are made by hand from animal hides or leather. While tradition is important, any established pattern must grow and change along with the culture in order for it to retain its power and relevance. You may find that you prefer to purchase a premade medicine bag, or that you gravitate toward a medicine bag made of cotton, linen, or felt. The bag itself should feel right to you, whether traditional or nontraditional, because what is most important is the inner work you will do with it. You will draw from your deepest self to fill your bag with healing energy and items with profound significance.

If you choose to create your own medicine bag, you must first decide on its size. A small personal bag you carry around your neck or tucked in a pocket or purse might typically fit in the palm of your hand. A simple drawstring bag is relatively easy to make by cutting two pieces

of fabric (or leather if you are comfortable with the techniques of leatherworking), sewing them together on three sides, turning them inside out, and then sewing a string or cord into the top for the drawstring. A larger bag for ceremonial items can be made in much the same way, at whatever scale you like. There are a number of tutorials online that can help with this.



Once you've made your bag, you may wish to decorate it with beads, embroidery, or painted symbols unique to your path and that have special meaning for you. The bag itself is a sacred

object in its own right; spend the same amount of attention and time on its construction or selection as you would the objects inside it.

If you choose to purchase a premade bag, look at several different options and wait for the right bag to call to you—you will know it when you see it. Hold different options in your hand if you can, and see if any of them “feel right,” or if you perceive any natural signs at the time. Did birds fly overhead when you picked up a certain bag? Did you catch a familiar scent in the air? There’s no need to rush this process. Often when we allow a sacred object to choose us, instead of the other way around, we end up with something perfect for us in ways we wouldn’t have consciously chosen.

Once you have found or created your medicine bag, what you put in it is entirely up to you. Take your time with this. Resist the urge to add everything all at once. Instead, take the opportunity to spend time in meditation to discern what belongs in your medicine bag,

and what may be best to leave on your altar at home (which we will look at next). These items may include small stones, gifts from your spirit animal (feathers, bits of fur), dried plants, tiny seashells, prayers written on paper. Think of your most precious personal items that together represent your unique spirit and embody a powerful symbol of your journey. In the chapters that follow, I will be making suggestions on creating items that you can include in your medicine bag—ones that can help you heal and transform.

When your medicine bag is complete, you may want to set aside some time to bless your bag by letting it soak in the rays of the sun or the moon, or praying/chanting over it as you focus on its new role as a touchstone for you on your spiritual or healing path.

Finally, allow your medicine bag to evolve as you do. You may feel directed to add or subtract items based on dreams, sacred walks, vision journeys, healing needs, or encounters

with your spirit animal. Let your intuition guide you in this—there is no right or wrong way. The bag is a sacred blessing that goes with you wherever you go.

### **Your Personal Altar**

In addition to the power of the medicine bag, many traditional cultures recognize the importance of creating a sacred place for spiritual reflection, one that unites the seen and unseen worlds. A personal altar is a reflection of this ancient concept—an honored place, set aside and tended mindfully, imbued with beauty and devotion, where the sacred and the everyday meet. In some ways, your medicine bag already functions like a small portable altar, as it contains items of deeply sacred power that resonate with your personal path. Likewise, creating your home altar fosters your unique journey, expands the power of your sacred purpose into your whole home, and offers a beloved space for ceremonial practice.

In the Toltec tradition, your personal altar serves as a metaphor for your unique spirit and your place in the universe. There are no rules for altar creation; your altar may be minimalist and simple, or bursting with color and texture. At your altar, you can say prayers or mantras, set and reflect on your intent, meditate, perform rituals and ceremonies, make offerings, and sing songs. Like a medicine bag, it is a physical reminder of the journey you are on, a home base for your divine heart.

You may want to change the seasonal theme of your altar, and you can honor your loved ones who have passed on before you by placing their pictures there (both of these practices will be covered later in this book). An altar is a place of rest from the hectic pace of everyday life, where you can notice if the mind is caught in a trap of suffering. An altar is a signal to the spirits and powers of the living world that you are ready to move forward on your path.

Each person's altar will be one-of-a-kind, but here are some suggestions to get you started:

First, find a place in your home to dedicate to this work—the top of a dresser or cupboard, a small end table, a bookcase, a nightstand, a fireplace mantle, an outside garden nook. You might even consider making your altar on a plank of wood or a small table or cart with wheels so you can stash it away when not in use. Altars can be adapted to any surface or size—so don't worry if all you can manage in the beginning is one corner of your dresser. Even a simple votive candle with one or two small items can hold the space and focus your intent as powerfully as the most elaborate altar.

Once you've chosen your spot you may want to clear and consecrate the space, making sure it's free of dust and cleansing it energetically with incense or a salt ceremony (see chapter nine). Once the space is ready, take some time to choose your altar objects. You may already have items around your home that

you know will have a place on your altar, or you may need to spend some time in nature or seeking out objects that have meaning for you. You might want to include fresh flowers; crystals; natural items from sacred walks, such as pine cones, seashells, feathers, or stones; glass bottles filled with water from a special river, lake, or spring; bells; prayer books or other sacred texts; cups or bowls to hold water, herbs, earth, stones, or small objects; pictures of loved ones; statues or pictures of spirits or deities; candles or incense burners . . . the possibilities are truly endless.

When you have your altar arranged, set aside some time to light the candles, burn some incense, play some music. Pick up each object, considering its meaning and personal significance, and say a small prayer. Once your altar is established, you can return to it anytime, even for a few moments, to refresh your sense of purpose and connect with the living world. Don't feel obligated to perform long, elaborate

ceremonies—even the simple act of picking up an altar item and holding it in your hands and asking for a blessing can reinvigorate your day.

Your altar is also your art. In your altar you will find an organic, spiritual reflection of the story of your life. Let its beauty be a reminder of how beautiful you are, as well as a window through which you can reach out to the unseen worlds.

### **A Commitment to Healing Yourself**

Once you have established these two important tools in whatever way works for you, it's time to take your first ritual step toward personal healing. This ceremony is based on one that I learned from my grandmother. It serves as an initiation and commitment to self-healing and produces a powerful reminder object that will assist in your ongoing healing journey. In this practice, you will combine the items with your picture to align their beauty and potency with yourself. Performing this ceremony symbolizes your realization that you are the artist of your

life and you recognize that healing yourself is the first step to creating the masterpiece that is your life story.

Prepare and gather:

- ♦ A photo of yourself
- ♦ A glass jar or other small container with a lid
- ♦ A few small, disposable objects that represent healing for you or are personally meaningful and attractive (e.g., seashells, flowers, stones, driftwood, pine cones, bits of colorful fabric)
- ♦ Incense (optional)
- ♦ Water

To begin, put your photo and disposable objects inside the container. If you are using incense, crumble a tiny bit of that up and add it to your container too. Then fill the container with water. Water is a universal symbol for life and, like air, a conduit for energy exchange

between objects. We are all connected through the air we breathe and the water we exchange through our bodies.

Next, set your intent on healing and becoming the artist of your life, staying open to the breath and any sensations that come up for you, and say the following mantra out loud:

*I commit to ongoing healing of my deepest self, to opening my heart, to caring for my body, to caring for my mind, to ending the addiction to suffering. I am the artist of my life, and I am ready to create my masterpiece.*

Then, put the lid on the jar and set it somewhere undisturbed for three days. You have now created a powerful gestation container, one where the energy of the objects can be unified with your own energy. Over the next three days, each time you see or remember the jar, take a moment to feel the power of your intent and send that positive energy into it.

After three days, drain the water from the jar and remove your photo.

This picture now holds the power of the objects, the water, and your intention. While it is still wet, hold the picture between your palms and close your eyes. Feel grateful for the energy within it. After that, let your picture dry in the sun to absorb more powerful energy, and then put it in a meaningful place—perhaps in your medicine bag, on your altar, or between the pages of a journal or book that you read regularly. The important thing is that you put it in a special place where you will see it often, because it will remind you of your commitment to being a healer of yourself and the artist of your life.

I love this ceremony because it sets your intent to heal yourself and provides you with a physical representation of that intent. Both of these are expressed in the photo you have imbued with the energy of these objects. The photo now has this energy—and so do you.

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