

BEING MORTAL RETREAT

Two Exercises (Self-generated Rituals) for the Middle Weekend of the Retreat

The middle weekend of our retreat has been left open — without online sessions – to give you time to contemplate the themes that have been brought up in the first four sessions, as well as in the first six essays. This open weekend may also give you time to engage in these two exercises, or self-generated rituals, which have the potential to bring what we’re speaking about into intimate focus. These exercises are deeply personal and can be both challenging and transformative. You may wish to do the first ritual on Saturday, and the second on Sunday.

A few words about *ritual* – rituals always happen at a certain time and in a specific place. You can’t just daydream about them. (Rituals are defined by the fact that something *happens* in them — something changes, something is enacted, as distinct from a celebration like Thanksgiving or Christmas where something is simply celebrated.) So if you decide to do these two rituals, determine *when* you will do them, and *where*. You might prepare the space, making sure you will not be disturbed, and when the time comes approach the ritual place with dignity and humility. You might make (or imagine) a circle of protection around you, ensuring that the ritual space is sacred and safe.

1. The Death Lodge

This is an adaptation of a Plains Indians ritual/story. It was said that when the tribe set up camp and an old person realized she or he had come to their dying time and would not continue traveling with the tribe when they broke camp, that person had their teepee set up at some distance from the main camp. This would signify to the tribe that that person’s dying time had come, and if anyone in the tribe had unfinished business with the dying one, or had grudges or regrets or needed in any way to “make good” with the dying one, now was the time to do so. And one by one, they would visit the dying person and do their best to resolve whatever needed resolution.

In this ritual, imagine that it is you who are the dying one. Your dying time has come. Enter your ritual space. Sit quietly. Pretend that you will soon die. Be as real about this as you can. Now invite anyone in your life to come who has any “business” they need to transact with you, or that you need to transact with them – to be forgiven or to forgive, to express something that needs to be expressed, to resolve something that is unresolved in your heart or theirs. Now wait. See who comes. Sometimes you may need to wait for a good while before someone comes. Sometimes no one comes. And remember, this is *your* ritual, *your* sacred space — if someone arrives who you don’t want to confront,

someone who makes you so fearful or angry that no resolution is possible, tell them to leave. You have that power.

Otherwise, when someone does arrive, tell them what you want to say to them, or ask them what you need to ask. Ask them what they need to say to you. This exchange may be quite simple, or it may carry on over some time. When it is finished, you may wish to thank the person for coming and bid them farewell.

Now wait again, and see who comes. When no one else comes, sit quietly for a while, and then close your circle in whatever way feels appropriate to you.

2. **Dying Words**

This ritual is best done with a helper — a “scribe” — although it can also be done solo. Establish a time and place for your ritual, and prepare the space so it feels restful and calm. As in the previous ritual, imagine that this is very close to your dying time, even closer than with the Death Lodge ritual.

You may wish to arrange for music that you love to be played in the background. If you have a scribe-friend, enter the space with him or her, sit quietly for a while, imaging your dying moments are close. Now express to your friend the words you would like to hear as you die. Go slow. Your friend should write down the words you say, or make approximate notes of what they are.

If you do not have a scribe-friend, you might speak these words into your phone or record them in some way, so that you can play them back to yourself when the time comes.

What words do you want to hear to help you become awake and clear-hearted as you die? What words will help you release any fears you may have? What words will help ease your passage as you depart this life?

When you have expressed these words to your friend and she or he has written them, or you have recorded them, now lie down quietly and when the time feels right, have them speak back these words to you (or listen to the recording you have made.) Your friend needn't use your exact words—they should express them naturally and lovingly with their own voice and spirit.

When the words are finished, lie quietly. Then when you feel ready, sit up, thank your friend, and return to your life — but do so gently and peacefully.