

emptiness into form



creating an altar

Graduation project created by Kristin Glenewinkel

Apprenticeship 2012-2013

Professional Training 2013-2016

Graduation June 2016

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Introduction

I have always kept an altar in my home. It felt like a platform for spirit to land, a space that was empty and dedicated to the Unseen. These days I have two altars at home, one dedicated to my work and one for my prayers for all relations. I have never tried to explain or write down why I would create such a space or why I would bring an altar into a dance space. For me it's the most natural thing to do and it happens in the realm beyond words. Because this is my graduation project I will try to bring my language to this. This feels vulnerable and tender. The sacred has been safe in the symbolic world of images and signs. To bring the sacred into the realm of words and explain the process is a challenge.

My history with creating altars

I have created altars sometimes at the buddhist retreat centre where I lived in the years 2002-2009 and at the 5 rhythm class with Margarita in Basel in 2009 and 2010. (I don't have any pictures). In communication with Kat Forrester I have created the altars for her Movement Medicine classes in Basel 2012-2016. She shared the theme and some ideas with me and made the altar. At some point I started to photograph the altars. I have created altars for all my sessions that I taught in the years 2014-2016 in Basel. In Strasbourg and Frankfurt I communicated with the organizer and team and found another version of co-creation where I would suggest theme and ideas and people pick this up and create an altar in their own style.

What is an altar?

Traditionally an altar is a table or a higher place that is there for an offering. Etymology: Old English from Latin altāria (plural) – from altus: high. The root meaning has to do with raising something up. Altars in the context of Movement Medicine workshops or ceremonies are frequently on ground level. The installation is raising our level of attention and awareness, whether on a wall, on a table or on the floor, these are all altars/offerings.

The altar is a live link with the MM Mesa. Like a "fuse box" in an electric system – the altar is where the main power lines outside meet, enter and activate a circuit in a particular house.

Why have an altar?

The altar is important because it holds the symbolic imprint, the original inspiration for the dance, for the offering. Images, shapes, colors, fabric, texture and Gestalt speak directly to our soul. As John O'Donohue puts it:

„The imagination loves symbol because it recognizes that inner divinity can only find expression in symbolic form. The symbol never gives itself completely to the light. It invites thought precisely because it resides at the threshold of darkness. Through the imagination, the soul creates and constructs your depth experience. Imagination is the most reverent mirror of the inner world.“

An altar can support us to come into presence here and now, to focus our attention, to raise our consciousness by lifting up and expanding our view. An altar is a door into the imaginative part of our being.

During the last years I have been asked a few times if I could give advice about how to create an Altar. I try to make an unconscious, organic process more conscious and explain how it works for me.

Creative process and the MM Mandala

YIN (related to Dancing Fool, CREATIVITY)

When I prepare for a class (or a session that I organize and create the altar) I think of a theme and my mind brings up a series of images and associations with the theme. I open a wide field in my mind and heart, I call to spirit. This is a state that feels soft and receptive. I stay for a while in this empty space until images appear and a clear form arises. This can take days, sometimes it happens in an instant. I guess that's what people in our community call „dreaming“. My imagination starts to work and spins a net of ideas, pictures, colors, textures and possibilities for bringing this into form. The process of listening is acknowledging that the subconscious, the Unknown is co-creating with me, that imagination is part of a dance space where we want to dream and connect with Source. This part of the process is associated with the Yin aspect at the centre of the Movement Medicine Mandala. I become like the moon, absorbing and perceiving. The less I do, the more I can receive the artistic impulse from inside.

YANG (related to Dancing Warrior, CHOICE)

Later I bring a few things together, I gather a bowl of earth or a few pieces of wood and here the process becomes more Yang, also at the centre of the Movement Medicine Mandala. I might work with shapes, look at the composition of different objects and their position on the altar. Sometimes I draw or paint a picture. Does the altar need light, what goes well together and how can I create a harmony in simplicity? In this phase of Yang creation I also work on the structure of the class more (when I teach myself). I find the music, do some writing and the session becomes one unit with art, music and content. Different patterns appear and clarity arises. This part of the process is physical and deals with matter. At some point I know: this is it. I pack the things, take them to the space and set up the altar. This part needs a certain Yang sharpness and speed, often I have to set up the altar in minimum time. Simultaneously I have to hold the sensitivity of Yin and keep listening. Often associations come at last minute or I need to adapt to the circumstances of a place.

YEUNG (related to Wise Elder, LOVE)

My experience is that; when I have dreamt deeply, nourished the dream from a Yin place and played with it in my imagination, took care for the more Yang aspect of shaping and giving Gestalt - the set up is easy. It feels like pulling the rabbit out of the hat. There is magic in this process and it always looks different than I originally planned. The essence of magic is that it requires no time and I experience this in the creative process. This is the meeting of Yin and Yang becoming Yeung. The three aspects dance with each other at the centre of the Mandala and allow us a glimpse into the great mystery. That is how I see the creation process in context of the Mandala. The heart allows love to manifest. In this moment, when the altar is set up, I realize it happened beyond time, in a blink of an eye. The three archetypes that are dancing in the heart of this work are often arising in the creative process and bring creativity, choice and love into creation.

During the session the altar has an effect on the dancers, some people like to gather themselves there at the beginning or go and sit close to it towards the end. The altar holds the session and explains some of the content without words. In a simple way this is art and the beauty frees us. We can take a break from logic and reason. When the altar has been made with

aesthetic sense, the nervous system can tune into the parasympathetic mode – where dreaming and healing can happen. It brings peace. We can dance and let our body dance its artistic expression. This is how the process from spirit to matter and back to spirit works for me.

Closing the circle

Saying thank you to the Invisible and thanking the Mesa for being the frame for this moment of creation. After the session I pack up the things. Nature materials I bring back to nature; back to the river, forest or to the trees in the park. I pray and say thank you and I stay in communication with the Unseen for a while. Cleaning up and storing away closes the process and emptiness remains. Receiving the echo. Silence in presence of beauty.

What materials do I use in the process?

Sometimes I find an object or an image at home and I know that this is part of the altar. It happens that I know that there needs to be a stone in the constellation and then I go look for a stone. I do not go out and buy materials for my altars. I have bunches of fabric and different colors of cloth. Life provides us with many beautiful objects, in the kitchen, on the balcony or in my son's room. There are treasures everywhere. I love to use postcards or little images. I use collages or paintings that I make for a theme. The four elements are always a good inspiration to orient yourself, „Is there some earth in the constellation, some water, some space and wind? Is there fire in the form of light in the set up?“ Often these four basic aspects are represented in the offering.

Where do you set up an altar?

An altar is providing a visual focal point, it needs to be visible. The choices of location in dance sessions are along the wall – often half way along for symmetry. Perhaps the direction is chosen to correspond to the element direction – or more often than not, the layout of the room will indicate the placement. This will have to do with the position of the entrance door, windows, the DJ desk, and other local aspects such as theatre stages, pillars, bulletin boards, TV screens, pianos, potted plants and so on. This is “common sense Feng Shui” – our sense of the proper and natural placement

of things. There is the possibility for a central altar. Often these are created for ceremonies with an intention of creating sense community in the group. A circular, central altar on the ground is powerful. With a little experience the MM space holder will intuitively see the best altar location right away.

Different styles of Altar

- *Offering with text/poem/book on a table*
- *Mandalas on the ground with postcards, stones and circles*
- *Presentation with objects and natural materials*
- *Paintings/Images on the wall*

Generic teachings for the community:

Honor your perception. The whispers of intuition contain all you need.

Creating an altar is opening sacred space, it's not decorating the room.

An altar communicates in clear images the content of the session.

Less is more. Simplicity communicates essence.

Become aware that all you need for making the altar is already here.

The essence of magic is that it requires no time.

There is no way to control this creative process. Allow it to happen.

Making an altar is simple and requires full presence.

The Invisible is creating with you and through you.

What others see:

Ali Young: *I vividly remember being led into the dance by Kristin for the first time - experiencing a clarity akin to a crisp, mountain breeze, or the edge of a bone - her altars also hold something of this purity and clearly defined edges - when she creates on the manifest level, her expression is funneled through her warm, passionate loving heart - the result? An explosion - crisp, clear and colorful all at once, like a magical firework, once seen, never forgotten!*

Agne Diciute: *I find you very creative, your altars look and feel like they are alive. It seems you can really call the spirits of the elements to land in these creations. I see and feel energy coming out of them and it inspires me, I can feel the support coming out of them. I think all you do is believe and create with love.*

Karin Saemann: *I find an Altar is a nice way to prepare and tune into a lesson. While creating it, the thoughts about the lessons are with it. I like the natural materials in the Altars I experienced with Kristin's lessons. They make a harmonious picture. I like the lights in it, either the electrified light-chain, or the small tea-candles, they give the Altar some alive movement through the light. I like to listen to the ideas of Kristin, when creating the Altar, it gives me her thoughts about the creation. I feel it would be a nice way to get into a lesson by first having a look at the Altar. For me the Altar is a sort of art-contemplation, which nourishes the own thoughts to the theme Kristin is offering that evening.*

Kat Forrester: *Kristin has been creating altars for my Sunday sessions in Basel since we began this joint project in August 2012. At the time of writing in March 2016, we have held 40 sessions; for the most part 3-hour "drop-in" sessions, and also two 6-hour ceremonies with booking. I have come to love Kristin's artistic impulse, and the movement of her hands as she folds a cloth or places a candle. It's a deeply authentic expression of a great gift of seeing materials and connecting with spirit. It is exactly as she says: comes from emptiness into form and holds both.*

As a movement teacher, I find great value in having a visual installation that symbolizes our intention and purpose for the class. This provides a clear and

stable reference point for the dancers, without the need for elaborate explanations in words. It stimulates the imagination, giving rise to imagery and symbolism that go far beyond the logical brain and invite the dancer into a much wider sense of what may be possible in the session. The altar supports me as the teacher to keep a clear focus on the intention for the class, and to ensure that what I say and the dance-exercises I offer are congruent with the theme.

Examples (with reference to the photos)

"Inner Space Clearing" 21st February 2016 (Photo nr 1)

Intention: Prepare for arrival of spring, by clearing inner space: a kind of spring cleaning - shake up what has been lying still - let in air and light.

Altar: The color light green is a preview of the color we'll be seeing in nature in the coming weeks, when the leaves and buds burst forth after the long Swiss winter. Delicious and exciting to see this color, slightly ahead of its time - encourages us to be ready when it comes. The way Kristin arranged the cloths is bright and breezy - something like washing out on a line in the sun and wind - invites the air and the light in. The green-yellow candle and the light rope also bring in light. The hazel catkins show us how to shake loose. The small crystals symbolize the clarity and purity we seek in our inner space.

"Bones" 31st January 2016 (Photo nr 2)

Intention: We are still in deep winter. Pay attention to our basic structures and shapes. Revitalize our bones and let them dream.

Altar: Very simple and basic: black cloth, white candle and a small animal bone. The setting of the table at a slight angle brings movement into an installation which otherwise might be a bit static and formal.

Vertical light rope at the back resonates with the spine of the dancer.

Painting by Georgia O'Keeffe: book open at a bone painting:

"Pelvis with Moon" 1943 Poem "Hollow Bones" by Amara Bronwyn.

Both painting and poem invite deep contemplation.

"Autumn Ritual" 15th November 2015 (Photo nr 3)

Intention: Letting go – finding the personal and collective weave of our contradictory feelings and experiences – so our emotion becomes part of the energy of our dream for world peace and love.

Altar: A river of warmth and light. Blue patterned cloths – please see the particular way Kristin has placed the cloths, giving impression of a flowing river. Meandering light rope brings light; red woolen yarn symbolizes warmth of human connection and our bloodlines. So the "river" has more than one meaning. During the ritual, the dancers could give autumn leaves and/or written messages to the river. (Colored origami paper and pencils provided.)

"Joy of the Beat" 10th May 2015 (Photo nr 4)

Intention: Explore the teachings of the fire element, about clarity, presence, connection and visibility.

Altar: "Still life" with drum. It is very clear and simple. The deep pink color of the background cloth speaks fire and love, and the gentle folds of it give movement. The drum itself is so beautifully and fully visible – one can see the details in the animal skin like rhythms of life.

The exquisite drum sticks are connected like two dancers.

The play of light and shade brings movement and depth.

„Form is emptiness, emptiness is form.
Emptiness is not separate from form,
form is not separate from emptiness.
Whatever is form is emptiness,
whatever is emptiness is form.“

(An excerpt of the Heart sutra, a text from the prajnaparamita-sutras)



1 Inner Space Clearing



2 Bones



3 Autumn Ritual



4 Joy of the Beat



5 Earth blessing



6 Spring Shapes



7 Harvest



8 Ancestors and Spirals



9 & 10 Tree of life



11 Dancing body

12 Ancestor call





13 Star meditation

14 The nine Gateways





15 Air and Wings

16 Solstice Fire





17 Fundraiser for Ecuador

18 Circle of Hearts





19 Power of love

20 New years Mandala





21 Fire circle for summer solstice

22 Circle for Winter solstice





23 Yin and Yang at Spring Equinox



24 At the centre of your circle



25 The five dimensions

26 Empty space End of year ceremony





27 Body, Heart and Mind

28 Animal spirits in four directions





29 The three Archetypes: The Dancing Warrior, The Wise Elder and the Dancing Fool



30 Yin

31 Yang





32 Autumn Equinox



33 Fire invocation



34 Water invocation



35 Lord of the dance (Drum by Dorrie Joy)





37 Landscapes of the heart





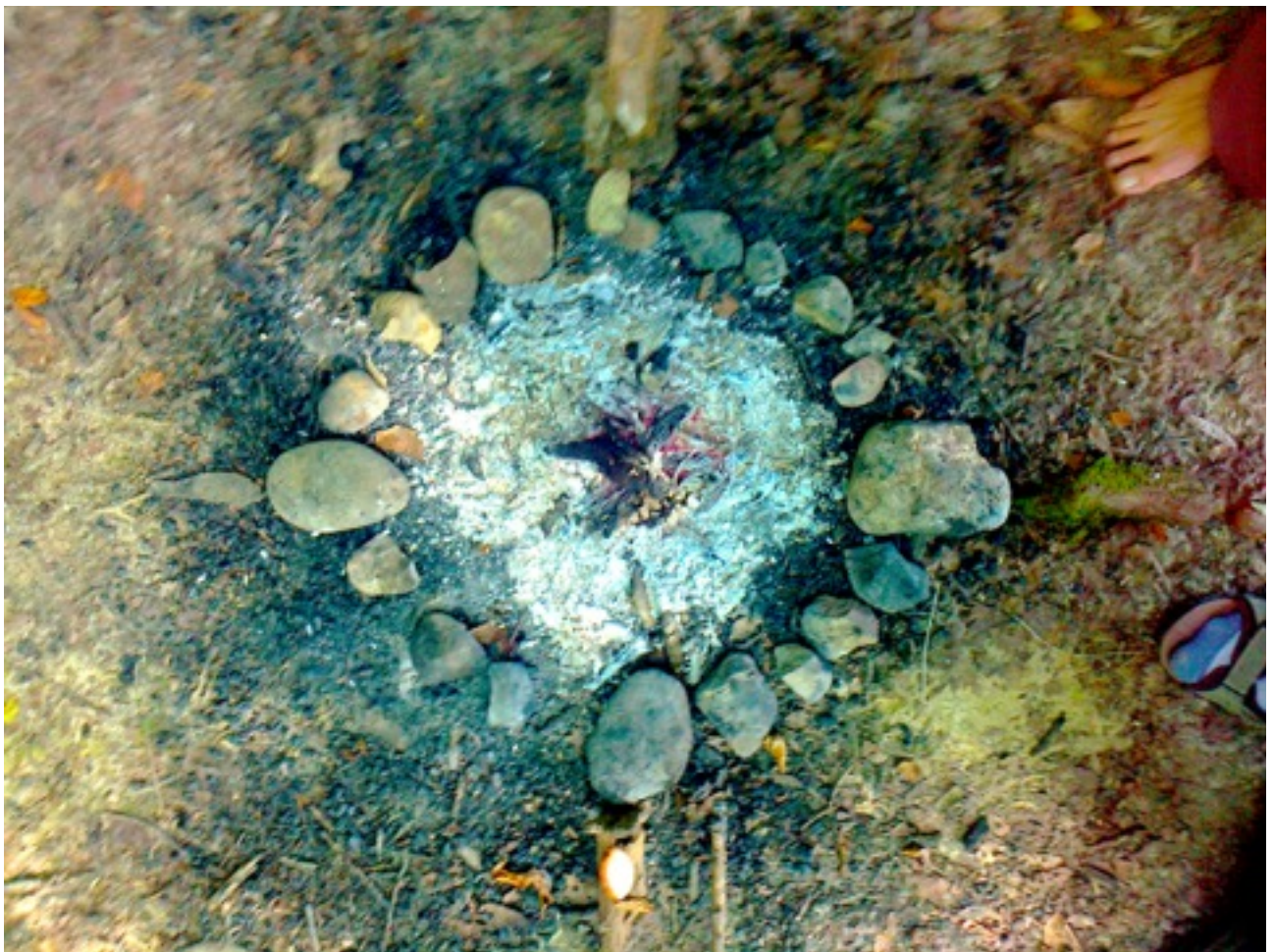
39 Creating an altar



40 Yin and Yang

41 Balance





42 Purification



43 Dream of the whale



44 Wisdom of Compassion



45 Driftwood

