

CREATING THE CONTAINER:

Designing Collective Rituals to Metabolize Grief Together as a School Team, Community, and Culture

WORKSHEET

Created By:

*School Crisis Recovery & Renewal
and The Dinner Party Labs*



The DINNER PARTY *labs*

When we can say what feels unsayable, we are less likely to have it dragging us around by the nose. Naming then becomes a form of affect identification and is rooted in ancient traditions of naming, marking, affirmation, and witnessing through community and ritual.

Jen Leland, SCRR Field Coach

This worksheet is a helpful walkthrough for some of the choice points that can create a powerful, trauma-informed container for your community to process student death, either as an acute event or an ongoing space.

You may wish to begin this design of your ritual / container alone, or as a group with a handful of people you wish to enlist as co-designers (fellow teachers or school staff, students, present or former colleagues who knew a particular student, families and the school community at large, etc.)

THE ELEMENTS

IDENTIFYING YOUR STRENGTHS AS A SCHOOL CULTURE AND COMMUNITY:

- Where do you go and what do you do to find meaning, as an educator and as a school community?
- What are the practices you already engage in with intention, attention, and repetition?
(Think: Advisory, restorative circles for staff, team retreats, student-led conferences)

WHY:

- Who and what do you wish to honor?
- What are the feelings you wish to make space for, personally and as a school community?
- What do you want to feel coming out of the experience? What do you want other people to feel?

WITH WHOM?

- Whom are you longing to connect with, and why? What are the conversations you long to have, and with whom can you have them?
 - Do you wish to hold an open space, available to any and all within your school community, or a private affinity space, for folks who share a particular experience, role, or identity? (See pg. 8 for tips on when to create an open space vs an affinity space.)
 - What are the conditions that need to be met in order for this group of people to feel emotionally safe? How can you safeguard confidentiality?
- What are the specific needs folks are bringing with them, and which of those needs can you begin to address here?
- What are the access needs? What are the possible barriers to entry that might prevent certain people from participating? Are there any sources of hesitation you can help to alleviate?
- Whose voices do you want to enlist as co-leaders in the design process? Whose buy-in is central to success? How might you partner with students, alumni, and/or families in the design and delivery of this ritual space?

See pg. 9 for tips on creating an invitation people want to say yes to.

THE ELEMENTS

WHEN:

- Is there a particular date you wish to mark (for ex, an anniversary or a birthday), or a season that would feel particularly meaningful (for ex, Fall and the return to school, a holiday, the New Year, or Spring and a season of rebirth)?
- Is this something you imagine doing one-time, or a practice you hope to return to year-after-year?

WHERE:

- List 1-3 places where you feel particularly connected to the student(s) who died.
- What other places are easy for you to access as a group, which feel meaningful or soothing – even if not connected specifically to the student(s) you've lost?

WHAT:

- **Who are we?** Think about the existing rituals that shape and define who you are as a school community: What are some familiar practices you can draw upon? What are practices you've longed to try?
- **Who were they?** What lessons or wisdom did they leave behind? What were their beliefs or behaviors or quirks that you most admired or find yourself missing?
- **Anchoring in tradition:** How might you honor the ancestral practices and cultural traditions present within your school community? What might you do to elevate cross-cultural practices, and to ensure participants are able to feel fully seen for the richness and diversity of belief they collectively possess?
- **Let your imagination run wild, and finish this sentence:** "I fantasize about healing or moving forward through . . ."

DESIGNING YOUR CONTAINER:

01

READ THROUGH YOUR ANSWERS ABOVE, AND CIRCLE 3-8 WORDS THAT YOU THINK WOULD HELP CREATE THE EXPERIENCE YOU'RE CRAVING.

02

AS A GROUP, SHARE THE WORDS YOU CIRCLED, AND IDENTIFY AND DISCUSS POINTS OF INTERSECTION AND DIVERGENCE.

03

HAVE EACH PERSON RESPOND TO THE FOLLOWING:

In honor of:

With the intention of:

We wish to:

Regardless of how it goes, I'll take care of myself by:

At (when/where):

04

HOW WILL WE SUPPORT PARTICIPANTS (FELLOW EDUCATORS, ADMINISTRATORS, FORMER EDUCATORS, COMMUNITY BASED PARTNERS, STUDENTS, ALUMNI, STAFF, FACULTY, ETC) IN FEELING SEEN AND HEARD IN THEIR GRIEF JOURNEY?

WHAT WILL WE:

A. Do?

B. Say?

C. Create?

DO'S & DON'TS

When it comes to memorialization and commemoration, there is no script, no formula, no handbook: We must follow the lead and needs of those most impacted, and build upon the structures we've previously laid to allow students, teachers, and staff to show up as their full selves. **The following tips were drawn from educators on the SCRR panel, "discourse of Memorialization & Commemoration,"**¹

01 NAME THE HARM.

Consider the very real ways in which "vertical forms of violence" in the form of white supremacy, settler colonialism, and concentrated poverty are at the root of so many student deaths and ongoing sources of loss, says Tiffani Marie. "Naming that and acknowledging it," says shea martin, "allows us to ask how we might then "create spaces of safety, of healing in a school system and institution that has been historically traditionally unsafe for students [of color]."

02 LISTEN TO STUDENTS.

What do students want to do, and how do you ensure that whatever rituals you create as a school community are meaningful to them? "Allow kids the opportunity to connect and engage [in ways that] are multifaceted and that honor different modes of engagement and different modes of grieving," says martin. "My accountability has always been to the young people that I love and the communities that I belong to and never to the institutions," says Christina "V" Villarreal. Reflecting on her experience as an Assistant Principal in East Oakland and the death of a student near the school campus, she shared that her chief focus was "How [do] I best leverage my role to ensure that I follow what the students, his best friends, his mother, his cousin who was there, need?"

"Their bodies know how to do what their communities have taught them to do, and more times than not, it's about us moving out the way," adds Tiffani Marie. "But," she says, "I want to be careful on how I'm saying that, so that folks don't feel excused from the work." Be mindful that your impulse to let students lead is not coming from a place of your own adult discomfort with sitting in discomfort.

03 "CENTER THE VOICES ON THE MARGINS THAT ARE LIVING AND GRAPPLING WITH GRIEF AND TRAUMA AND DEATH EVERY SINGLE DAY," SAYS SHEA MARTIN.

BE MINDFUL THAT GRIEF IS GRIEF:

Disenfranchised grief often occurs among those who feel they do not have the "right" to grieve. At the same time, remember that grief is not held equally. Societally, we most often focus on single, episodic loss, while erasing the bigger picture of communal, collective grief and the social inequities that permeate our world.

04 ALLOW THE CONVERSATION TO CONTINUE.

"A lot of times, institutions will have an event, and then once you're two months down the road, a kid or teacher falls apart and you're like 'oh like I don't know what happened, why are they acting this way?,'" says shea martin. "How can we create or adapt language and space for conversations to continue long-term, to help kids understand that healing, grieving, and memorializing someone in their lives is a long-term process and a lifelong process?"

05 INSTITUTIONALIZE & NORMALIZE PRACTICES FOR HOLDING SPACE.

- "The most powerful communities that I've been in for holding space for grief have been those where there was a routine or a structure built in," says Alex Shevrin Venet. She recalls working in an alternative school that held Circles everyday with kids, and regularly with faculty and staff. "If something bigger was bubbling up for a lot of people, we could call a special circle called 'Making Meaning, where we would gather and really dig into something with the kind of a structure we all knew how to pick up. It takes the ability to define crises away from just the people with certain job titles and it puts that with everybody."
- "I think we've done a really beautiful job of centering events like Dia de Los Muertos and institutionalizing it, and hiring a director of restorative practices, so that there are circles that are done normatively," says Tiffani Marie. "When there are events, it's not this reactive thing that we're doing - it's a normative part of our school community. Students have the language to engage meaningfully. There are several teachers who have altars in their classroom to honor ancestors and to invite particular energies into our space."

06 CONTINUE SHARING STORIES, AS NEW GENERATIONS OF STUDENTS AND EDUCATORS COME AND GO.

Notice that you're talking more than others? Step back and give other voices a chance to be heard. Be patient and respectful with speaking turns and speaking times. And remember: Silence can be powerful together. We welcome what silence has to say as much as speech.



MAKE IT A MEAL.

Between 2021-2022, SCRR and The Dinner Party Labs hosted what we called "Life After Loss Tables: Educators Edition." We brought together a group of educators who had each experienced the loss of a student — and in many cases, students — from across the country for a series of virtual gatherings. (We called the gatherings “tables”, in a nod to the physical spaces and dinner tables we longed to share.) Over the course of a year, the educators sat together in intentional, peer-led spaces, as a chance to engage in conversation around their experience with death-related, school-based losses and to explore paths toward healing.

Eating together is the oldest ritual in all of the books: a means of slowing down long enough to listen deeply to ourselves and to each other. Shared meals can also be a powerful way of lifting up the stories and legacies of the people we've lost: We might choose to bring a dish with a story behind it — say, a favorite food of theirs, or a dish that gives a window into the places and cultures we come from. We can choose conversation-starters that invite us to reflect openly on subjects that we might otherwise avoid, or use a meal to conclude a memorial celebration, thereby seizing an opportunity to metabolize the experience and strengthen our connections with one another and with the person or people who died.

¹The preceding tips were drawn from educators on the SCRR panel, "[Memorialization & Commemoration](#)," hosted on 5/13/2021, featuring: Alex Shevrin Venet, *educator, author, and professional development facilitator*; Alica Forneret, *SCRR Pedagogy of Grief Content Strategies & Founder and Executive Director of PAUSE*; Beth Silbergeld, *educator, school leader, equity consultant*; Dr. Christina “V” Villareal, *Faculty Director of Teacher Education, Harvard Graduate School of Education*; Francesca Osuana, *MSW/MPH, PPSC, Former SCRR Field Coach*; Leora Wolf-Prusan, *Edd, Project Director, The School Crisis Recovery & Renewal (SCRR) Project*; Mary Horn, *Director, The Dinner Party*; Oriana Ides, *MA, LPCCI, PPS, SCRR Field Coach*; shea martin, *writer, educator, and co-founder of Liberate and Chill *Collective*; Tiffani Marie, *educator and researcher*; Yesmina Luchsinger, *MS, educator, advocate, and mental health professional*

CREATING AN OPEN SPACE VERSUS AN AFFINITY SPACE

What might be possible for one particular group of people that might not be possible for a different group of people?

HERE ARE A FEW THINGS TO CONSIDER AS
YOU THINK ABOUT WHO YOU WANT INVITE:

RACE / ETHNICITY:

Holding distinct spaces for people of different racial or ethnic groups—also known as caucuses—is a popular tool in racial equity work. Separating groups opens the doorway to more honest conversation, while reducing the risk of harm: For instance, people of color can openly share how race has impacted their experience of loss, without having to explain themselves or fearing they'll be perceived as “too much.”

The school climate can determine whether you and others feel safe expressing vulnerability, and with whom. Teachers may be hesitant to share openly with administrators and school leadership, and vice versa. If you're a school administrator, consider creating a table for fellow administrators; if you're a teacher, consider inviting only fellow teachers.

POWER / POSITIONALITY:

Are there particulars about the cause of death or the circumstances surrounding it that you wish to unpack with others who've shared similar experiences? Perhaps you wish to gather with others who've lost a student to suicide, or to homicide, or perhaps you ache to connect with fellow educators who've borne a succession of losses over years of service. If you decide to open up the experience to a range of experiences, try to ensure no one person is made to be an outlier.

SHARED EXPERIENCE:

If the loss was more recent, you may wish to gather with other educators who knew the same student or students, and want to reflect on all the ways the experience continues to impact them. We're often left longing for opportunities to say a name out loud that rarely gets mentioned, to share memories, and together, to construct ways to honor and remember the dead. On the other hand, anonymity can sometimes be a good thing, making us less apt to judge another person's expression of grief.

SHARED PEOPLE

CREATE AN INVITATION PEOPLE WANT TO SAY YES TO

An invitation can serve as a powerful opportunity to model the tone and spirit you wish to invoke and to inspire, and to assuage fears people might hold in showing up fully in a gathering of this kind.

INVITATIONS SHOULD INCLUDE:

- ✓ *A personal why — why this person, why this group, why now*
- ✓ *A goal/purpose for the conversation itself*
- ✓ *An easy way to say no.*

A FEW TIPS

Speak from the heart; don't talk like a robot.

As a school site leader or administrator, we invite you to use this as an opportunity to model the same vulnerability you're inviting among participants. Avoid jargon or anything that feels institutional or stiff; instead, speak from the heart about why you're craving this, and trust that others might be craving the same thing.

Remember: Joy and pain are not mutually exclusive.

As educator Tiffani Marie reminds us, "Joy and laughter is a part of grief in many of our cultures and our practices." Commemorations may feel joyful or celebratory in ways you might not expect. You may choose to create a ritual that makes space for both expressions of pain, and of celebration for the life lived — for the sharing of funny stories, or values and experiences that mirror the vivacity held by those you've lost.

Before you send an invite, talk to a handful of would-be participants about what they're craving.

Share your intentions and hopes for the gathering, and get their perspective: What makes you feel heard/valued? What concerns do you have about showing up to a gathering like this? What conversations are you hoping to have? Consider questions like, "How does this conversation allow us to live into the values of who we want to be?" Use the words you've heard when crafting your invite, and anchor the invitation in the values you and the people you're inviting profess to hold as a collective community.

Preempt skepticism.

Keep in mind all the reasons someone might not want to sit down, and use the invitation to assuage any of those fears.

Prime your people.

"It's easy to focus on preparing all the practicals and forget to prepare the people," writes Priya Parker in *The Art of Gathering*. "Priming your attendees for the gathering is crucial. Think about what behavior you'd like at the gathering and look to prime it ahead of time." What can you do to reinforce the message of the gathering, long before folks arrive? What are different points in the day or run-up to the gathering that you can use to elevate the themes and types of expression you're inviting folks to share?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

CREATING AND HOLDING SPACE FOR OURSELVES AND EACH OTHER AFTER STUDENT DEATH:

A Guide to Processing, Meaning-making, and Integration as Educators for our Collective Recovery and Renewal (*The Dinner Party Labs + School Crisis Recovery and Renewal Project*)

This guide is the product of more than two years of efforts to create intentional, peer-led spaces for educators to engage in conversation around their experience with death-related, school-based losses as a means towards healing.

“Creating and Holding Space for Ourselves and Each Other After Student Death” is designed for educators who wish to grow their skills, knowledge, and practice when it comes to talking openly about loss. We offer a series of reflection exercises, principles, and practices that will lead you toward collective healing, all to help educators explore the impact of student death and other school-based crises, and to integrate those experiences into their personal and professional development.

The guide is divided into two parts:

- We begin with an overview of grief and the paradoxes that attend it, along with the particular impacts of student loss on educators and school communities. We examine the causes and consequences of grief bias, and the need to set up conversations that honor and protect those who have been harmed most by injustice.
- We then turn to the art of holding space: how to notice and name what you have capacity for, learning to sit with discomfort — be it your own or that of a grieving friend or colleague, how to ask good questions, and group facilitation strategies to create and maintain a safe space.

RITUALIZING REMEMBRANCE IN OUR SCHOOL CULTURES: DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS

(School Crisis Recovery and Renewal Project)

“We cannot recover and renew without holding space and creating a place to honor our experience with loss, death, and also welcome joy and celebration of the lives who were and will always be a part of our school community,” write Oriana Ides, Noor Jones-Bey, and Jerica Coffey, in this compilation from SCRR.

Here, you’ll find:

- reflective questions to ensure cultural humility when engaging in Día de los muertos with students;
- resources to guide conversations about death; and
- links to lesson planning and curricula to create ofrendas (altars) to celebrate those no longer with us.

MAKING IT THROUGH TOGETHER: RITUAL COLLECTION FOR LIFE AFTER LOSS (*The Dinner Party Labs*)

Note: this resource requires adaptation to school cultures and contexts

In early 2020, The Dinner Party (TDP) teamed up with Lippman Kanfer Foundation for Living Torah to launch a pilot project aimed at increasing the accessibility of spiritual and cultural rituals and practices. We began working with a dozen spiritual leaders from across traditions to curate a set of rituals and practices that people throughout time have used to navigate loss and life after. The result is this collection.

Our goal was to free religious wisdom from religious institutions, and to make those practices — and the insights they contain — accessible to any and all looking for a flashlight as they wandered grief’s dark tunnels. We wanted to explore the intersection between grief and spiritual practice, and to give people permission to adapt, adopt, and remix those practices, adding in elements of their own, in order to spread the wisdom they contain.

In this collection, you’ll find 12 rituals, with a few snippets on how they were used, shared by our pilot users. Each ritual includes a description of its origins and usage through time, a story from the author about the role it has played in their own journey with grief, and instructions on how to use it.

A GUIDE TO CREATING YOUR VERY OWN GRIEF RITUAL RECIPE BOOK (*The Dinner Party*)

Note: this resource requires adaptation to school cultures and contexts

Thinking about the personal practices you partake in (intentionally or not) that help you fortify, reflect, honor, celebrate, or release? Interested in grief rituals, and want to spend time fleshing out your own? The Dinner Party offers The Grief Ritual Recipe Book which can equip you to approach what might feel like a tangled knot of feelings—a holiday looming, perhaps, or something in need of celebration—and transform it into your own uniquely personal and perfectly messy way of moving through.

RESEARCH & READS

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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