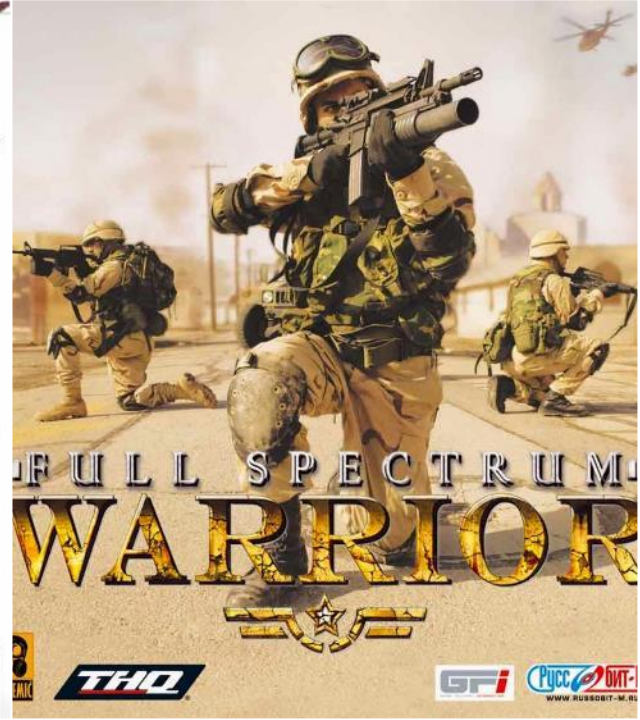
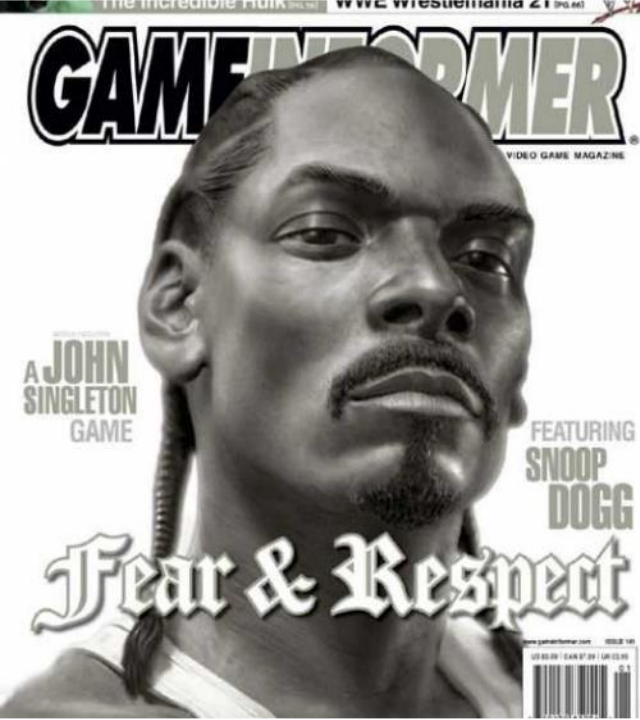




Battling Burnout

THE SIDE PROJECT RITUAL

LARALYN MCWILLIAMS



GDC Finding Your Creative Way Through Difficult Times



**I Don't Want Your Lemons:
Optimism Fuel For Weary Devs**



GDC

Designing With Intent

Setting Success Criteria For Creativity

Laralyn McWilliams

Chief Creative Officer, Skydance Interactive

@laralyn

Overview

1. Burnout and its toll
2. The power of ritual and other mental tools
3. The Side Project Ritual

Today

1)

2)

3)

4)

Burnout



WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION ICD-11



Burn-out is a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.



It is characterized by three dimensions:



Feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion;

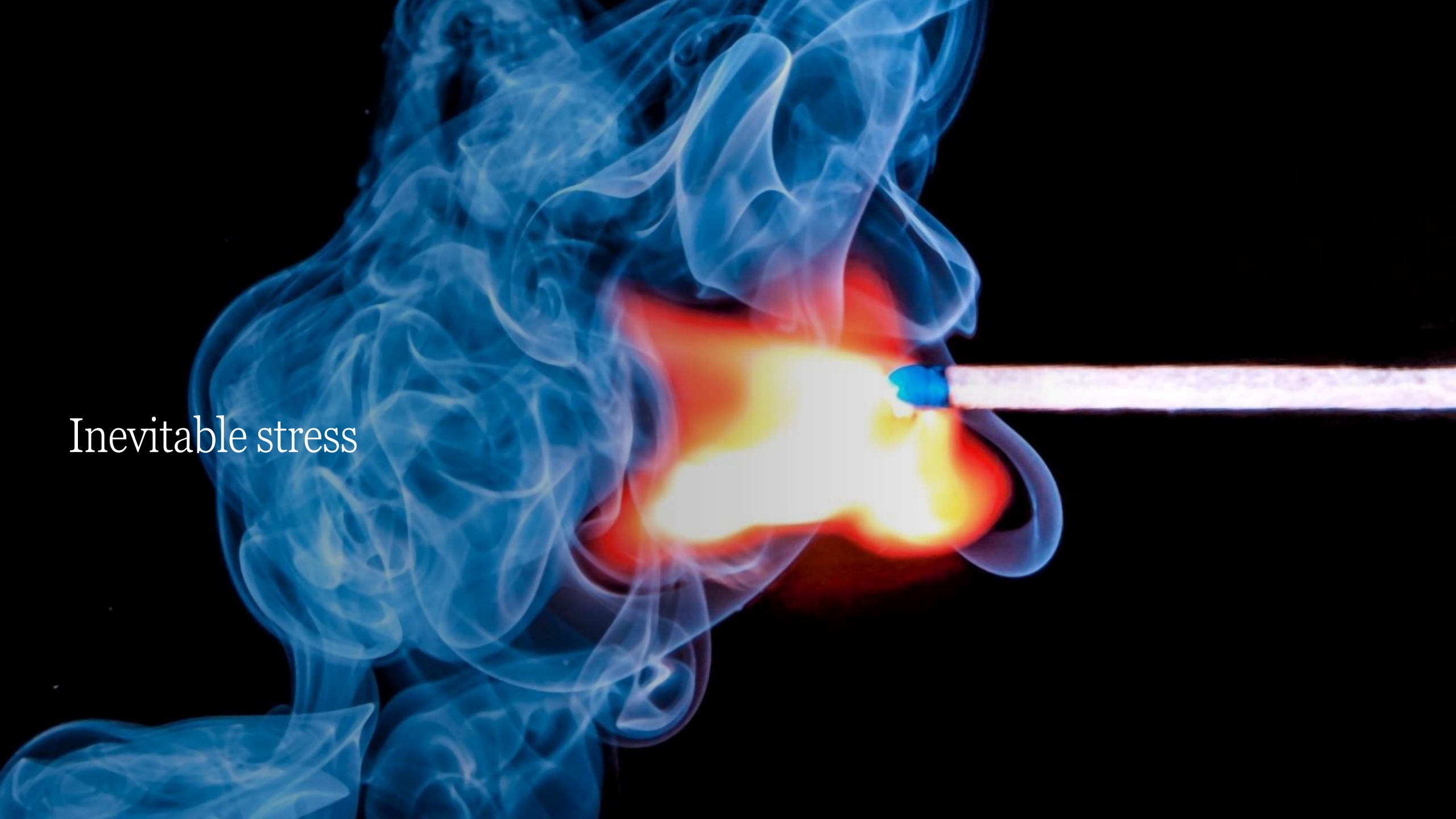


Increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and



Reduced professional efficacy.

Inevitable stress



Stress sources

- Current events



Stress sources

- Current events
- Creative work environment

Stress sources

- Current events
- Creative work environment
- Constant change



A photograph of pink rose petals and a flower bud on a white background. The petals are scattered around a central flower bud, which is partially open, showing yellow stamens. The petals are in various stages of being picked, some are whole and others are torn or curled. The background is a plain, light-colored surface.

Stress sources

- Current events
- Creative work environment
- Constant change
- Periods of loss and grief



Stress sources

- Current events
- Creative work environment
- Constant change
- Periods of loss and grief
- Culture of silent endurance

OFTEN
UNRECOGNIZED



Recognizing burnout

- Intense, I-can't-take-it anger





Recognizing burnout

- Intense, I-can't-take-it anger
- Thousand-mile pain stare



Recognizing burnout

- Intense, I-can't-take-it anger
- Thousand-mile pain stare
- Frustration and inability to focus

Recognizing burnout

- Intense, I-can't-take-it anger
- Thousand-mile pain stare
- Frustration and inability to focus
- Feelings of worthlessness, incompetence



Recognizing burnout

- Intense, I-can't-take-it anger
- Thousand-mile pain stare
- Frustration and inability to focus
- Feelings of worthlessness, incompetence
- Disconnection from friends, family, things you enjoy



Recognizing burnout

- Intense, I-can't-take-it anger
- Thousand-mile pain stare
- Frustration and inability to focus
- Feelings of worthlessness, incompetence
- Disconnection from friends, family, things you enjoy
- Physical illness and damage



DISCOVERED TOO
LATE

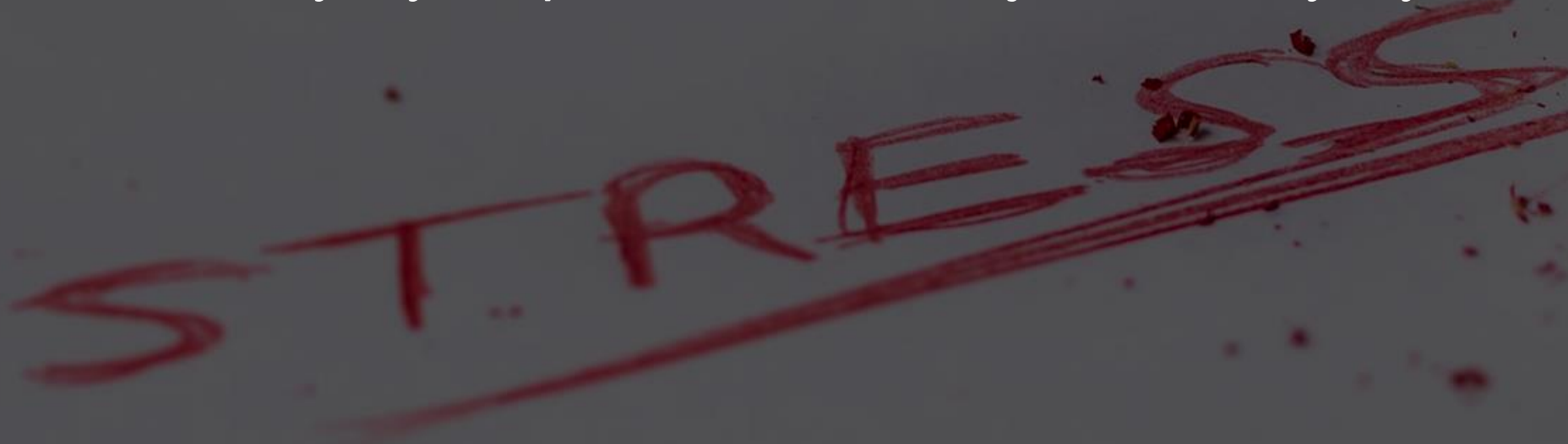


HIGH COST

91% say having an unmanageable amount of stress or frustration negatively impacts the quality of their work.

83% say burnout from work can negatively impact their personal relationships.

87% say they have passion for their current job but 64% say they are frequently stressed.



STRESS

HIGH COST

Game development has existed as a career for at least thirty years, and yet:

- 51% of game devs have been in the industry for less than 7 years
- 69% of game devs have been in the industry for less than 11 years
- 82% of game devs have been in the industry for less than 16 years
- Only 16% of game devs have been in the industry for 15 or more years

Battling burnout



Battle burnout

- Mindfulness



Battle burnout

- Mindfulness
- Breaks and vacations



Battle burnout

- Mindfulness
- Breaks and vacations
- Mental health resources






Battle burnout


- Mindfulness
- Breaks and vacations
- Mental health resources
- Cultural change

GOOD:
SEE THE
SIGNS,
INTERRUPT
THE PROCESS



A blurred background image of a man in a white lab coat and yellow safety goggles. He is holding a small green plant sprout with several leaves using blue nitrile gloves. The focus is on the plant and the text overlay.

BETTER:
AVOID
BURNOUT,
FOCUS ON
GROWTH



Intent, sense
of purpose,
plans and
consistency

A woman with long brown hair is lying on her back on a green lawn. She is looking directly at the camera with a calm expression. Her hands are placed on her forehead, with fingers spread. She is wearing a light-colored top. Several bright yellow daisy-like flowers are scattered around her on the grass. The lighting is soft and natural, suggesting an outdoor setting during the day.

Eight science-
backed steps using
the power of ritual
for mental and
emotional reset

Battle burnout

- Mindfulness
 - Breaks and vacations
 - Mental health resources
 - Cultural change
-
- More game development...
really???





The Side Project Ritual

A PURPOSE-DRIVEN PLAN TO BATTLE BURNOUT.

“the power of ritual”





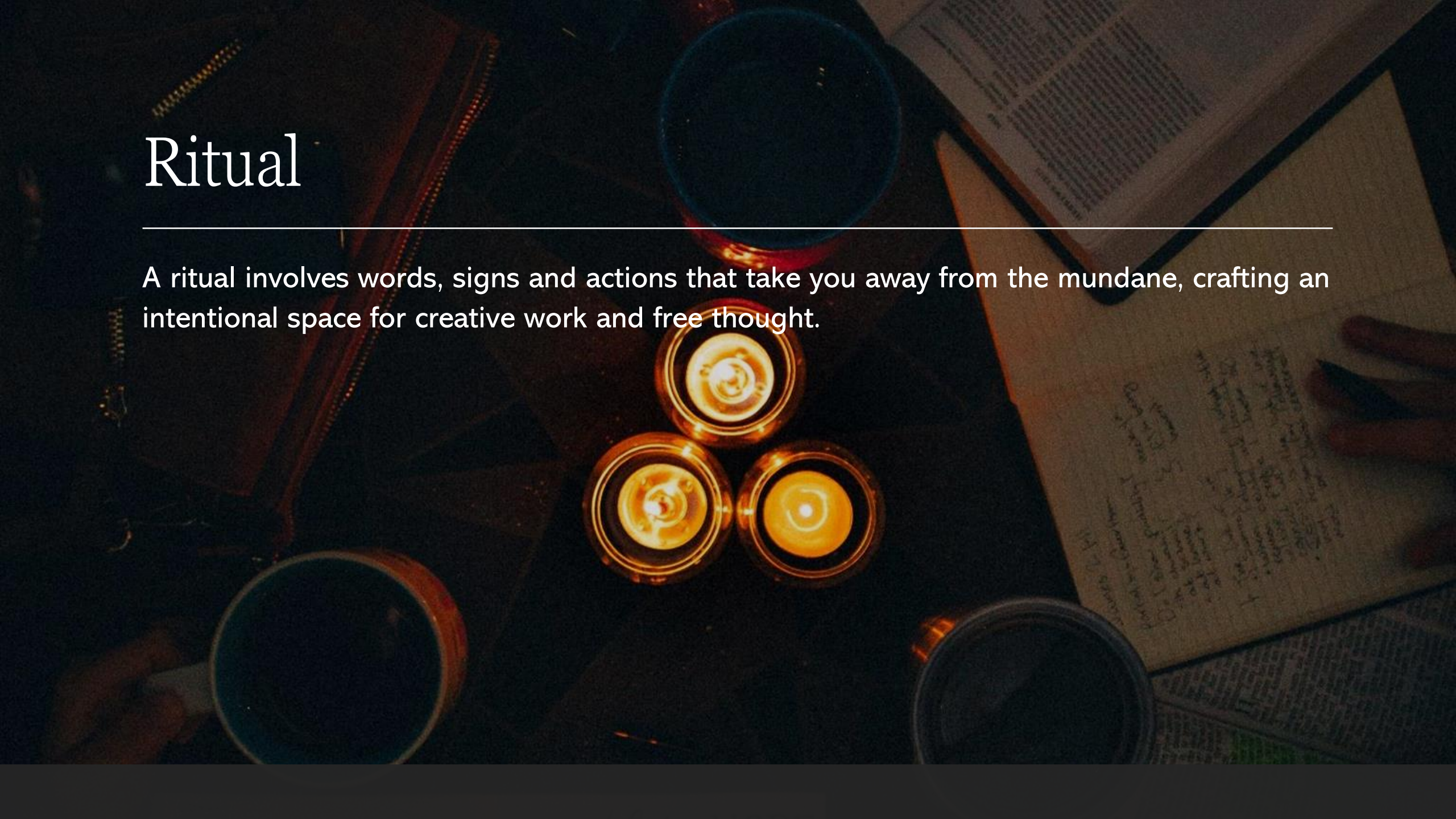
Mental tools and tricks

USE COGNITIVE SCIENCE TO
REBOOT AND BUILD
RESILIENCE



Ritual

A ritual involves words, signs and actions that take you away from the mundane, crafting an intentional space for creative work and free thought.



A close-up photograph of a man with a beard and blue eyes. He is holding a glowing, tangled string of lights over his face, with the lights creating a bright, abstract pattern. The background is dark, and the overall mood is mysterious and contemplative.

Visualization

THOUGHTS PRODUCE THE
SAME MENTAL
INSTRUCTIONS AND
EFFECTS AS ACTIONS

Superstition

- Two golf experiments
 - “Lucky” ball.
 - “I’m crossing my fingers for you!”





We're wired for superstition

IT'S ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE TO
STOP THE CONNECTIONS.

Superstition works

MANY SUCCESSFUL
CREATORS USED “LUCKY”
RITUALS.



Superstition as a tool

LEVERAGE THAT INTERNAL
SYSTEM TO BUILD SELF-
CONFIDENCE AND SELF-
ESTEEM.



A close-up photograph of a human hand, palm facing up, with vibrant, multi-colored paint splatters and streaks across the skin. The colors include red, orange, yellow, blue, and purple, creating a textured, artistic appearance. The background is a solid dark grey.

Creative therapy

Creative exercises reduced pain, anxiety, depression and stress while increasing self-esteem and improving the quality of life.



We're science skeptics

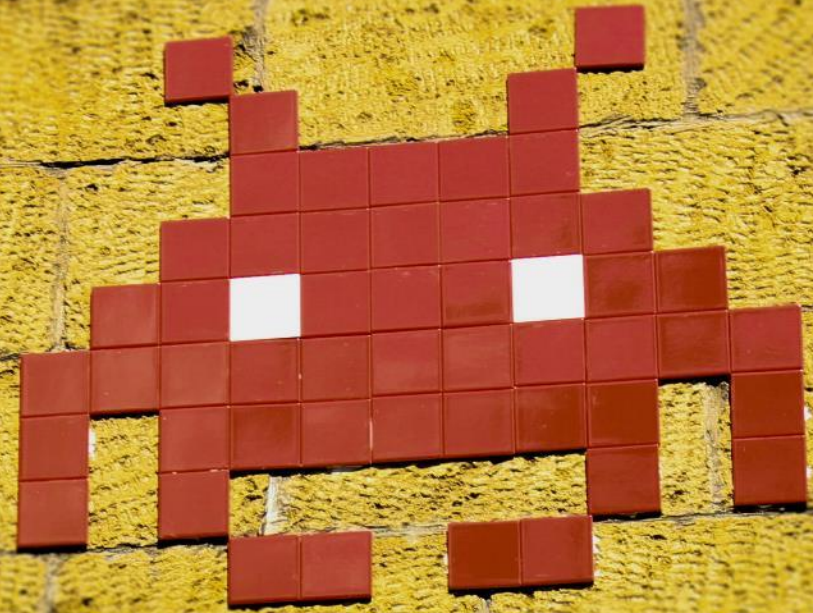
SUPERSTITION AND
VISUALIZATION ARE
EASIER TO DISMISS THAN
SEE AS TOOLS.

A man with a large, dark afro and a beard is looking thoughtfully to the side while holding a thick, plain, light-brown book. He is wearing a red hoodie with tan-colored sleeves. The background is a blurred interior space with white architectural elements and a window.

Ritual + visualization + superstition
+ creativity... + game dev? |

Hair of the dog that bit you |





Reasons to use a solo game side
project to battle burnout |

A close-up photograph of a hand holding a small, glowing, tangled object, possibly a piece of jewelry or a small electronic device, against a dark background filled with out-of-focus, bokeh lights. The hand is positioned in the center, with fingers gently gripping the object. The background is a deep black, punctuated by numerous bright, circular bokeh lights in shades of white and light blue, creating a dreamy, ethereal atmosphere. The lighting is soft, highlighting the contours of the hand and the intricate details of the glowing object.

Independence

NO ONE CAN TELL YOU
WHAT TO DO.


```
3 require File.expand_path("../config/environment", __FILE__)
4 # Prevent database truncation if the environment is production
5 abort("The Rails environment is running in production mode!") if Rails.env.production?
6 require 'spec_helper'
7 require 'rspec/rails'
```

```
8
9 require 'capybara/rspec'
10 require 'capybara/rails'
```

```
11
12 Capybara.javascript_driver = :webkit
13 Category.delete_all; Category.create
14 Shoulda::Matchers.configure do |config|
15   config.integrate do |with|
16     with.test_framework :rspec
17     with.library :rails
18   end
19 end
```

```
20 # Add additional requires below this line. Make sure to require any model,
21 # Requires supporting ruby files with custom matchers (e.g. rails_matchers),
22 # spec/support/ and its subdirectories. Files matching spec/support/*_helper.*
23 # run as spec files by default. This will be required in spec/*_spec.*
24 # in _spec.rb will both be required and run as spec files.
25 # run twice. It is recommended that you require spec_helper in spec/*_spec.*
26 # spec_helper in spec/*_spec.* will both be required and run as spec files.
```

Variety

MAKE NEW THINGS.

LEARN NEW SKILLS.

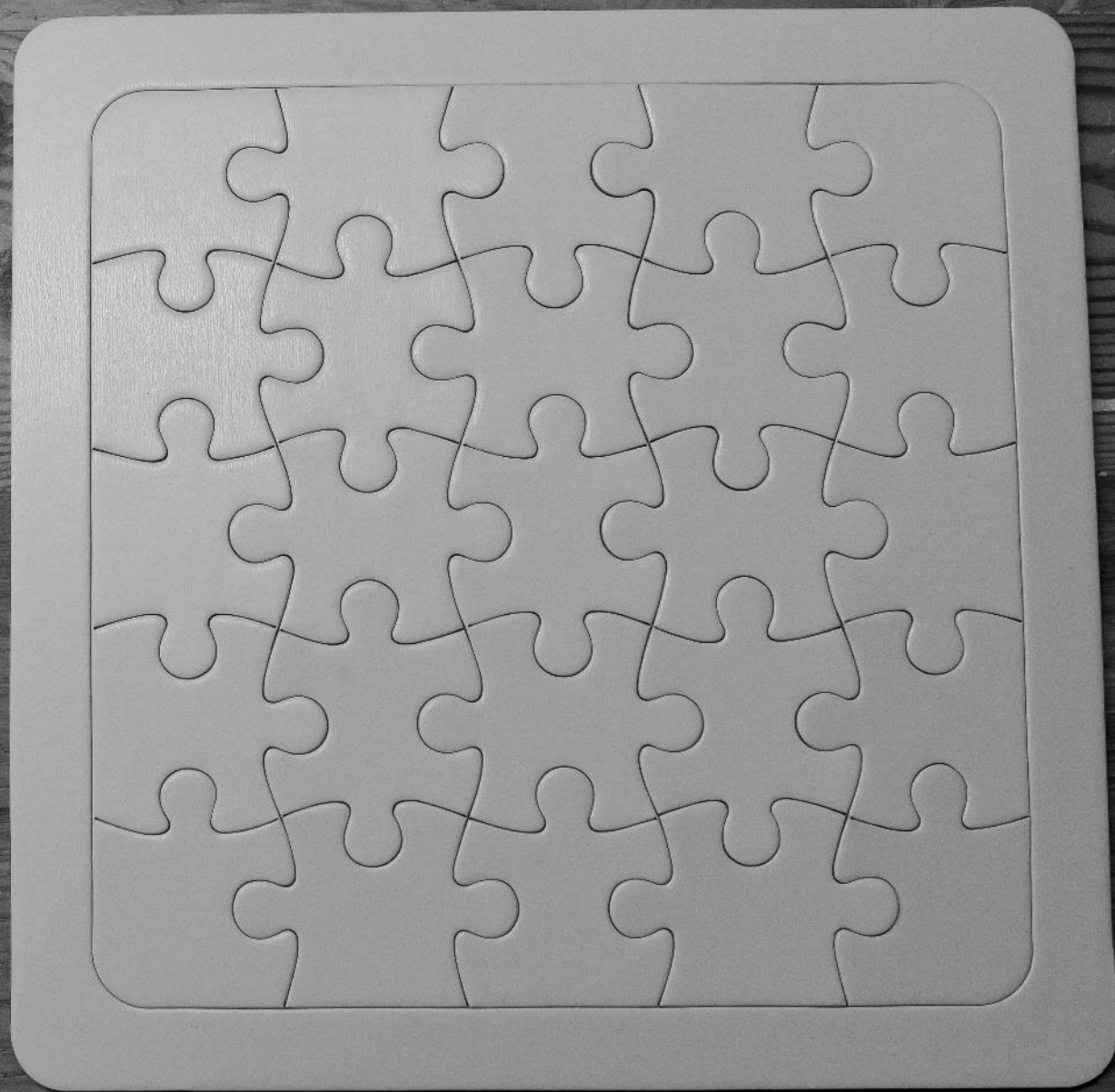


Freedom

EXPRESS YOURSELF.



MAKE WHATEVER
THE HELL YOU
WANT.



The Side Project Ritual

1. Opening





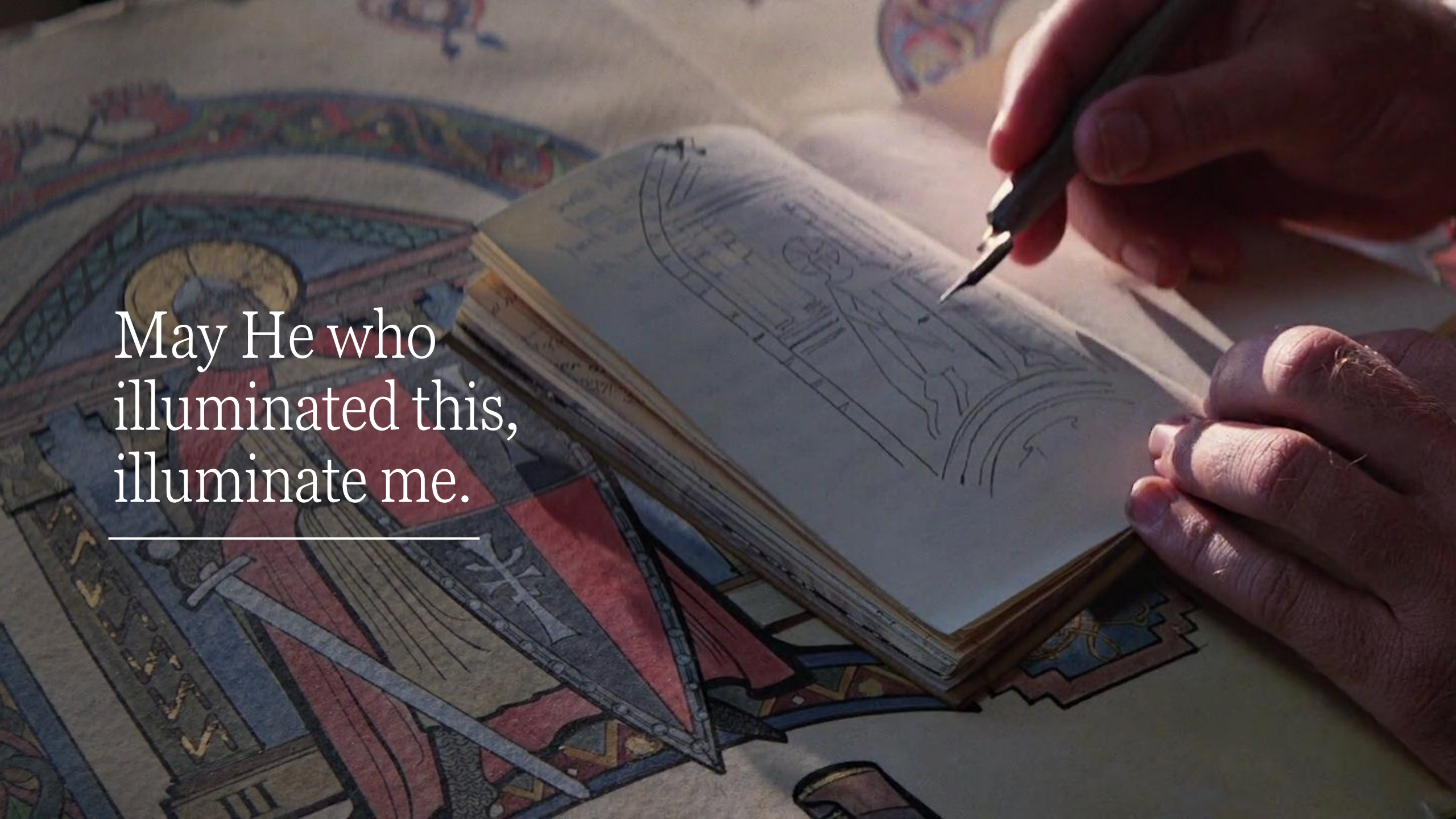
The opening

A hand holding a crystal ball that reflects a forest scene. Inside the crystal ball, a bright light source, possibly the sun, is visible, creating a lens flare effect. The background is a blurred forest scene with trees and foliage.

THE OPENING

- Collection of inspirational items, images, music and practices.
- Trigger yours brain: we're getting ready to Do The Work.
- Include elements of luck or build a new superstition.



A close-up photograph showing a person's hands using a black pen to draw a sketch of a figure in a small notebook. The sketch is a simple line drawing of a person standing, possibly a saint or a religious figure, with a halo. The notebook is open, and the drawing is on the right page. In the background, a larger, more detailed medieval manuscript page is visible, featuring a large, ornate initial 'M' in red and blue, with a figure of a person in a red robe and a halo. The manuscript page is partially obscured by the notebook. The lighting is warm and focused on the hands and the notebook.

May He who
illuminated this,
illuminate me.

the WAR of ART

**Break Through the Blocks
and Win Your
Inner Creative Battles**

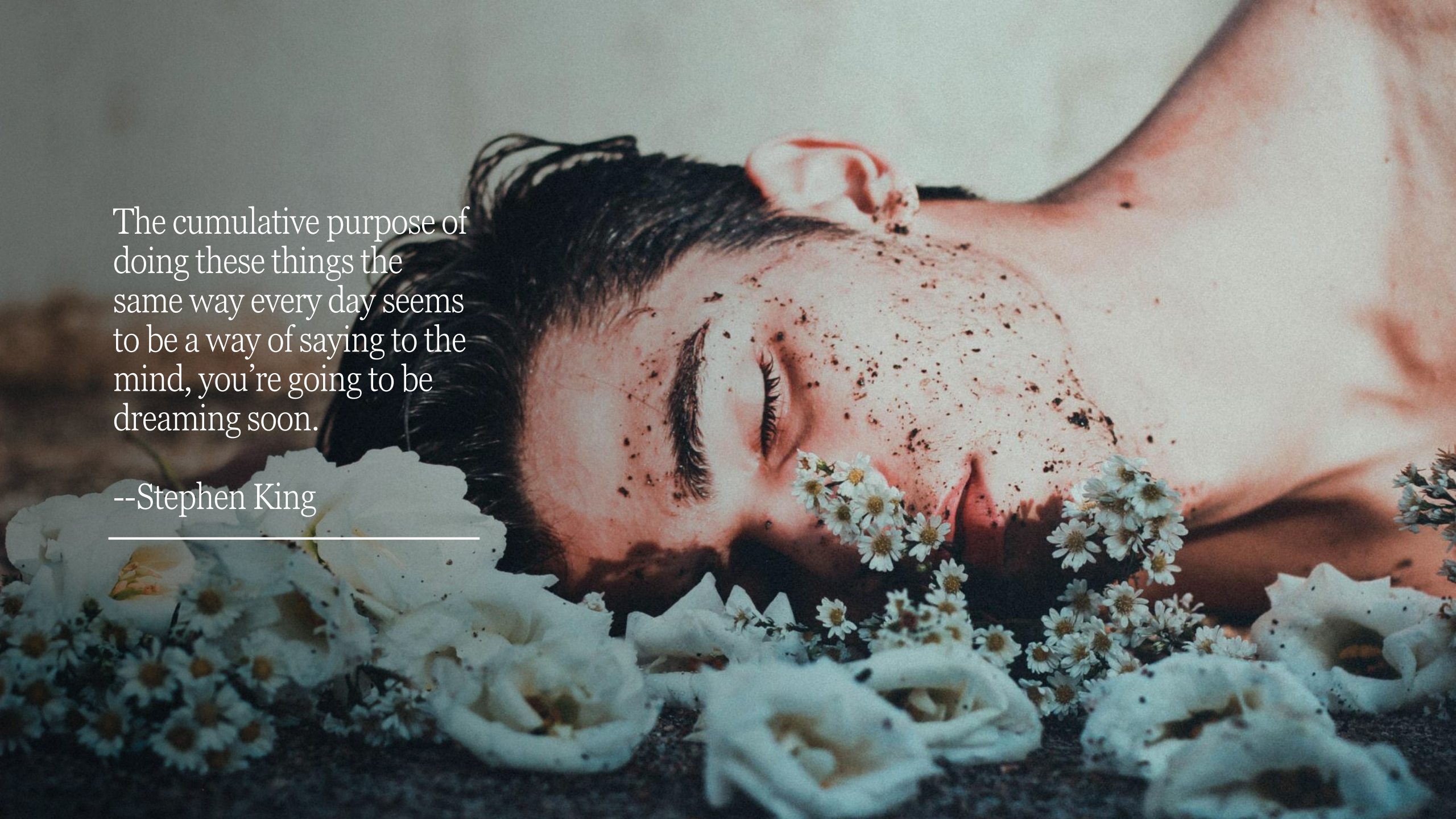
THE OPENING

- Lucky work boots with lucky laces
- Lucky hooded sweatshirt with lucky charm
- Lucky LARGO name tag
- Thesaurus
- Lucky cannon, pointed toward chair
- Prayer (Invocation of the Muse from Homer's Odyssey)
- Father's cuff links
- Lucky acorn

THE OPENING

- Water or tea
- Specific time
- Vitamin pill
- Music
- Same seat with papers in the same place



A close-up photograph of a person's face lying down, eyes closed. The face is covered in dark dust or ash. The person is surrounded by white flowers, including daisies and roses, which are scattered around their head and neck. The lighting is soft and warm, creating a somber and contemplative mood.


The cumulative purpose of
doing these things the
same way every day seems
to be a way of saying to the
mind, you're going to be
dreaming soon.

--Stephen King



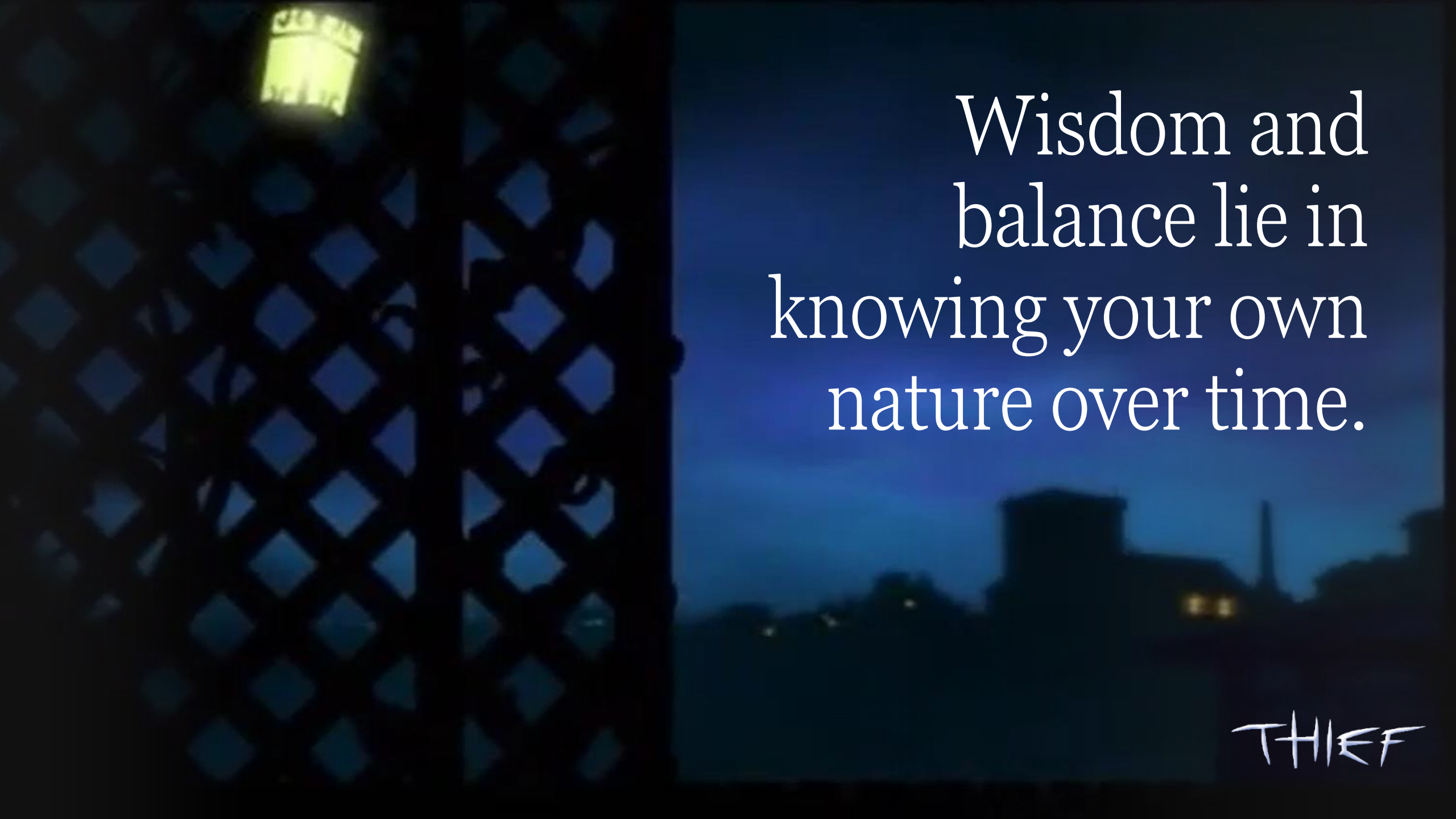
Creating space

FRAME YOUR WORK AND
GIVE IT PURPOSE

A woman is shown in profile, looking upwards and to the right. She is wearing a dark headwrap with a light-colored geometric pattern. Her face is adorned with small, light-colored circular markings. She is wearing a large, dark, circular earring. The background is a warm, orange-red color with soft, draped fabric textures.

Choose something that
reflects you

A THING THAT INSPIRED YOU IN
THE PAST, OR SOMETHING THAT
WILL INSPIRE YOU TO CREATE A
NEW FUTURE.



Wisdom and
balance lie in
knowing your own
nature over time.

THIEF

I feel fantastic and I'm
still alive.

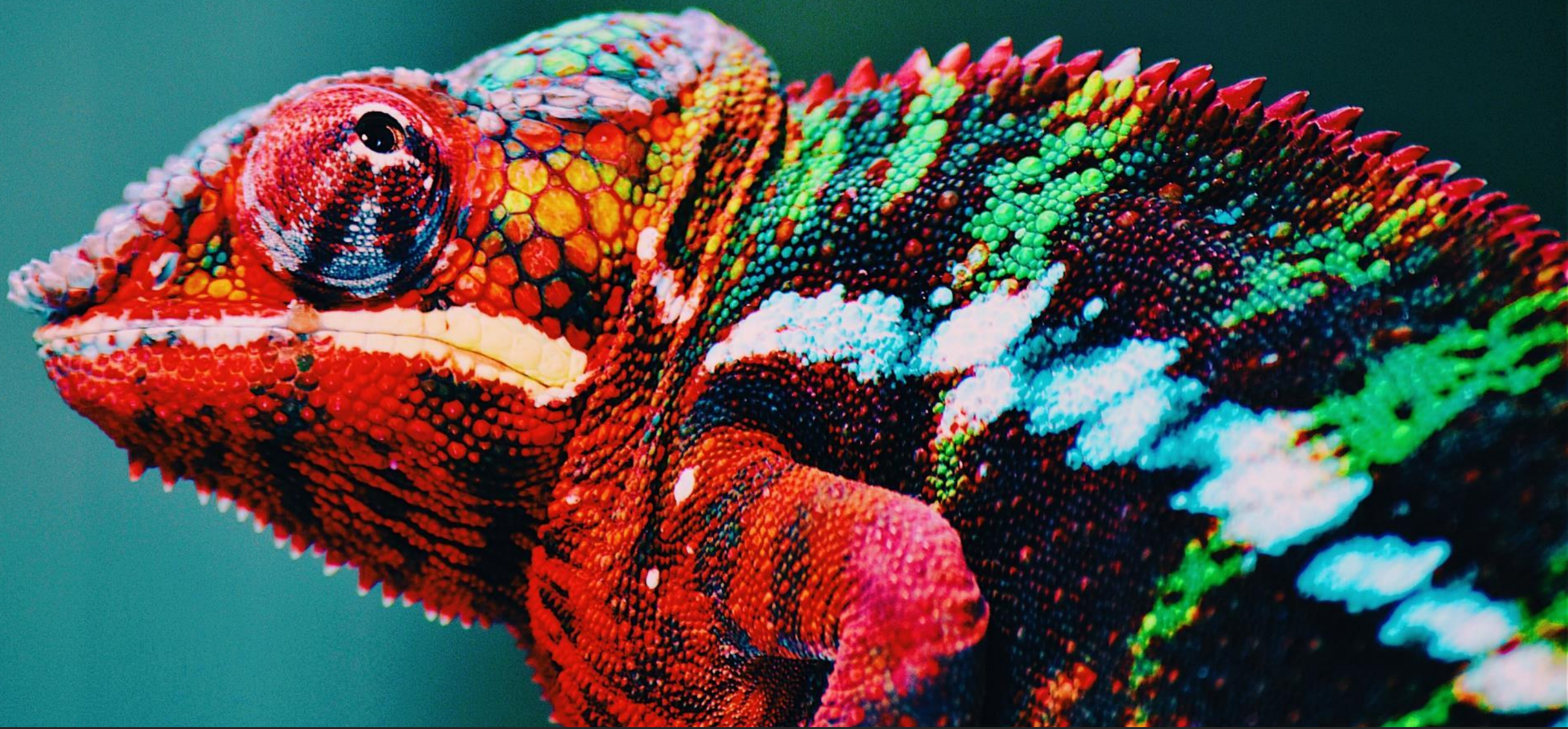






I have been to another world and
come back. Listen to me.

PETER LAKE, IN MARK
HELPRIN'S *WINTER'S TALE*



The Side Project Ritual

1. Opening
2. Sacred space and time





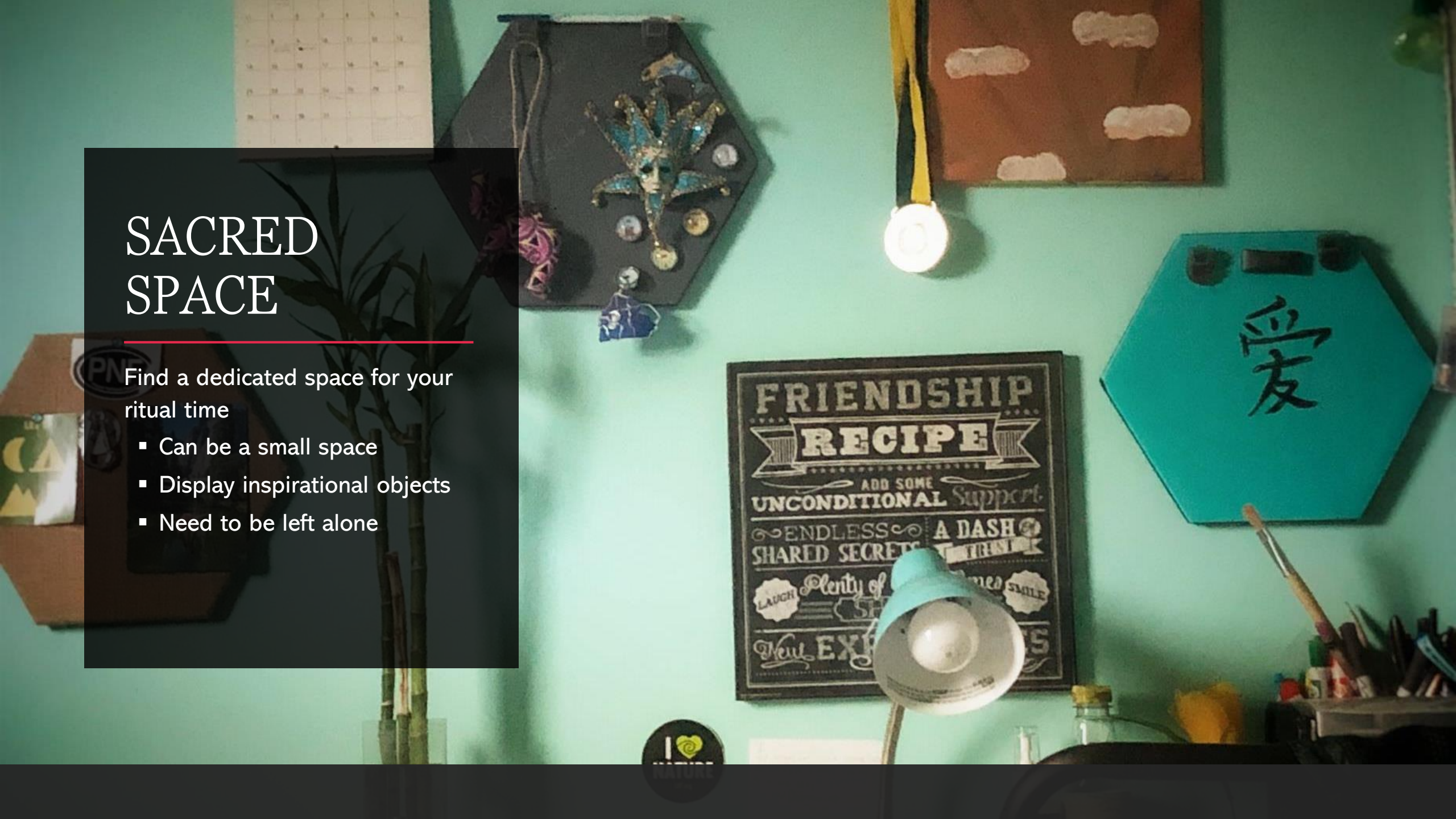
Sacred

SACROSANCT, REGARDED
WITH GREAT RESPECT AND
REVERENCE

SACRED SPACE

Find a dedicated space for your ritual time

- Can be a small space
- Display inspirational objects
- Need to be left alone





Gather your tools



Sacred Time

Decide how much time to spend and commit

- Block out distractions
- Stay focused
- Persist... even when it's frustrating
- Use the time for creativity even if it means switching tasks

A young woman with long brown hair in a braid, wearing black-rimmed glasses and a white t-shirt, is smiling while working on a laptop. She is in a modern office setting with a grey wall and a white cone-shaped light fixture. In the foreground, there is a blurred view of another person's arm and a desk with various items like pens and a container. The text "Remind yourself" is overlaid on the right side of the image, followed by a horizontal line and the text "THIS IS YOUR TIME." in all caps.

Remind
yourself

THIS IS YOUR TIME.

The Side Project Ritual

1. Opening
2. Sacred Space
3. Mindfulness





A man with short dark hair and a goatee is sitting in a meditative pose in a desert. He is wearing a vibrant, multi-colored striped shirt over a grey tank top and light-colored pants. His eyes are closed, and he has a peaceful expression. The background shows a clear blue sky and some desert vegetation. A dark grey semi-transparent box is overlaid on the right side of the image, containing the title 'Meditation' and a list item.

Meditation

- Three minutes of breathing

A scenic view of a river with a boat and hanging lanterns. The image shows a calm river reflecting the surrounding greenery and buildings. A small boat is docked on the right side. Several colorful lanterns are hanging from a tree branch in the foreground, adding a decorative touch. The background features a row of houses and a bridge, all reflected in the water.

Meditation

- Three minutes of breathing
- Visualize the river



Meditation

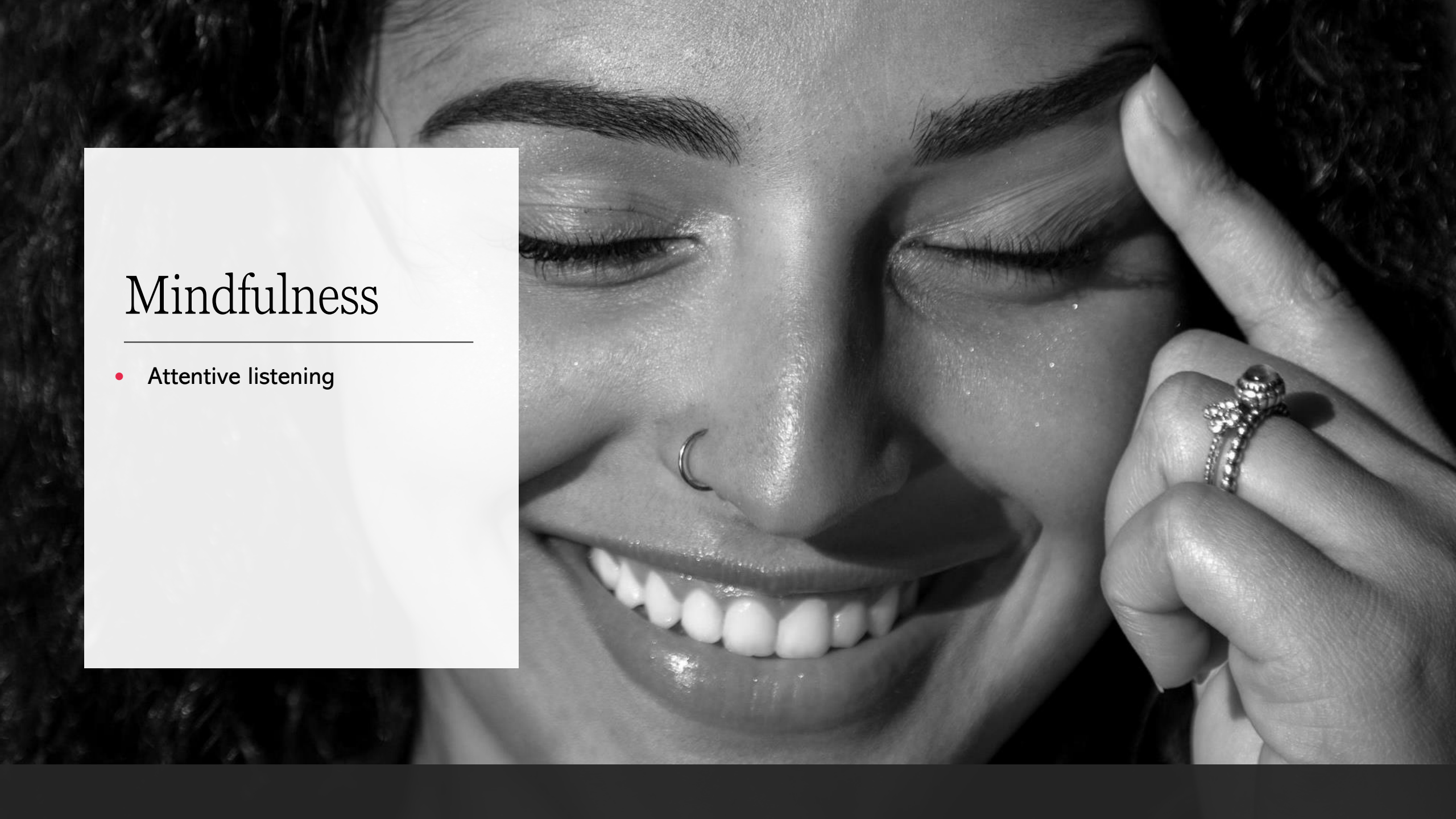
- Three minutes of breathing
- Visualize the river
- Repeat a mantra

MIND YOUR HEAD



Mindfulness

- Attentive listening





Mindfulness

- Attentive listening
- The raisin exercise

Mindfulness

- Attentive listening
- The raisin exercise
- Mindful seeing



Singing bowls



Bonsai





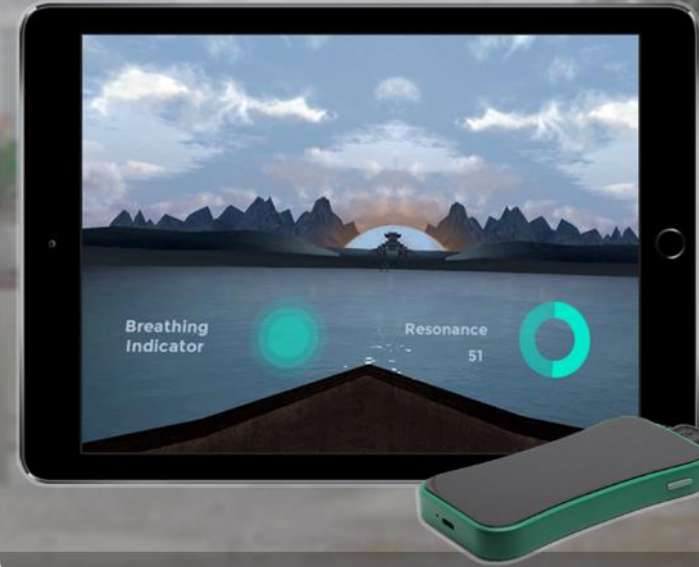
museTM | 2
the brain sensing headband



MIND + BODY



muse



unyte


INTERACTIVE MEDITATION

THE
+ ♥ HeartMath.
EXPERIENCE

The Side Project Ritual

1. Opening
2. Sacred Space
3. Mindfulness
4. Focused goals for today





Review your work

Take five minutes to look over the work from last session.

Make note of any revisions.



Focused goals

REVIEW OVERALL GOALS
FROM THE LAST SESSION

The Side Project Ritual

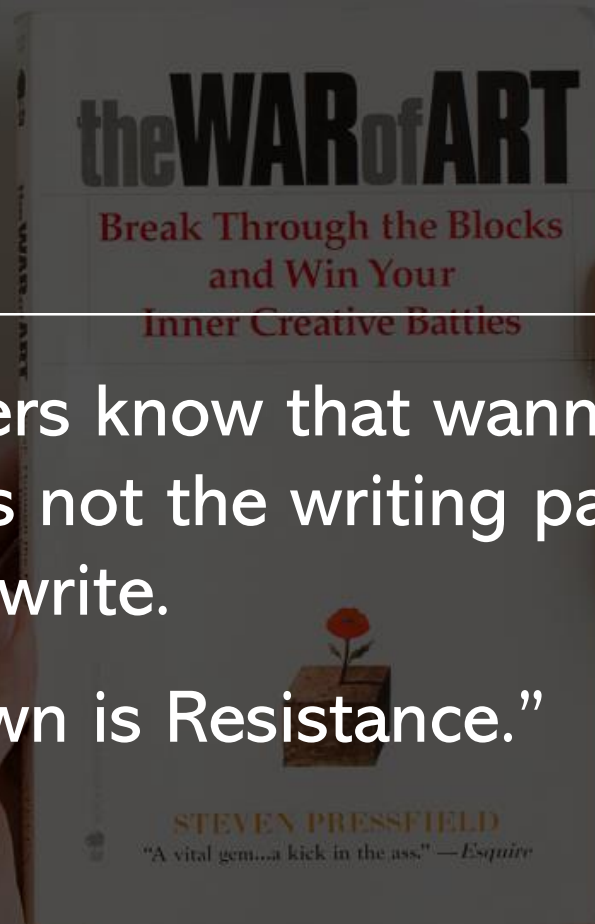
1. Opening
2. Sacred Space
3. Mindfulness
4. Focused goals for today
5. Do the work



The War of Art

“There’s a secret that real writers know that wannabe writers don’t, and the secret is this: It’s not the writing part that’s hard. What’s hard is sitting down to write.

What keeps us from sitting down is Resistance.”





The War of Art

Most of us have two lives.
The life we live, and the
unlived life within us.
Between the two stands
Resistance.



| Do the work



Choosing a Project

- Doesn't have to be the final answer
- Something you plan to ship however small

Choose your
weapon





Physical games

GET AWAY FROM THE
ELECTRONIC.

- chapter2_firstinvest
- chapter3_firstinvestend
- chapter4_firstlab
- chapter5_afterlab
- interstitial_5-6
- chapter6_firstarticle
- cheat
- ch3-4notes
- untitled
- gosub_statfix

Tutorial

```

311 [i]Does she expect me to answer?[/i] A gold charm bracelet catches your
    eye, as it gently jingles with her movement. You peer more closely—the
    charms are cats in various poses, stretching, sitting, even perched in a tiny
    open box.
312
313 Now she's scowling, probably because you're staring at her bracelet, and
    you feel obligated to speak.
314
315 *fake_choice
316   #Be sincere—you really were admiring the tiny gold kitties.
317   ..... "Sorry if I was staring but I love that bracelet."
318   ..... *set sincere %+ 20
319   ..... *if statChange = 1
320   ..... (Sincere has increased.)
321   #Try a little humor to lighten the mood.
322   ..... You gesture toward your wet hair and jacket. "Looks like the rain's
    making your day about as awesome as mine."
323   ..... *set sincere %- 20
324   ..... *if statChange = 1
325   ..... (Humorous has increased.)
326   #Be blunt—she seems like the type to appreciate it.
327   ..... "Sorry to burst in here unannounced. Billy told me to head this way
    since he had to go fix some equipment."
328   ..... *set direct %+ 20
329   ..... *if statChange = 1
330   ..... (Direct has increased.)
331   #She seems like someone you want as an ally. Turn on the charm.
332   ..... "Hi! Sorry for the lack of introduction, but I'm really glad to meet
    you."
333   ..... *set direct %- 20
334   ..... *if statChange = 1
335   ..... (Persuasive has increased.)

```

Without a blink or a breath, she directs her next question to you. "How am I supposed to test a new scanning algorithm if the power glitches out every time I start a pass?" She stares at you intently, arms crossed on her chest.

Does she expect me to answer? A gold charm bracelet catches your eye, as it gently jingles with her movement. You peer more closely—the charms are cats in various poses, stretching, sitting, even perched in a tiny open box.

Now she's scowling, probably because you're staring at her bracelet, and you feel obligated to speak.

- ☐ Be sincere—you really were admiring the tiny gold kitties.
- ☒ Try a little humor to lighten the mood.
- ☐ Be blunt—she seems like the type to appreciate it.
- ☐ She seems like someone you want as an ally. Turn on the charm.

Next

Narrative game tools

TWINE, CHOICE OF
GAMES, INFORM

HELLO WORLD

THIS IS PICO-8

NICE TO MEET YOU

Simple game tools

GAMEMAKER, RPG
MAKER, PICO-8



Game engines

UNITY, UNREAL.

A Practical note

9. **Insurance.** The Contractor will provide health, life, disability, and unemployment insurance, if warranted) relative to any work performed by the Contractor.

10. **Assignment.** The Contractor shall not assign any of her rights under this Agreement, or delegate the performance of any of her duties hereunder, without the prior written consent of the Company.

SIGNATURE

A hand is holding a lit sparkler, which is creating a large, bright, starburst-like explosion of sparks. The background is dark, with a warm, orange glow from a light source on the left. The text "Game jams" is written in a white, serif font, positioned below the sparkler.

Game jams

START WITH A SPARK,
FINISH IT THEN RELEASE
FOR FREE

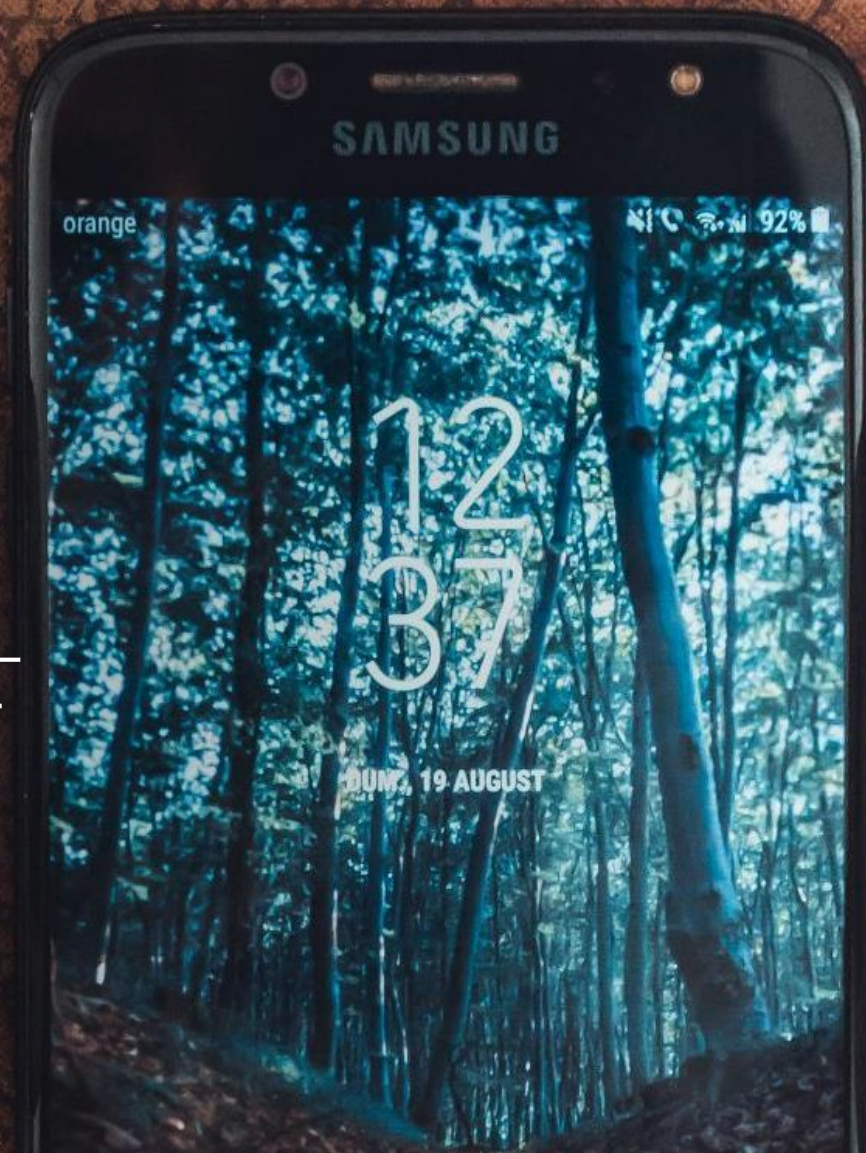
A woman with dark hair, wearing an orange t-shirt and a red and white striped apron, is smiling as she paints a floral design on a ceramic plate. She is standing at a round table in a workshop. On the table are various art supplies, including a container of brushes, a jar of paint, and a palette. In the background, there are wooden cabinets with drawers, some of which have decorative cutouts. A large lamp is hanging from the ceiling, casting a warm light on the scene. A window on the right side of the frame shows a view of the outdoors.

Non-game projects

WOODWORKING, POTTERY,
GLASSMAKING,
PAPERCRAFT, KNITTING.

Choose your key skills

SOMETHING YOU DON'T
DO IN YOUR DAY JOB





A person with dark hair, wearing a black long-sleeved shirt and black leggings, is climbing a steep, metal staircase on a lush green hillside. They are carrying a grey drawstring bag and have their hands on the metal railings. The background is a dense, green forest with ferns and other vegetation. The overall mood is adventurous and inspiring.

Let Go

YOU DON'T HAVE TO
PLAN FOR EVERYTHING.

A close-up photograph of a person's hands, wearing tan leather work gloves with blue and white striped wristbands, carving a piece of light-colored wood. The hands are positioned over a dark, rough rock surface. Wood shavings are scattered around the base of the wood block. In the background, a large, smooth, light-colored object, possibly a coconut, is visible. The overall scene is outdoors, with a blurred natural background.

COMMIT

WHITTLE UNTIL YOU
UNCOVER A SHAPE.

Talk About It

DIRECT CONNECTION WITH
PEOPLE THROUGH YOUR
PERSONAL WORK



Talk about it

- Discuss your project with friends, family
- Share on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram
- Stream development on Twitch or Facebook
- Keeps you accountable, engaged, purposeful



The Side Project Ritual

1. Opening
2. Sacred Space
3. Mindfulness
4. Focused goals for today
5. Do the work
6. Purposeful goals for next session
7. Gratitude
8. Closing



SAVE YOUR
WORK



Make your TODOs

ADD A CONTEXT: DESK, WALKING, ON PHONE.

TO DO

1. WAKE UP

2. ~~COFFEE~~

3. THE REST...



The Side Project Ritual

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3. Mindfulness
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5. Do the work
6. Purposeful goals for next session
7. Gratitude



A large number of colored pencils are arranged in a circular border around a central square area. The pencils are of various colors including red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple, and black. They are all sharpened and point towards the center. The background is a light brown, textured surface.

Gratitude

PRESS PAUSE AND
REFLECT.



Take a moment

- Think of something for which you're sincerely grateful.
- Write it at the top of your notes for next session.



Gratitude

- Opens the door to more relationships.
- Improves:
 - Physical health.
 - Psychological health.
 - Sleep
 - Self-esteem
 - Mental strength
- Enhances empathy and reduces aggression.

The Side Project Ritual

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A photograph of three lit candles in a dark, wooded setting. The candles are white and lit, with a small flame visible on the tallest one. The background is dark and filled with thin, bare branches, creating a moody and atmospheric scene. The lighting is soft, coming from the candles themselves, casting a warm glow on the surrounding branches.

CLOSING

- Remind yourself of what you accomplished.
- Clean and prep your sacred space.



Ending Focus

CHOOSE SOMETHING THAT
EMPHASIZES WHY YOU DO
THE WORK.



All great discoveries... are products as much of doubt as of certainty, and the two in opposition clear the air for marvelous accidents.

A WINTER'S TALE BY
MARK HELPRIN

The Side Project Ritual

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Evergreen process of purpose and
growth |

A silhouette of a person's head and arm is shown against a twilight sky. The person is holding a lantern in their right hand. Inside the lantern, a string of warm white lights is visible, and a few lights are also visible hanging from the bottom of the lantern. The sky is a mix of dark blue and purple hues.

Create your own guiding lights

AND YOU CAN ALWAYS FIND YOUR WAY BACK TO
MENTAL CLARITY, KEEPING BURNOUT AT BAY.

The Side Project Ritual

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FEEDBACK, QUESTIONS?
@LARALYN
LARALYNMCWILLIAMS.COM