

# Healing Heartwork



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The Healing Heartwork Toolkit is a collaboration between the  
American Muslim Civic Leadership Institute and Chaplain Sondos Kholaki

# Introduction

## Deepening our understanding of Islamic tools for healing, self-care and community care

In response to the emerging needs of its fellows, **AMCLI launched a series of Healing Heartwork Toolkits to provide Islamic practices and tools for healing, grounding, centering and exploring the self** during Ramadan 2021. We continue this series with a new Healing Heartwork toolkit in 2022, focused on deepening our understanding of Islamic self-care modalities. Both toolkits are presented during Ramadan as a time for reflection, spirituality and nurturing a connection to the Divine, self and community.

The first toolkit, **Healing Heartwork: Exploring Self**, focused on cultivating *afiya*, or emotional well-being, through practices that create moments of *sakina*, or tranquility. This toolkit, **Healing Heartwork: Exploring Loss**, focuses on *janazah*, or funeral rites, as a way to address experiences of grief and loss as we enter year three of a global pandemic.

AMCLI has partnered with Chaplain Sondos Kholaki, who crafted the toolkits based on her years of experience in supporting and accompanying individuals in crisis on their healing journey. Over the month of Ramadan, AMCLI and Ch. Sondos Kholaki released the **Healing Heartwork: Exploring Loss** in three parts, with each part focused on a relevant Ramadan theme.

- **Part One:** Mercy, focused on rituals honoring creation, including our body and the environment.
- **Part Two:** Forgiveness, focused on rituals for the mind and the heart.
- **Part Three:** Safety, focused on finding the way between soul (*ruh*) care and self (*nafs*) care



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# About the Healing Heartwork Toolkit: Exploring Loss

Living through a global pandemic affects all aspects of our being: mind, body and soul/spirit. In Islamic belief, one does not experience life without also experiencing loss (*Qur'an Surah Al-Baqarah 2:153*), and over the past two years, that loss manifested in various ways, from the loss of loved ones to the loss of familiar routines and simple connections with family, friends and colleagues.

In the midst of these challenging disruptions, we may find it helpful to hold a funeral of sorts as a way to acknowledge the many losses we have endured. In **Healing Heartwork: Exploring Loss**, we will weave into the three stages of Ramadan the beautiful Islamic rituals surrounding death. In doing so, we hope to provide an opportunity to process the losses we have experienced on both individual and collective levels while uplifting the themes of Ramadan: mercy, forgiveness and spiritual safety, as referenced in the *Hadith* by the beloved Prophet Muhammad ﷺ.

**Healing Heartwork: Exploring Loss** provides an opportunity to reflect on ritual. Ritual transforms an otherwise mundane act into one infused with the presence of God. In Islamic tradition, every action—from the simple to the complex—invites a moment of pause to remember Allah. For instance, when we wear a new piece of clothing, we thank and praise God and remind ourselves of the purpose of dress, and when we climb into our car every morning, we praise God for His provision and remind ourselves that we will return to Him. So too, the Islamic rituals surrounding death and bereavement serve to capture the attention of the living and remind those of us connected to the deceased to assess our lives in preparation for our inevitable return.

Ritual also connects us to our spiritual lineage and ancestry in word and deed. When we bow in *ruku'*, a bowing position in the Islamic prayer, we may imagine our forebears bowing in the exact same way toward the exact same place, perhaps having brought their own concerns, fears and hopes to the prayer space, as we do today. In an increasingly physically disconnected and distanced world, reclaiming this intentional connection through ritual to our spiritual community—past, present and future—may offer a balm for our aching hearts.



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In Islam, we believe that Allah created humankind with the ability to withstand hardship, trauma and calamity through the healing modalities present in so many of the rituals prescribed for us, from wudu to salat to the sunnah of the Prophet ﷺ. The repetitive and enduring nature of ritual provides comfort and familiarity in times of fluctuation, an important coping strategy when crises emerge. Through this closer look at the Islamic funeral rituals, we may have the opportunity to pause and reflect on the losses we have all endured while drawing peace from spiritual practices focused on honoring the body, mind, heart and soul.



Soul

*Allah tasks no soul  
beyond its capacity.*

*Quran 2 : 286*

## About Chaplain Sondos Kholaki



Chaplain Sondos Kholaki serves as a hospital staff chaplain and a volunteer community chaplain in Southern California, and is an AMCLI fellow. She is board-certified with the Association of Professional Chaplains (APC). Sondos earned a Master of Divinity degree in Islamic Chaplaincy from Bayan Islamic Graduate School/Claremont School of Theology and a Bachelor of Arts in English and Creative Writing from UCLA as a Regents Scholar. Sondos completed five units of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) residency

where she served care seekers of all faiths and educated staff and volunteers on Muslim spiritual care. Sondos is the author of *Musings of a Muslim Chaplain* (2020) and the co-editor of *Mantle of Mercy: Islamic Chaplaincy in North America* (2022). Sondos enjoys sipping a perfectly brewed cup of coffee, listening to Quran recitation by Turkish reciters and singing her heart out at spiritual gatherings. She is married and has two children.



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# About AMCLI



The American Muslim Civic Leadership Institute (AMCLI) develops and trains American Muslim leaders who are committed to civic engagement. AMCLI strives to accompany these pioneering leaders as they realize their full potential, and in doing so, have a more effective and sustained impact on the issues affecting their communities, and America at large.

## A Note on Islamic Death Meditations

Each part of the **Healing Heartwork: Exploring Loss** series will conclude with an Islamic death meditation. Many Muslim scholars and sages practiced regular meditations on death to visualize one's own journey at the end of life for the purposes of spiritual development. Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, a theologian and mystic philosopher of the 12th century, famously wrote and practiced death meditations, the inspiration of which directly informs our revival of these practices for our use this Ramadan season.

Theologians of various faith traditions and philosophies agree that contemplating one's mortality aids in living a more purposeful life wherein one prioritizes that which aligns best with one's values as well as deepens one's sense of gratitude. In the midst of a pandemic, death meditations may help in alleviating a sense of fear toward our inevitable end by providing us with an opportunity to imagine ourselves in this realm of the unknown. Death meditations also create a space for us to sincerely reflect on our life, our relationships with others and, most importantly, our relationship with the Divine. We can then assess which aspects of our lives need our attention.



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# Part One

## Mercy to Creation (Body and Environment)



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In the first ten days of the month of Ramadan, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) encouraged Muslims to focus on the quality of mercy. As we transition into this Ramadan, a period of reflection, how might we use this time to contemplate the last two years of the pandemic, weighing our losses and cradling our grief?

In part one of "Healing Heartwork: Exploring Loss," let us consider the healing modalities embedded in the funeral and burial rituals involving earth and water as a vehicle to explore loss.

**With a merciful eye toward creation, modeled on the way of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ whom Muslims believe is a mercy to all of existence (Qur'an Surah Al-Anbiya 21:107), how might we honor the losses we endured and will continue to endure?**

Many spiritual communities believe that an important connection exists between our body, the earth and water. The Islamic tradition emphasizes this connection, believing that humankind began with Adam, the first human, whom God created out of clay: a mixture of earth and water. The conclusion of a Muslim's individual existence is marked by a water-based cleanse followed by placement in a grave, wherein our physical form gradually fuses with the earth as its final act of service. Unlike the modern approach to death—which is less of an approach and more of an avoidance—the Islamic tradition prescribes frequent remembrance of and reflection on the end of our earthly existence. Thus, the Islamic rituals surrounding death serve the main purpose of reminding the living of our eventual demise and return to God. The rituals remain a collective manifestation of the verse we utter when experiencing loss: To God we belong, and to Him we return, inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi rajiun.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said, *"Visit graves, and you will be reminded of the afterlife; wash your dead, for truly in the touching of an empty body, there is an eloquent lesson; and offer prayers at funerals, that perhaps you may grieve, for truly, the grief-stricken remain in the very shade of God."*



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**The Islamic tradition is replete with rituals and practices connected to water, both in life and death, as a symbolic and literal cleansing. In life, Muslims perform the ritual of *wudu* and *ghusl* (both forms of ritual washing using water) as a means of metaphysical and physical purification. The use of clean water administered gently and mindfully to our limbs in a specific, sequential order not only teaches Muslims how to cultivate presence, but also offers a modality by which one may slow down and restore balance to our physical and emotional thermostat.**

## Water Rituals in Islam

In grief, for instance, hot anger may surface as part of the journey. In such occasions, a water-based ritual such as *wudu* may be turned to as a practice to ground ourselves as we move through the anger. While many have learned to function in the midst of grief through disassociation, *wudu* invites us into a slowing down process wherein we reconnect to our physical form through touch and water throughout the day. These breaks of ritual purification not only cleanse our form but also reestablish our inherent sense of dignity; as we practice *wudu*, we implicitly communicate to ourselves, "I give myself this act of mercy toward my body because I matter that much to Allah."

Imagine the healing effects of this washing of *ghusl al-mayyit* on the one performing the ritual. How beautiful a gift to offer our loved one for the last time, sending them back to the earth and to their Creator in the cleanest state possible and to be able to savor that last touch of our loved one while listening to the gentle trickle of water as it is poured over every limb. The pandemic led to many missed opportunities to perform *ghusl al-mayyit* for Muslim communities around the world, but there may be an opportunity to reconnect with the precious memory of our deceased loved one every time we approach *wudu* or *ghusl* or other water-based rituals for ourselves. Ritual serves as a connection point between our present, past and future.



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# Earth-Based Rituals in Islam

The parallels between water and earth rituals become apparent in prescriptions for how to perform *wudu* in the absence of clean water. Under these circumstances, Muslims may use dirt or dust from the earth as a purifying medium through the practice of *tayammum*. In Islam, connection to the earth offers Muslims many opportunities for mercy and healing. From the earth, Muslims believe we absorb replenishing metaphysical energy, known to us by the teaching of the Prophet (peace be upon him) that states that the entire earth remains a place of prayer (Sunan al-Tirmidhī 317). The earth also plays an important function in our transition back to our Creator. In Islam, the deceased is laid to rest directly in the earth without a coffin—no barrier interferes with our physical form fusing with the earth, contributing to the life of its organisms, giving our existence purpose up until the very end.

After the funeral, the living interact with the earth, too, with the option of throwing small handfuls of dirt atop the grave while reciting the Quranic verse,

***"From this very earth We created you and to the same earth We shall cause you to return, and from it We shall bring you forth to life again"***  
**(Qur'an Surah Ta-Ha 20:55).**

The practice serves to remind those remaining of their ultimate destination. In this symbolic practice, we find healing as well. It can provide us with a way of feeling purposeful at a time when grief may overwhelm us and with a way of saying "see you later" rather than "goodbye." Muslim teachers often remind their students, we come into this world wrapped in a shroud and handed to a loved one, and we exit this world with our loved ones wrapping us in a shroud and metaphorically handing us back to our Beloved Creator.



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# Islamic Death Meditation I

**Based on the writings of Imam  
Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali in his book,  
Faith and Practice**



**We begin with Bismillah Al-Rahman Al-Raheem, in the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Compassionate.**

Death is a natural return to our Beloved Creator. As Muslims, we believe that we die a “small death” every night, based on the teaching of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), who stated that sleep is the brother of death and on the Quranic verse, *“It is Allah Who takes the souls at death and the soul of the one, who has not yet died, during sleep”* (Qur’an Surah Az-Zumar 39:42). An Arab poet famously captured this sentiment, writing, *“Sleep is a small death, and death is a long sleep.”* Ironically, though, we need sleep in order to live fully. Sleep serves as an important healing modality.

Together, let’s experience a new sleep ritual based on the spiritual connection between sleep and death by imagining our resting place in the grave. As you imagine sliding into your comfortable and safe bed, position yourself such that your feet point toward the qibla, the same way your body will be placed in the grave. Next, rest your body on your right side, the side on which the deceased reclines in the grave.



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Now imagine that thousands upon thousands of warm, twinkling lights slowly surround you. These lights symbolize all of the good deeds you offered in life. Around your head, the lights from all the verses of the Qur'an you've recited or heard come forward. Around your feet, the lights from all the times you've stood in prayer approach. And around your hands, the lights from all the times you've given charity and made duaa and comforted somebody emerge. And from your mouth, the lights from all the times you've made dhikr and fasted come forward.

As you lay there, basking in the warm and welcoming glow of your good deeds, prepare your soul to meet God by asking for forgiveness for your spiritual struggles. We never know when our time will come to an end, so let's prepare from now: Repent of your faults, seek pardon, resolve not to return to your sin, and so sleep.

## Optional Addition

### Opening

Let's begin by taking a deep breath in through the nose, holding for a couple of heartbeats, then exhaling through the mouth. **Let's take one more deep breath in through the nose, hold, then exhale through the mouth.** Continue to take these deep breaths, noticing the rise and fall of the stomach. **Allow your forehead to relax, your jaw to drop slightly, and your arms to rest comfortably on your chair or in your lap.** If you feel comfortable, let your eyes close.

### Closing

**Come back to your space. Notice the anchoring of your body by pressing your feet into the ground beneath you, connecting you to the energy of the earth below. And as you continue inhaling through the nose and exhaling through the mouth, notice the spaciousness in your chest. And when you feel ready, gently open your eyes, and as you arise, resolve to do good to all as God Most High gives you another day of life.**

**Listen on SoundCloud: <https://bit.ly/HH2-Part1>  
Watch on YouTube: <https://bit.ly/YT-HH2-Part1>**



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# Part Two

## Forgiveness (Rituals for the Mind and the Heart)



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Islamic death and burial rituals serve one main purpose: to remind those in attendance of their eventual return to God. The middle ten days of Ramadan, centered on forgiveness, also provide an opportunity to focus on interdependence, a salient theme that emerges in the *janazah* funeral prayer. From this ritual, Muslims learn that we need one another, not only in life but also in death.

**Interdependence: the dependence of two or more people or things on each other; the quality or condition of being mutually reliant.**

**In Islam, the *janazah* funeral prayer falls under the category of *fard kifayah*, or communal obligation, meaning that if part of the community fails to fulfill this ritual, the entire Muslim community remains liable the eyes of God.**

The *janazah* necessitates our participation; every aspect of it involves interaction with the deceased, the family of the deceased, and one another. As it happens, the etiquette of the *janazah* entails that all in attendance remain fully present in mind, body and spirit by avoiding idle talk and adopting quieted, mindful movements.

Even in death, God decrees that we lean on the community to help fulfill our religious and spiritual commitments. After the deceased undergoes the ritual of washing called *ghusl al-mayyit*, the family members, friends and/or trained community volunteers performing the ritual gently wrap the body in a white *kafan* shroud.

The *kafan* shrouding purposefully evokes the image of the required uniform worn during the Hajj pilgrimage, further connecting the ritual to the concept of community. Muslims rarely, if ever, perform Hajj alone. The challenging journey necessitates the support of a group, even a small one, capturing an essential lesson about life and how God created humankind with an innate need for connection to and dependence on each other. We were not and are not meant to journey alone in this life.



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Immediately following the *ghusl* and shrouding, the community gathers for the *janazah* prayer, a ritual that resembles the *salat* (canonical ritual prayer), except that in the *janazah* prayer, the worshiper remains standing throughout. Without the need for extra space for prostration, worshipers stand in lines closer to one another than when in *salat*. Imagine the lines of prayer in *taraweeh* during the month of Ramadan, but more tightly arranged, as though lined up in one large group embrace. Whenever possible, a family member of the deceased leads the community in prayer, centering the most vulnerable of the bereaved in this grounding practice.

The *janazah* prayer includes four cycles of *takbeerat*, the announcing of “God is the Greatest,” to indicate the next step. Notably, two out of four of the cycles focus on the quality of forgiveness—in the third *takbeer*, the worshipers seek forgiveness and mercy for the deceased either in their own words or using a prayer of the Prophet (peace be upon him), such as, “O Allah, forgive those of us who are living and those of us who are dead, those of us who are present and those of us who are absent, our young and our old, our male and our female” (*Sunan Abi Dawud* , Book 21, Hadith 113).

In the fourth *takbeer*, worshipers ask for forgiveness for themselves and their loved ones. In the *ghusl* and *janazah* practices, the need for family and community emerges, perhaps to offer a lasting opportunity for reconciliation and forgiveness.

The mere word “forgiveness” may land differently for each of us depending on where we find ourselves on our healing journey. Forgiving others will look different for each of us; like grief, no precise timeline exists. For some of us, forgiveness may simply look like our internal chaos settling into a peaceful equilibrium felt deeply in our soul.



Trust

And whoever puts their trust in Allah, then He will suffice him.

Quran 65 : 3



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**Ultimately, Muslims strive to attain this station of al nafs al mutmainnah, or the soul at peace that returns to God at death, well-pleased and well-pleasing to God (Qur'an Surah Al-Fajr 89:27-30). Forgiveness isn't really about anybody else but ourselves. Forgiveness does not require that the offending party know that we forgive/forgave.**

When our pain remains unaddressed, a trauma response may look like hyper-independence, or the avoidance of needing others out of fear for our emotional, spiritual or physical safety. We may find ourselves recoiling from family and community. Due to negative experiences, our broken heart informs our thoughts such that we cannot trust others or may lead us to not even trust God.

Until we commit to the difficult inner work of healing, forgiveness stays just out of our reach. As long as our wounds—caused or exacerbated by those we may have loved and trusted—remain unhealed, our capacity to forgive remains hindered.

**Muslim scholars established a special connection between our mind, thoughts and heart. For instance, the Qur'an mentions the function of the heart as one that "ponders" (Qur'an Surah Muhammad 47:24), and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) pointed to his heart when locating the center of God-consciousness. Science, too, suggests that our brain and heart share similar neurons (thought-forming pathways) and communicate with each other to create a symbiotic relationship.**

When considering the theme of forgiveness, then, let us note that a broken heart produces broken thoughts.

- **How do our thoughts or opinions of God impact our connection to the Divine?**
- **How do our thoughts or opinions of others affect our connection with the community?**
- **Does our hurt impede our ability to forgive others or ask for forgiveness?**



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Muslims believe that Allah, in His perfect knowledge, prescribes for us spiritual practices that can restore our broken hearts and thoughts. Our teachers share that the true secret to contentment is in one's ability to accept the wisdom behind qadar, or Allah's decree. One becomes a curious and open observer of what happens to oneself, rather than succumbing to one's emotions.

In Islam, it is believed that by nourishing a good opinion of God as the Most Generous (the One who sends us the resources we need to mend), and by demonstrating beautiful patience and surrender through loss, we are showered with divine mercy and blessings (Qur'an Surah Al-Baqarah 2:157). Embracing the attitude of Ibn al Waqt ("child of the moment") means accepting both the highs and lows of life as coming from the Most Merciful, while maintaining the proper ethos of patience during hardship. This approach helps practitioners of Islam find peace and wholeness through embracing surrender to God's will. Through submission to each moment, an attitude is developed that allows us to lean into our function as "muslims."

Many spiritual sages have written about spending entire lifetimes yearning for their soul's release from this corporeal body in death and eventual reunion with the Beloved. Just as we need each other on this journey of life, we need our Best Companion even more so. As such, we grow in our ability to navigate forgiveness and repair our connections with others and with the Divine.



Peace

May the peace, mercy  
and blessings of Allah  
be with you



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# Islamic Death Meditation II

**Based on the writings of Imam  
Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali in his book,  
Faith and Practice**



**We begin with Bismillah Al-Rahman Al-Raheem, in the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Compassionate.**

One of the main purposes of engaging in death meditations on a regular basis includes the goal of detaching from this world through knowing that nothing here lasts. Our spiritual teachers advise that we remember often those of our peers who have died before us to drive home this point of earthly fleetingness. In this moment, pause and recall someone you know personally who has passed away. Contemplate this person's death and their physical form now beneath the earth. Now, compare their current position beneath the earth with how they moved and operated while alive. Recall how they appeared in their former positions and circumstances and meditate on the way in which the earth has now absorbed the beauty of their forms, and how they have left behind family and community and loved ones. Contemplate how all of their property remains behind, and how they inhabit their grave without any of those physical assets. Contemplate how all of the communal spaces, perhaps their mosque and social gatherings, continue to operate without their presence. In the physical sense, all traces of their form have vanished with their death.



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As we sit in the here and now with breath in our lungs and blood pumping through our veins, we too will one day cease to physically exist. All those whom we love, all that we have been gifted and cherish, all that we possess, will continue to exist without us until their time, too, will come.

So we pray to Allah for the capacity to forgive—forgive ourselves and those who have wronged us—and for forgiveness from the One who promises us forgiveness in the Hadith Qudsi, saying, *“O son of Adam, so long as you call upon Me, and ask of Me, I shall forgive you for what you have done.”*

## Optional Addition

### Opening

Find a comfortable position. Let's begin by taking a deep breath in through the nose, holding for a couple of heartbeats, and exhaling through the mouth. **Let's take one more deep breath in through the nose, hold, and exhale through the mouth.** Continue to take these deep breaths, noticing the rise and fall of the stomach. **Allow your forehead to relax, your jaw to drop slightly, and your arms to rest comfortably on your chair or on your lap.** If you feel comfortable, let your eyes come to a close.

### Closing

Notice the anchoring of your body pressing into the seat, and release any tension in your legs. Feel your feet pressing into the ground beneath you, connecting you to the energy of the earth below. **And as you continue inhaling through the nose and exhaling through the mouth, notice the spaciousness in your chest.** When you feel ready, gently open your eyes and as you awake, resolve to pursue your own healing toward your forgiveness journey as God Most High gives you another day of life.

**Listen on SoundCloud: <https://bit.ly/HH2-Part2>**  
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# Part Three

**Safety,  
finding the way between  
soul-care and self-care**



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As we enter into the last ten – and most blessed – days and nights of Ramadan, we shift our focus to the theme of safety. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said: “It (Ramadan) is the month, whose beginning is mercy, its middle, forgiveness and its end, emancipation from the fire.”

Emancipation from the fire in the afterlife in the Islamic tradition translates to a soul at peace (Qur’an Surah Al-Fajr 89:27-28) in the Eternal Garden. The Prophet’s (pace be upon him) choice to emphasize freedom from the fire is meant to impact our psychology as we hear this prophetic testimony. Hearing what our soul will avoid leaves us with more relief than merely hearing what our soul will reap.

Muslim teachers and sages explain that we need not wait until the afterlife to attain peace in our souls. Islamic practices and philosophies offer Muslims a path toward inner peace in the here and now through awareness of and care for the self.

**Even in death, the concept of care for the self is apparent in the rituals and practices that God prescribes to assure the care and dignity of our physical form. For example, after the *janazah* funeral prayer, the body is placed into the grave with the utmost tenderness. Shrouded in the scented *kafan*, with the deceased’s hands folded at the chest as though in prayer, the body is positioned with precision to face the qibla (the direction of salat toward Mecca) with the deceased’s right shoulder directly atop the yielding earth. The care and concern we should offer to our body in life is what God also prescribes for us in death.**

In the Western paradigm, self-care addresses three aspects of our being: the mind, body and soul (*nafs*). From an Islamic perspective, a fourth dimension is added to the latter category, namely the spirit (*ruh*). In the Islamic tradition, the *nafs* dictates our passions and appetite for eating, sleeping, reproducing and so on, while the *ruh* exists by way of God’s breathing into Adam – and, by extension, into us – His Spirit (Qur’an Surah Sad 38:71-72). The *ruh* therefore, contains our personalized connection to the Divine. The *ruh* is what enters our body in utero, sustains our connection to the Divine in life, and leaves our body at death to return home to God.



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In our modern context, the focus of self-care is mainly focused on the primal self, a facet of the nafs: how much we eat or sleep, whom we allow into our hearts and how we build resilience in our physical form through exercise and rest. While these elements are undeniably important for our well-being, simply caring for the nafs – from an Islamic perspective – does not replenish us spiritually.

**As Muslims, self-care includes soul-care, meaning tending to both the nafs and the ruh.**

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said that the greatest struggle is the struggle against one's primal self. Finding balance through controlling one's base desires requires much effort, discipline and energy.

So, as we expend energy in the struggle to curb our nafs, we renew our spiritual energy in our ruh. The month of Ramadan serves as the perfect example of achieving this balance: for while the fasting curbs our *nafsi* desires – proving to us year after year that we possess the discipline to achieve self-control and delayed gratification – our increased worship practices sustain and replenish our spiritual reserves.

صَبْرٌ

Patience

Indeed, Allah is with  
those who patiently endure

Quran 8 : 46



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# Caring for the *Nafs*/Soul: Boundaries

Soul-care for the *nafs* may look like the struggle against the pull of our vices. Avoiding sin is an act of soul-care. Muslims believe that in this blessed month of Ramadan the influences of Satan, an external spiritual threat, recede. With Satan removed from the equation, we lose the ability to blame another entity for our transgressions, which offers Muslims raw and unfiltered insight into their primal selves. A deeper level of introspection becomes imperative for Muslims this month as we ask ourselves, what remains in my control to improve?

In the Qur'an, God refers to our sins as transgressions against ourselves: "O My servants who have transgressed against themselves [by sinning], do not despair of the mercy of Allah. Indeed, Allah forgives all sins. Indeed, it is He who is the Forgiving, the Merciful" (Qur'an Surah Az-Zumar 39:53).

**Moral distress occurs when our actions and values misalign, resulting in inner chaos and turmoil. We may feel more anxious, doubtful, short-tempered and confused.**

It's important to note, in the Quranic verse above, that God sees our self-transgressions as a simple fact of life. We are human, so we make mistakes. Muslims believe that we enter into this world in spiritual purity, with *fitrah*, but that over our adult life, the accumulation of sins covers our *fitrah* like opaque layers.

Our soul is not at peace because when we sin, the separation between us and our Beloved increases, distancing us from the Source of Love and Mercy. We lose the most precious station possible in this life: nearness to God.



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# صلاة

Prayer

And your Lord had said:  
Call upon me  
and I will hear your prayer  
(Quran 40 : 60)

The void we may feel within stems from the expulsion of God from our hearts through our self-sabotaging belief that we are unredeemable. When we regain a good opinion of God according to God's chosen names - the Forgiving, the Merciful - we create space within ourselves for the Divine once again. Our goal, then, isn't perfection but instead the devoted, ongoing effort to prevail over the temptations inherent in our *nafs*.

Similar to the modern understanding of self-care, spiritual soul-care involves establishing, acknowledging and respecting boundaries. We learn from the practice of *ghusl al-mayyit* (ritual bath for the deceased) that, during this vulnerable moment of partial nakedness and helplessness of the deceased, only family members or people of knowledge - those who embody trustworthiness and care - offer the bath. For those of us still alive, we must examine who and what we allow "in" during our most vulnerable moments.



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**The Prophet Muhammad  
(peace be upon him)  
cautioned Muslims, saying,  
"There is a piece of flesh in  
the body that, if it remains  
healthy, the whole body  
becomes healthy, and if it  
is diseased, the whole  
body becomes diseased.  
Beware, it is the heart."**

As we find ways to care soulfully for our *nafs*, we may benefit from remembering that our heart and soul are the most precious components of our being and, therefore, require the most protection.

As Muslims seek to reach a level of spiritual development where we avoid sin not merely out of fear of punishment but out of fear of growing distant from God, so too may we all develop the boundaries necessary to fulfill our need for connection to our self and the Divine.

## **Caring for the *Ruh*/Spirit: Remembrance and Recitation**

Our *ruh*, or spiritual essence, needs a constant stream of nourishment. In the Islamic tradition, a full menu of options exists, from contemplation in nature to *dhikr* and *salat* – both practices that correspond directly to clinically proven healing modalities. Fasting in the month of Ramadan redirects effort we would otherwise devote to nourishing the physical body to caring for the metaphysical spirit by quieting the *nafs*. If we find that controlling or suppressing our *nafs* proves overly difficult, this may indicate a need for increased attention toward our spiritual heart during other times of the year.

The Prophet (peace be upon him) said, *"The hearts get rusted as does iron with water."* When someone asked, *"What could cleanse hearts again?"* the Prophet (peace be upon him) replied, *"Frequent remembrance of death and recitation of Qur'an."*

Through this Healing Heartwork series and the death meditations during Ramadan (the month of the Qur'an), we seek to realize both aspects of this prophetic diagnosis.



Healing Heartwork



The Prophet's (peace be upon him) suggestion to cleanse the heart through measured recitation of the Qur'an heals both the physical body and the spiritual heart. Muslims can take comfort in the words as a healing for the heart (Qur'an Surah Yunus 10:57) and find a tool for breathwork through the precision of tajweed to calm the nervous system when in distress.

Moreover, recalling our mortality every day humbles us and refocuses our efforts. As many have said, 'self-care is not selfish care.' Ideally, Muslims engage in self-care and soul-care to sustain themselves in order to continue fulfilling one purpose: worshiping God, knowing God and serving God's creation (Qur'an Surah Adh-Dhariyat 51:56).

Through life's ups and downs, we may gain a fuller and richer understanding of God. If we only know God in health, then we do not really know God. Similarly, if we only know God in tribulation, we do not really know God. During Ramadan, we experience both extreme hunger and thirst as well as satiation. In attending janazah funeral prayers, we experience death while still living. If we fast and fail to acknowledge our fragility, we must re-examine our approach. And if we attend funerals and fail to acknowledge our mortality, we lose an important opportunity to grow closer to our Creator.

The heart oriented toward the *qibla*, or the direction of prayer, marks a Muslim's final resting place in the grave, symbolizing the fulfillment and continuation of our purpose to worship and serve God.

For those of us still alive, observing this placement prompts us to explore how we may "*face the qibla*" while still alive, outside of ritual. In other words, are we directing our whole selves to the Divine?

When we find ourselves in balance and blessing, we may turn to Him in gratitude. When we find ourselves lost and alone and scared, we may turn to Him for company as He promises in the Qur'an, "*Do not be afraid, I am with you, hearing and seeing everything*" (Qur'an Surah Ta-Ha 20:46).

حب

Love

Indeed, Allah loves those  
who rely upon Him

Quran 3 : 159



Healing Heartwork

# Islamic Death Meditation III

**Based on the writings of Imam  
Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali in his book,  
Faith and Practice**



**We begin with Bismillah Al-Rahman Al-Raheem, in the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Compassionate.**

In his writings, Imam al-Ghazali addresses the loneliness and fear we may experience after our loved ones bury us in the earth and eventually walk away. He reassures those who believe that while our family and friends will grow more distant from us, our service and good works will surround us in the grave and transform into comforting companions while we wait for the Day of Resurrection.

Imagine that you are the body lying in the grave, wrapped in a perfumed kafan shroud with your hands folded across your torso as though in prayer. You lie with your right shoulder directly on the porous, woodsy-smelling earth. Your heart faces the *qibla*, continuing the connection you had in life to the symbolic House of God in Mecca, which offers your soul comfort through this familiar posture. Above, you hear your loved ones taking turns throwing small handfuls of dirt atop your grave, and you hear their footfalls as they turn and depart.



Healing Heartwork





Hope

And do not lose hope in  
the mercy of Allah

Quran 12 : 87

Before you have even a moment to feel lonely or scared, you find yourself surrounded by your righteous acts - your prayer, your fasting, your pilgrimage, your struggles in *jihad*, and your charity.

When the Angels of Chastisement try to approach you from the direction of your feet, Prayer intercedes, saying, *"Get back! You have no authority over this believer as they stood in Prayer at length for the sake of God."*

When those Angels then try to approach you from the direction of your head, Fasting intervenes, saying, *"You have no authority over this believer, for they thirsted and hungered at length for the sake of God."*

Next, the Angels try to approach from the direction of your middle, but Pilgrimage and Jihad say, *"Get back, for this believer exhausted themselves and wearied their body for the sake of God."*

Then the Angels try to approach from the direction of your hands, but Charity says, *"Back! Retreat from my master, for how many acts of charity issued from those two hands just to fall into the hands of God!"*

Then the Angels of Mercy appear and spread a heavenly cloth for you to rest upon, and you watch your grave space widen as far as the eye can see.

To your relief, a flickering candle then appears from Heaven, and from it your grave remains warmly illuminated as you wait for the Day of Reunion.



Healing Heartwork

## Optional Addition

### Opening

Find a comfortable position. Let's begin by taking a deep breath in through the nose, holding for a couple of heartbeats, and exhaling through the mouth. Let's take one more deep breath in through the nose, hold, and exhale through the mouth. Continue to take these deep breaths, noticing the rise and fall of the stomach. Allow your shoulders to drop, your arms to sink deeper into your lap or the chair, and your forehead to relax. If you feel at ease doing so, let your eyes come to a gentle close.

### Closing

Slowly come back into this space. Notice the anchoring of your body pressing into the seat, and press your feet into the ground beneath you, connecting you to the energy of the earth below. Continue inhaling through the nose and exhaling through the mouth, noticing the spaciousness in your chest. And when you feel ready, gently open your eyes and as you awake, resolve to do good to all as God Most High gives you another day of life.

**Listen on SoundCloud: <https://bit.ly/HH2-Part3>**  
**Watch on YouTube: <https://bit.ly/YT-HH2-Part3>**



Healing Heartwork





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