

Creating and Tending to an Altar

by Mary Isis, sacred musician & practitioner of the ritual healing arts.

Introduction~ Creating and tending to an altar space of your own is a very valuable and personal practice, that guides and supports one in their sacred ceremony of life.

Ever since I was a child I used to create beautiful spaces in my room with meaningful items, arranged in specific ways that brought be a sense of harmony, peace and joy. I didn't realize then that I was actually creating altar spaces. As I grew into my adulthood and steadily on my spiritual path, my altar space became a place for my re-centering, for my visioning, for my prayer and meditation. A place where my songs were birthed. In every home I lived (which have been many at this point with how much I have travelled) I have always had an altar space. And even when I don't have a home and am nomadic I always have my "portable altar" in my little basket that I can lay out at any location I rest.

While creating these kinds of sacred spaces comes natural to me I recognize it may not for others and also that it is something worth sharing about because people could benefit from some guidance in this area. And I believe we all have this inherent ability, and that it just needs some re-awakening. I am grateful and honored to share my own process for creating and tending to an altar and I also want to express how each person will find their own way, for this is an intuitive and personal, creative practice.

Creating and Tending to an Altar space in your Home, in 4 STEPS:

Step One. Choosing the space for your altar.

Choose a space in your home that you can find sanctuary and privacy, if possible. There are many different traditional beliefs around the placement of altars. And there are also more general and logical practicalities. Choose a space that is not so heavily trodden by other people and not next to any door where there is a lot of movement. Think of a space that allows for your own stillness. The altar can be at three potential levels: on the floor, on a low table for sitting at, or on a higher table where you might stand to face it. You might even build several altars- its up to you with the space that you have available. Some traditions, such as feng shui say to never build an altar on the ground, however in the Pachakuti Mesa Tradition, of which I was trained, it is recommended for our altars to be on the ground. Building you altar in a place that has a solid wall behind it (not a window) is preferred. Trust what feels right and true for you, for choosing the location. When it comes to building "temporary altars" for special occasions or events keep in mind that the same information I share in this article can be applied. The only exception would be to the building of "earth altars," which in this case all items would be gathered from the area and also left there (everything being from nature and given back to nature).

Step two. Gather your altar items.

The items for your altar are to be personally meaningful to you and also symbols for that which you hold sacred and of true value. They are items that when you sit with them they will INSPIRE you and REMIND you of the person you want to BE. They are also items that create a sense of CONNECTION with your true self and/or the Divine. Keep in mind, that these items may come in at different times and you need not have them all at once. The more general and essential items that I always wish to have in my altar space are items that represent the sacred elements of Earth, Water, Air, Fire and Spirit. Having a candle (preferably bee's wax because it is the most healing/ purifying) is always an essential and I would say is the single most important item because it is a symbol of divine Light- and we all wish for more of that in our lives, right? An altar space can

literally be just a space with a candle. Always be safe with the candle and make sure it is contained within some kind of holder or dish. Having a way to burn incense or a smudge is another essential- I personally love having either a little cast iron cauldron or an abalone shell or some other ceramic dish for this. Having a special stone/rock or crystal is another essential (this collection will undoubtedly grow over time!) integral altar piece, and activates the grounding earth element. Another essential is having a flower or bouquet of flowers and/or vegetation- this could even be a living plant in a little pot. Ideally this could be gathered with care from your surroundings, but if that is not possible they can be purchased. For the water element I love having some form of floral spritzer- my favorite is rose water or creating my own essential oil in water spritzer (just make sure its all natural and nothing synthetic). And I also like having a space where I can keep a vessel of water, to bless and also drink from. To honor the Spirit element I like to have an area of my altar for my ancestors. I have found that when I have a space that I can commune with and make offerings to my ancestors I feel an extra sense of guidance and support. After this, it is truly an art, which items you wish to add to your altar space. For myself, it usually involves special items I find in nature, such as feathers, seed-pods, herbs, bones, etc. Sometimes we may wish to have photos of people who we wish to keep present in our hearts and minds. Sometimes we may wish to have a statue or image of a deity or animal totem that we feel connected with. Sometimes we may wish to have beautiful, inspiring writing or affirmations. Perhaps your oracle cards (if you have any) or your journal will also want to live at/near your altar. Let your heart and intuition guide you in this. Your altar is a living, evolving sanctuary of your presence and love.

Step 3. Arranging the altar.

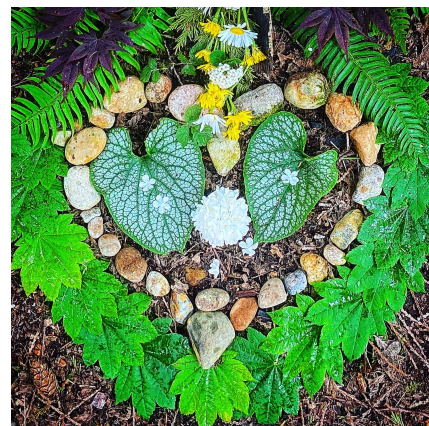
The arranging of your altar space is a creative and intuitive process that begins with a *cleared, clean and sanctified space*. Clear the area of any dust. Burn some smudge and/or spritz some floral water in the space and energetically clear it. Shaking a rattle or ringing a bell is another form of clearing. Next, if the surface is not the most beautiful to look at you might consider having a special cloth that you can lay down to put your items on. Consider using a beautiful cloth that is especially for this purpose, and not just any old cloth that might have any old energies attached to it. The first item to place down can be your center and grounding piece that immediately establishes your altar, such as your candle and then a rock/crystal. How you arrange your items after this point is entirely up to you, yet here are my suggestions. Having symmetry in your altar creation can create a sense of harmony when looking at it. Keep taller items such as your bouquet of flowers in the back to prevent accidentally knocking anything over. Again having a wall behind your altar is favorable but sometimes having an altar in the middle of a room can be very beautiful too, as it reflects as being a central part of your life.

Step 4. Tending to your altar.

Once you have your altar established is when the true practice and relationship with it begins! An altar is a place to visit frequently, to make space everyday if possible to sit with. It is not a place to be forgotten about, collecting dust and meaningless items. Ways to tend it would be to sit with it and make sure it is kept clear, clean and pristinely beautiful. Dead flowers or any stagnant energy should be cleared away. This isn't to say that there can't necessarily be "dead plants" on your altar because you may want to have a little basket where you put your collected nature items, for example. **Just make sure that everything present on your altar is intentional.** You can frequently freshen up your altar with your incense, smudge or floral spritzers. You can replace old candles and clean off your crystals and/or charge them in the sun (if your altar is not in a sunny place).

I hope you found this article helpful and that you feel inspired and motivated to create your own altar. Blessings upon your path of transformation! Love, Mary

The following are some of my own photos of altar spaces I have created for special events, retreats, etc., various “earth altars,” as well as an older photo of my Pachakuti Mesa altar, towards the end.





written by Mary Isis

Pathways of Transformation

copyright 2023

