



**WE ARE A WORK OF ART**

# **HEALTH + WELLBEING INITIATIVE**

**SPIRITUAL TOOLKIT**



**WE ARE A WORK OF ART**



# WELCOME

Cool Culture is a BIPOC-led social justice organization that uses arts and culture to strengthen family and community wellbeing. Each year we have historically partnered with over 50,000 families from across the five boroughs who reflect the diversity of our city and thousands of educators from 450+ schools and early education programs. We collaborate with hundreds of cultural workers from 90 museums, historical societies, botanical gardens and science centers. The Cool Culture team brings together people from all walks of life — families and children, educators and artists, museum staff and government officials — to build cross-cultural understanding and advocate for positive social change. Whether you are new to Cool Culture or a longtime member, we are honored to welcome you into a community of New Yorkers committed to creating a more just and equitable city through the arts.

We face today's evolving challenges and losses knowing that the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately harms BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) families who frequently have inadequate access to quality schooling and healthcare, not to mention to the arts. Yet our communities also have a long and rich history of cultural traditions designed to support one another during times of hardship. We bring the joy!

This is the one of five Wellbeing Toolkits that are designed to support discussions about individual, family and community health and wellness, whether at home or while in schools, museums or other community spaces. Each Toolkit is informed by conversations with the Cool Culture network of families, educators and our partners across New York City.

**LET'S GET STARTED!**

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## WHY ART?

Art is a human right. It is a means of self-expression evoking joy, pain, empathy, hope, and freedom. Through art we pass on knowledge about our lives, values, and traditions; transcend boundaries between and across our cultures; and increase our capacity for dialogue and understanding. Art is practiced by everyone. It is everywhere: in our homes and cultural institutions, on gallery walls and on the sides of buildings, in theaters and at block parties. Art is healing. It amplifies our individual and collective power, helping us to make meaning in our present and create our futures.



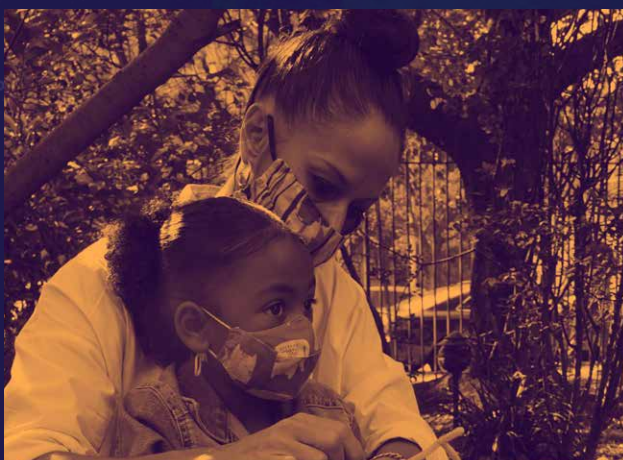
## WHY CULTURE?

Culture is fundamentally shared and continually changing. It comprises the arts, institutions, practices, languages, and ways of knowing that individuals, families, communities and societies value and choose to preserve for the future. Like the air we breathe it is often invisible, but guides our interactions, values and deepest held beliefs. It is strengthened when people from all backgrounds intentionally come together to define and act upon their collective ideals.



## WHY FAMILIES?

Families embody culture, imparting language, enacting daily practices and following traditions their children receive in both formal and informal ways. They are their children's teachers and advocates having goals that straddle the past, present and future. Families draw on their wealth of knowledge, insights, skills, and experiences to build a foundation for their children and future generations.





# MEET THE TEAM

The pandemic is teaching us many things about what is needed to thrive in our homes, community, city — indeed the world. Some of the lessons have been deeply personal, others are reminders that our wellbeing is interconnected. A question our team has been thinking about, and one we want to pose to the Cool Culture community of families, educators, museum partners, artists, and others is: *What has the pandemic awakened in us?*



**CANDICE ANDERSON**  
Executive Director

Deep appreciation and gratitude for small moments: a favorite meal with family, a good read on the couch, a good laugh with neighbors, walks in the frigid New York City air while looking forward to spring.



**STANLEY DELVA**  
Institutional Relations Manager

I'm more intentional with my health and more aware of how I treat and maintain my relationships with the people around me and the world we're inhabiting. I'm often reminded during this pandemic of how community work begins with self-care.



**TRACEY GREENIDGE**  
Director of Development

As a wife and mom of two little ones, this pandemic has ignited a fighting spirit from deep within. I still find joy during life's most challenging moments, in dance-offs with my family, game nights, and stop motion movies produced by tiny fingers on my phone.



**ANNIE LEE**  
Director of Communications

I'm learning to give myself space to process grief. I've become more intentional about making time for joyful things like cooking with loved ones and writing snail mail.



**TRA NGUYEN**  
Program Manager

The desire to stretch and grow in ways I've only dreamed about, to uncover layers of myself, to surrender to healing, to slow it down, and to appreciate all of the little things that make up life.



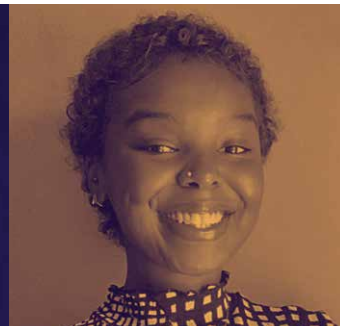
**FATIMA SHABBI**  
Director of CityWide Initiatives

The pandemic has shown me the power of communal care and rest. It has affirmed that we must reimagine, co-create and invest in equitable futures for all.



**ALEXANDRA SHONEYIN**  
Program Coordinator

The pandemic has made me realize that we need to invest more in our local communities and preserve our resiliency, stories, and creativity.



**KANIKA SRINIVASAN**  
Senior Director of  
Operations & Strategy

The importance of connection to loved ones, the meaningfulness of nurturing these relationships, and appreciation of the time we can spend together.



**SUSAN WILCOX**  
Director of Programs

The pandemic has awakened in me the reminder that, for better or worse, we are one organism susceptible to the ways we abuse or nourish the earth - our sole home. The impact may be unequal, but not one of us is untouchable.







## HEALTH + WELLBEING INITIATIVE

**The Health + Wellbeing Initiative** will bring us together to connect, create, imagine and act to invest in our individual and collective wellbeing, so that our community members come away with:

- **Deeper awareness of the current state of our wellbeing:** mind, body, spirit + civic engagement (and that of our family and communities).
- **Knowledge of the ancestral and indigenous wellness practices in our communities,** and our family traditions and practices as well as Western medical practices.
- **Awareness of the social dimensions of health** and the interdependent nature of our health + wellbeing.
- **Knowledge that health is a social justice issue** and how to access both indigenous and western health + wellbeing and civic engagement resources.
- **A vision of wellbeing for ourselves** (our family, our communities and our city) + an actionable first step to move towards this vision of the future.

# SPIRITUAL WELLBEING

## ALTAR MAKING: MAKING ROOM FOR HEALING & REMEMBRANCE

**AUTHOR: AJA D. REYNOLDS**



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aja Denise Reynolds is a healer, activist, artist and educator. She is the legacy of Linda and the late Ralph Reynolds, a testament of her family's survival and resistance in the US. In the many roles she is positioned in, she is led by a Black feminist spirit of care, collectivism and courage to confront systems of oppression. Her gifts possess the power to bring people together, and bring light into dark places through laughter. Her collaborative engagement with Black girls focuses on creating 'fugitive' or freedom spaces through the use of art, activism and healing. Aja's dissertation titled "Ain't Nobody Checking for Us: Race, Fugitivity and the Urban Geographies of Black Girlhood" is her most current work that documents this labor of love.

### What has the pandemic awakened in you?

**A greater commitment to collective care, stillness and a commitment to planting as a way to being communal with the ancestors and the earth to ground me.**

This toolkit, one of five in Cool Culture's We Are A Work of Art: Health + Wellbeing Initiative, is centered on inspiring spiritual wellness. Our minds and bodies are connected to a spirit, an inner being that is able to connect to other people, land and animals through an unseen connection, but you feel it. Just like you need to take care of your mind and body, you have to check in with your spirit because they all need to be aligned with each other so we can show up feeling our best on the inside and outside.

Spiritual wellness can be inspired and guided by many forms - through visual art, sacred altars, music and meditation for example. Here, I'd like to invite your family into the practice of altar making as a way to tend to our spirit.



## How do you take care of your spirit currently, or have observed others engage in spiritual practices? What have you experienced or seen with the use of altars as a sacred ritual?

Altar making is a sacred spiritual practice that is used in homes and communities across the world. These practices embody both religious and secular cultural influences to connect with our own spirits and for our spirits to connect with others. **My initial introduction to altars was as a religious practice I observed growing up in a Baptist church in Steelton, PA. The altar was a sacred wooden table with the inscription “In Remembrance of Me” etched in the front and a bible that rested on it.**

Over time I learned culturally how others used altars to tend to their spiritual wellness, which was important to me as I shifted my spiritual practice and saw altars as a collective meeting place to connect more deeply with those living and dead. In the summer of 2018, I had the opportunity to learn from community healer Tracey D. Hall about how formerly enslaved Black people in the U.S. adapted West African altar traditions. She led me and a group of Black girls during a summer institute, where I served as the

program coordinator, in building our own collective altar in remembrance of murdered Black girls. This became a powerful space in our classroom to hold grief and celebrate the lives of people that mattered to us. Additionally, we learned about the use of altars to manifest something we want to come forth, whether healing from an illness or a new job.

**I want to share altar practices as a way to help navigate grief and loss that have been brought on by the pandemic, or perhaps this practice may become a designated space in your home for manifesting things you hope to come.** The everyday realities of loss may burden us, yet the celebration of life and legacies left behind can uplift us. I invite you and your family to first explore the meaning and use of altars across cultures as a sacred spiritual practice, and then engage in collectively creating an altar in your home. While altar rituals are practiced globally, I wanted to highlight some of the ways I have witnessed cultures use the practice.

## ANCESTRAL ALTARS

**Throughout the world, you may recognize in someone’s home a designated sacred area with photos, trinkets, candles, food and drinks in remembrance of family and other significant people that have passed on.** This is an ancestral altar that is a “sacred meeting place where we can recognize, celebrate and communicate with them.”<sup>1</sup> Historically, those that were enslaved from Africa had to find ways to secretly hold on to traditions, sometimes mixing their spiritual practices with Christian practices to disguise those rituals. In Yoruba and other West African languages, the word “altar” translates to “the face of gods.”<sup>2</sup>

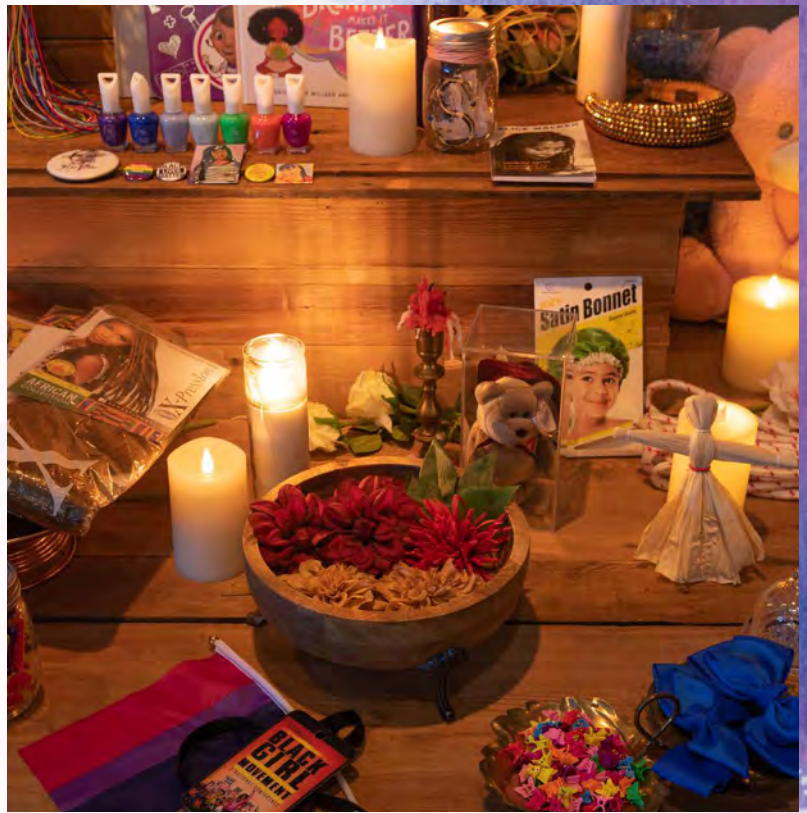
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<sup>1</sup> <https://diasporicsoul.com/2020/07/17/altar>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1994-07-01-9407010221-story.html>

# COMMUNITY ALTARS

**Another form of altar practice happens in community spaces meant to remember someone who may have died from gun violence or a car accident at the site of the incident.** It may be on a street corner adorned with bears, flowers, photos and messages to the person that died. People may visit the site and pour out libations or alcohol to pay tribute to the dead. Additionally, I have participated in community altars to bring awareness about violence on Black girls. After a protest march, members of the community were invited to contribute items that represented Black girlhood to a designated area that had been cleansed using sage (an herb used to remove negative energy in indigenous spiritual practices) and prayer. People contributed teddy bears, lip gloss, bamboo earrings, photos, candy and other materials that celebrated Black girl culture.



"The Black Girlhood Altar," a temporary monument, was assembled to honor the lives of Black girls cut short by violence *Photo by: NY Times*



The Black Girlhood Altar, a sacred site assembled by Black girls in Chicago, now on display at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, *Photo by: NY Times*



# DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS ALTARS

I was particularly intrigued to see the similarities between the ancestral altars and what my Mexican friends call la ofrenda, which are elaborate altars built to remember family and friends that have died. Particularly for **Día de los Muertos or Day of the Dead, which is celebrated by Mexican and other Latinx communities during November 1st and 2nd, la ofrenda welcomes the souls of the deceased to visit their families for one day each year and enjoy the offerings.** It emerged from an Aztec ritual known as Miccailhuitl, which served to remember the dead and recognize the seasonal change. Over time, parts of Christianity and Catholicism have been infused in its practice. If near the burial site, you may go to the cemetery and build the altar there, otherwise people build them in their homes. You may find vibrant, colorful items adorning la ofrenda including sugar skulls, flowers, photos of the dead, food and representations of the four elements (wind, fire, earth and water).

## MEDITATION ALTAR

**For those practicing meditation, you may be interested in creating a meditation altar. As borrowed from Buddhist spiritual practices, these are sacred physical spaces that represent peace and stillness in which you can manifest what you need.** Buddhism originated in India 2,500 years ago, and is one of the world's largest religions. This religion believes in using spiritual practices such as meditation and yoga in pursuit of enlightenment and to ease human suffering. On a Buddhist altar you may see a gold statue of the Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, facing east with other sacred items.

You may be inspired to create a meditation altar that represents your spiritual practices even if you do not practice Buddhism. For example, you may sit at the altar before heading to work and school to affirm "I will have a good day today." You may chant mantras or words of affirmation, and pray or sit quietly before the altar as you set your intentions for the day.

**What are some encouraging quotes or words of affirmation that bring you joy that you would add to a meditation altar?**

### FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT SPIRITUAL PRACTICES REFERENCED IN THIS ARTICLE:

<https://www.history.com/topics/religion/buddhism>

<https://diasporicsoul.com/2020/07/17/altar/>

<https://remezcla.com/features/culture/how-to-build-your-own-altar-ofrenda/>

[www.nytimes.com/2021/12/07/style/black-girlhood-altar-chicago-monument.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/07/style/black-girlhood-altar-chicago-monument.html)

[www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1994-07-01-9407010221-story.html](http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1994-07-01-9407010221-story.html)

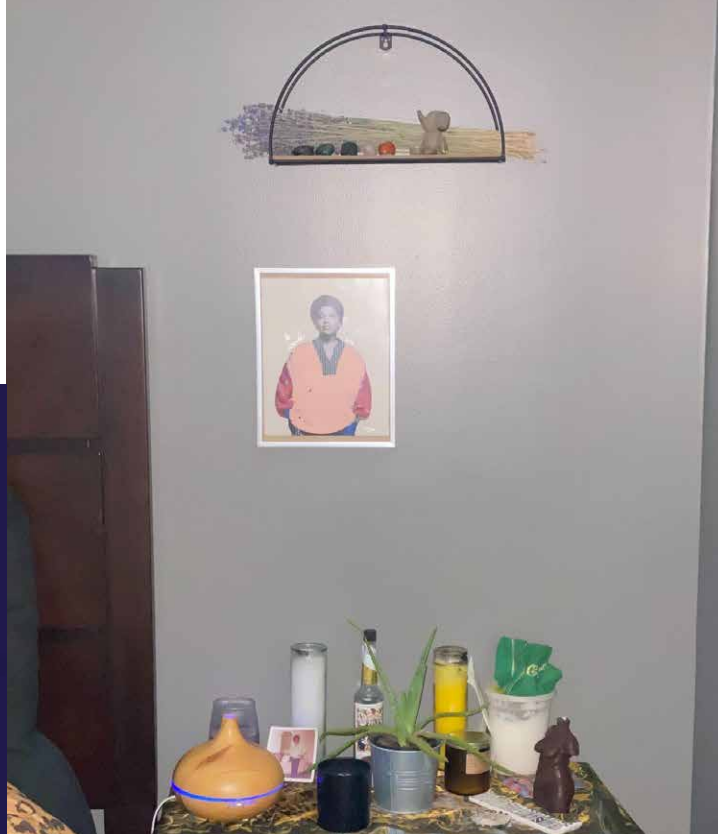
[www.othersuns.us/stories/2021/1/24/how-to-create-an-ancestor-altar](http://www.othersuns.us/stories/2021/1/24/how-to-create-an-ancestor-altar) > Playlists



# ACTIVITIES TO INSPIRE SPIRITUAL WELLBEING

## ALTAR-MAKING ACTIVITY

Now that we have a quick overview of the use of altars as a spiritual practice that blends religious and cultural practices, it is your turn to build your own altar. Below I will provide some guidelines, however remember this is about what feels good to you and your home.



Aja D. Reynolds shares the altar in her home.

## CREATE A SPACE + SET INTENTIONS

Find a space in your home, such as in the living room or the kitchen. You can use a small coffee/end table or bookcase. If you feel there's negative energy around the space, you might want to reset with sage, holy water, Florida water or any other ritual personal to you in organizing an affirming site.

Next, what is the purpose of this altar? Is this an ancestor altar or meditation altar? How do you want this altar to serve you and your family? What are you inviting in? What are you letting go?

## ADD ITEMS

Now you want to add items that align with your intentions and spiritual practices. You may add herbs like palos santos or lavender or incense that uplift the space. If religious, maybe adding a Bible, Quran or other traditional text to the altar feels necessary. Other items can include:


- **Symbols representing the 4 elements: earth, wind, fire and air**
- **Photos of ancestors (If an ancestral altar, it is advised to only add photos of those that have died.)**
- **Living item (i.e. plant, flowers and or food)**
- **Heirloom or family artifact - an item passed down from a loved one**
- **Candles - some suggest that certain colored candles protect the altar**
- **Crystals/stones**
- **Any other items of significance that feel appropriate**

If you plan on spending time at the altar, especially for meditation, consider adding a floor pillow, or ottoman for comfort.



# BREATHING WITH ORISHA WITH BABA OLUDARÉ

As part of the We Are A Work of Art: Health + Wellbeing Initiative, Baba OluDaré of Kiire Wellness shares a breathing meditation and healing exercise for the Cool Culture community. He reminds us that dancing, singing, and breathing are rituals and medicines created to release our power and restore physiological, spiritual and emotional balance. Find a comfortable space in your home or classroom and follow along with our video:

 <https://bit.ly/HandWbreathwork>



## ABOUT BABA OLUDARÉ

Baba OluDaré founded Kiire Wellness to archive, practice and teach the respiratory rituals, dances, songs and ancestral healing methods of the African diaspora. He has been a student of Yoruba traditional music and dance for nearly two decades and has trained in the art of sacred drumming since he was a child. He is also an ordained Lukumi priest of Orisha.



# RESOURCES TO INSPIRE WELLBEING

Throughout **We Are a Work of Art**, **Cool Culture** will share resources identified by our network of families, educators, artists, museum partners, and other community leaders. These resources were chosen to direct you to support, information and opportunities for healing as needed.

## NOURISHING THE SPIRIT

- **Black Food: Stories, Art, and Recipes from Across the African Diaspora by Bryant Terry**

With contributions from more than 100 Black cultural luminaries from around the globe, the book moves through chapters exploring parts of the Black experience, from Homeland to Migration, Spirituality to Black Future, offering delicious recipes, moving essays and poetry, and beautiful artwork.

- **Greater Good Science Center**

The Greater Good Science Center is committed to nurturing peaceful, compassionate, joyful families. The Greater Good online magazine is filled with articles and videos for parents and families to help them foster qualities like gratitude, forgiveness, resilience, understanding, and generosity in themselves and their children.

[https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/?\\_ga=2.220049438.665855718.1649699198-2070216353.1649699198](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/?_ga=2.220049438.665855718.1649699198-2070216353.1649699198)

- **Chopra**

Chopra blends modern well-being practices with Ayurveda - a centuries-old system of health and healing - to offer a whole-self approach. Learn about child-friendly meditations that can equip children with tools to “help them fend off negative thoughts and behaviors, build self-confidence, focus, and treat others and themselves with respect and appreciation.”

<https://chopra.com/articles/3-kid-friendly-meditations-your-children-will-love>

- **Meditation Apps for Kids by Common Sense Media**

Common Sense Media, a nonprofit technology and entertainment resource that helps families and children navigate the digital world, shares the benefits of even short amounts of meditation to reduce stress, boost immunity, and offer other health benefits. View their list of child-friendly mobile applications organized by age range:

<https://www.commonsensemedia.org/lists/meditation-apps-for-kids>

- **NYC Care**

New Yorkers can access low- or no- cost health care through NYC Health and Hospitals Corporation. Call 646-NYC-CARE or visit [www.nyccare.nyc](http://www.nyccare.nyc)

- **NYC Well**

A free and confidential connection to mental health and substance abuse support, available 24/7 via talk, text, and chat. <https://nycwell.cityofnewyork.us/en/>



- **Salud America!**

Salud America! is a national Latino-focused organization that creates culturally relevant and research-based stories and tools to inspire people to drive healthy changes to policies, systems, and environments for Latino children and families.

<https://salud-america.org/>

- **Spiritual Care in Medical Settings**

If you or your family member is seeking medical care, hospitals and other medical service organizations may offer spiritual and emotional care teams to assist with a variety of challenges while respecting your values, beliefs and religious or cultural heritage. You may want to ask a nurse about available spiritual care services. Below are a few examples:

**Mount Sinai West - Spiritual Care and Education Department**

[www.mountsinai.org/locations/west/support/spiritual-care](http://www.mountsinai.org/locations/west/support/spiritual-care)

**NYC Health + Hospitals: Lincoln Hospital - Pastoral Care**

[www.nychealthandhospitals.org/lincoln/for-patients-visitors/pastoral-care](http://www.nychealthandhospitals.org/lincoln/for-patients-visitors/pastoral-care)

**Visiting Nurse Service of New York - Emotional Support and Spiritual Care**

[www.vnsny.org/how-we-can-help/hospice-palliative-care/our-services/emotional-support-and-spiritual-care](http://www.vnsny.org/how-we-can-help/hospice-palliative-care/our-services/emotional-support-and-spiritual-care)

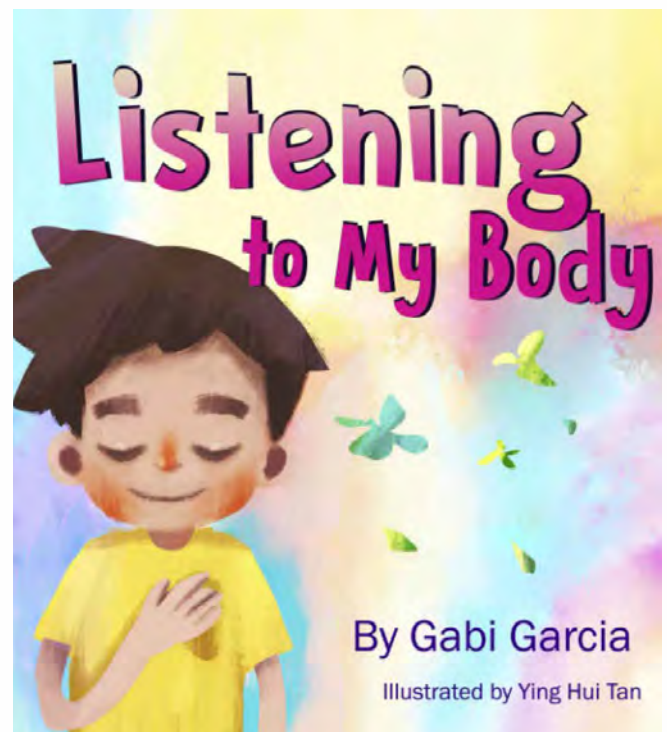
## CHILD-FRIENDLY RESOURCES ON WELLBEING AND THE SPIRIT

- **Coco**

Taking place during Dia de los Muertos, this animated film follows an aspiring young musician, voiced by Anthony Gonzalez, on a journey to the magical land of his ancestors. He explores family stories, histories and traditions in the spirit world with the unexpected help of a charming spirit voiced by Gael Garcia Bernal.

- **Listening to My Body by Gabi Garcia**

A board book guide to help children understand the connection between their sensations and feelings so that they can get better at figuring out and expressing what they need.





- **Many Shapes of Clay: A Story of Healing by Kenesha Sneed**

A young girl learns to live with the sense of loss and of the joyful power of making something new out of what is left behind. The book shares a gentle message that we all have the ability to heal and create.

- **Soul**

This animated film centers the spiritual journey of a music teacher, voiced by Jamie Foxx, who is seeking to reunite his soul and his body just before his big break as a jazz musician. He is accompanied by a precocious soul, voiced by Tina Fey, as they seek answers to some of life's biggest questions.

- **The Feelings Book and The Goodbye Book by Todd Parr**

Vibrant and whimsical illustrations help young readers identify a range of feelings in the first book, and processing loss is told through the second book where a pet fish has lost its companion.



Look out for other **Cool Culture Toolkits** around **Mind, Body, and Civic Wellbeing** with more in-depth resource lists and activities for families and educators.

As part of the **We Are A Work of Art Health + Wellbeing Initiative**, they will contain frameworks for assessing wellbeing while providing art-making activities that can inspire conversations around different states of wellbeing and healing.

# FEATURED PARTNER

Which NYC cultural institutions are inspiring us to process our states of wellbeing and inspire action around mind, body, spirit or civic engagement right now?

At Rubin Museum of Art, you might explore the ways that Tibetan Buddhist artworks and practices have acted as paths to wellbeing, centering themes such as prevention, healing and longevity. You and your family can visit the Rubin and nearly 90 other museums, gardens, and zoos for free with your Cool Culture Family Pass. View updated visitation guidelines on our Cultural Partner Visitation Portal:

**<https://bit.ly/VisitCoolCulturePartners>.**

## RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART

150 West 17th Street, New York, NY 10011

### Healing Practices: Stories from Himalayan Americans

March 18, 2022 - January 16, 2023

THE  
RUBIN  
MUSEUM  
OF  
ART



“In Tibetan Buddhism, mental, physical, and spiritual wellbeing are interdependent, and can only be achieved through a variety of holistic practices, from ritual to medicinal, that restore balance to these three aspects.”

#### Invite your child to reflect:

*What is something you do at home or in school that helps your spiritual wellbeing?  
Which items or artifacts did you see in the exhibit that you find very similar to something you or your family use in your spiritual practice?*



# STAY CONNECTED

## JOIN US

Cool Culture partners with Title I elementary schools and early education centers to co-create programs and activities with families and educators that ignite our emotional, intellectual and political imaginations.

Through a partnership with Cool Culture, families sign up through their school or child care center to utilize the Family Pass. The pass offers a range of arts and cultural activities through free access to nearly 90 museums, gardens and zoos — places like the Brooklyn Museum, El Museo del Barrio, the Central Park Zoo and much more!

Donate to support our work: [www.coolculture.org/donate](http://www.coolculture.org/donate)

## THANK YOU

Cool Culture's programs are made possible by generous donors like you. As a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization, we rely on public and private donations to build capacity for over 50,000 families, educator partners, and museum staff to connect, create, and collectively evolve art and culture within and beyond institutions.

### Cool Culture, Inc. is Supported By:

Cooper Family Foundation Inc; Morris and Alma Schapiro Fund; New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with The City Council; PHILLIPS Auctioneers LLC; The Bay and Paul Foundations; The Cornelia T. Bailey Foundation; The Emmanuel Baptist Church Mission and Benevolence Fund; Fisher Brothers Foundation; Go City; The Hyde and Watson Foundation; Laurie M. Tisch Illumination Fund; Charles Kaplan Fund of the Mayer and Morris Kaplan Family Foundation; National Endowment for the Arts; New York City Department of Youth and Community Development; The New York Community Trust; New York State Council on the Arts; Verizon; Cool Culture's generous Board of Directors; and countless individual donors.

### BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Candice Anderson (Executive Director), Dixie Ching, Jared Cooper, Cathy Elkies, Samantha Gilbert, Dr. Christopher John Godfrey, Rob Krulak, Risa Meyer, Edwina Meyers, Lynne Toye, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, Ahmed Yearwood

Cool Culture envisions an equitable society that values, embraces and is enriched by all cultures. Our mission is to amplify the voices of families and to strengthen the power of historically marginalized communities through art and culture, both within cultural institutions and beyond.



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@CoolCulture

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