

On using ritual to guide your work



Poet and performer Janaka Stucky discusses the challenge of making the private public, creating from a heightened state, and the power of ritualized tricks and triggers.

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As told to Elle Nash, 2577 words.

Tags: [Poetry](#), [Music](#), [Magic](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [Collaboration](#).

You're known as a poet and performer. Can you tell me a little bit about your current project, which involves a live recording and a series of live performances?

My book, *Ascend Ascend*, was published in 2019 by Third Man Books. When the book came out, I partnered with [Atlas Obscura](#) for a series of seven ritualized performances in seven different cities around the country. They were full multimedia performances where I recited the book in its entirety from inside a magic circle that's drawn with sigils and seals on the floor—ringed with beeswax candles and incense and live marigolds that are planted in this outer rim of soil.

In New York, I performed with Mark Korven, who's a Canadian composer who did the soundtracks for *The Witch* and *The Lighthouse*. In Seattle, I got to do this improvised performance with the cellist, Lori Goldston. Lori is best known for having played with Nirvana on their *Unplugged* album, which was a huge influence on me as a teenager, and she's played with Earth, who I often listen to while I'm writing.

When we did this Seattle show, Lori and I had never met. Literally, we just spoke once on the phone before the show. We didn't even really do much of a sound check together, we just improvised the whole performance in this beautiful old church in Seattle that had incredible acoustics. The show was professionally recorded by the sound engineer, but I just sat on the recordings because as my tour was wrapping up, the pandemic hit.

Honestly, I kind of forgot the recordings existed for a year. And then [Steve Von Till](#), who is one of the members of the band, Neurosis, and who runs Neurot Recordings, ordered a signed copy of *Ascend Ascend* from my website and we eventually connected over email. That conversation evolved into, "Hey, let's put out this as a live album with Neurot!"

When it came time to develop a visual identity for the record, illustrator [David V. D'Andrea](#) was the obvious choice for me. David has made all these amazing tour posters for the bands like Sleep and Earth and Om and Godspeed You! Black Emperor, and I have a print of his that's hanging on my bedroom wall—that I used to change my son's diapers under. We're creating a limited edition, "blood marigold" colored vinyl run, and some screen-printed prints signed and numbered by David as well.

The really exciting thing is that Atlas Obscura wants to do a new round of performances in 2023! So I'm going to be doing an encore set of ritual performances in LA, Seattle, Boston, and New York. Those will probably be the last time I perform this work in this way.

What does it take to just pull something together like that? You have to find a particular kind of event space for this, it sounds like.

For someone who's operating at my scale, it would be hard to do without having a production partner like Atlas Obscura involved because they have this great network of unusual venues. They helped find crypts, cemeteries, temples, churches, and abandoned warehouses for me to perform in. They also have a network of local producers and AV people who can do the sound and the lights and everything. For instance: I connected with Lori in the first place because a local poet and producer in Seattle, named Shin Yu Pai, brought us together. So it's really helpful to have them involved.

From a performer's perspective, I have this whole suitcase of all my ritual materials in it, my candles, my incense, magic items. Then, we locally source live marigolds for each show—and a lot of them!

What is the impetus behind doing rituals as performance as part of your work?

When I'm writing, it's from this trance state. For me, the poetics of trance isn't just the practice of entering an altered state of consciousness, but also staying in that kind of transcendent uncertainty while I write. I do this so that the obscure and intimate mystery of my encounter with language takes place in a liminal state of grace. And so the creative act becomes an act of utterance and an act of awe. For me, that's action without attachment rather than action with agenda. So the poetics of trance is this uninterrupted dialogue with the divine. It's a deep dialogue of ecstasis, and love and terror with the universe. It's important to me that the performance of my work reflects the sacred space from which it was produced.

I don't just mean the physical space. It's also an interior space. It's this palace of supernatural longing that exists as a temple in time rather than space. I want the performances of the poems to be an initiatory experience, and I don't want to just enter that altered state of consciousness myself while I'm performing. I want to invite the audience into it too, so the performance becomes an invocation, a collective trance, flowering into this fourth dimension. Each show is unique because each audience is different, and that palace that we build together takes on new shapes.

For me, magic is so private. I almost never do any rituals with anyone else except for my one friend. And even when I feel like when we do things together, sometimes I feel a sense of vulnerability at showing someone else and doing my magic practice with someone. What is it like then to do something like this so publicly?

It is very vulnerable and very frightening for me to do publicly. As a straightforward reader of my work, taking the ritual performance out, I'm a veteran performer. I've been reading in public for over 20 years now. I'm very comfortable and very confident in front of audiences, but when I started doing these ritual performances I had not felt performance anxiety like that in years or decades even.

It's a very risky thing to do artistically. You don't know how people are going to respond to something that, while it's very sincere, also has a lot of aesthetic artifice to it. Especially poetry audiences. Literary audiences are very suspicious of anything that is theatrical. So you're dealing with a literary audience who's skeptical of something that's theatrical, and then you're dealing with a performing arts audience who maybe is skeptical of a boring literary reading. So you have to win both people over to the opposite side at the same time.

If you are a practitioner and you really believe in the power of this stuff, it is also a psychically very risky and dangerous thing to do, too. You are opening yourself up to a lot of passengers. There's a lot of work that I did in crafting those performances. It's why I perform inside of a magical circle. The sense of risk went into the selection of everything. All my props that I use in that ritual, from the materials to the kind of incense I light, is not just theatrics, but a way of both inviting in the energies I want to involve in the performance, and protecting myself as the performer.

Can you talk about the meditation space that you set for yourself beforehand, before you perform or do other creative things?

Back in 2009, I think it was, I wanted to participate in National Poetry Writing Month where you do a poem a day for 30 days of April. I am not a prolific writer. I usually would write 5 to 10 poems a year or something like that. So for me to do 30 poems in 30 days was really daunting. I reached out to a novelist friend of mine who was prolific and could crank out thousands of words a day. And I was like, "How do you do that? You just sit down and do it?" And his response was, "You need to create a ritual for yourself."

In hindsight, I realize that what he meant by ritual was get up at seven, make coffee, sit down to your desk at nine, write for an hour, stretch, sit down and go for a walk, come back and write for another hour. But because I grew up in an ashram and I had these really esoteric parents who would take me to mystics and psychic surgeons and everything, when I heard the word ritual, I was like, "Oh yeah, ritual. I know what this is about." And so I created this occult writing ritual for myself that involved turning off all the lights in the house, and candles, and incense and turning on ambient doom metal, and then just sinking into this Byronian state of torpor in my chair for 15 minutes as I entered this meditative trance state, until I felt like I was empty and I was ready to begin writing. And what happened was really unexpected, that not only was I able to write 30 poems in 30 days, but it changed the voice in my writing, like 180 degrees. Which I was not expecting.

Before that I was writing very confessional narrative poems. Probably I'd be really much more popular if I was still writing those fun Billy Collins-esque poems or something like that. But my poems became very surreal, and fragmented, and ecstatic as I entered these states of utterance. I've been writing like that now for whatever that is, 13, 14 years now.

Would you ever go back to the narrative poem?

I won't talk about it too much because I don't want to jinx the current writing, but I started writing poetry again. I haven't really been writing it since the pandemic. I've been writing in other genres. Just a couple weeks ago I started writing poems again—switching up my practice a little bit and not being so ritualistic in the writing, but still being meditative in it. Playing with narrative and then launching off into something that is fragmented and surreal and utterance. We'll see where that goes.

I want to talk about the power of secrecy and even superstition when it comes to creative projects.

The binary between genuine magical practice and superstition is sort of a false binary that gets brought up a lot in debate around it. I think all real magic is part placebo, and just because it derives its power from our belief in it, doesn't make it invalid. If I have a transcendent experience, it doesn't really matter how I got there, because the experience is genuine. Let's take our explicit magical practice out of the equation for a second... If you think about a magician in a darkened room—and whether that magician is someone who is pulling rabbits out of a hat or doing a seance, or is an escape artist like Houdini, or is a rock musician like David Bowie, or someone who really understands the power of ceremony—when it comes to performance (and how, I think as human beings, we are these naturally ceremonial creatures), we're drawn into that.

You can be drawn into that and have a really genuine other-worldly experience, and the only difference is how we talk about it. Whether you talk about that experience as a divine experience, whether you talk about it as a psychological experience, whether you talk about it as an aesthetic experience, whether you talk about it as a UFO abduction. We're just talking about it through different cultural lenses, but it's all the same experience at root, and it is a really transcendent and beautiful one. So I think similarly, those ritual practices or those magical practices that we incorporate into our personal lives or our creative lives, whether it derives its efficacy from superstition, or whether it is actually charged with some extra-dimensional energy of some kind, the result is still the same.

When you are working yourself towards a trance state in ritual, or even for writing, what are some things that you do, what are some methods that you have for that? Is it the music and the meditation until you can drop into that state?

Some of my earliest memories are sitting in my dad's lap while he was meditating in this big meditation hall full of 200 other people. So I can fall into a meditative state usually in 5 or 10 minutes whenever I make time to do

that. But I also like having the somatic triggers. I think that's also really helpful. And when I teach writing rituals to people, which I do sometimes, I really encourage people to find their own somatic rituals. They don't have to be super esoteric triggers. It can just be this one type of incense that you always light when you're being creative, or a special mug you have, or a type of drink you drink, or a certain sweater you wear or whatever it is. But those things, every time you do it, it's almost like a muscle memory for your creative mind where, "Oh, now it's time to free associate. Now it's time to sink into some negative capability and do something interesting and see where that goes."

In addition to the more formal meditation practice, I like to have those somatic triggers, too. I switch them up, so for five or 10 years, it'll be a certain set of things, and then I'll start experimenting with others because I also think input affects output. So what happens if I switch my coffee mug, or I switch my ritual drink, or I switch my incense, or I stop listening to doom metal and I start listening to minimalist contemporary piano compositions or whatever it is. How does that affect my state of consciousness? And then what happens?

I bought some things from Otessa Moshfegh's Depop, and I was like, this is going to be my enchanted ritual writing item.

I saw! Didn't you get her jacket or something like that?

I did, yeah. I also have this little locket she sent that I put on a choker, so it's on my writing desk and I don't ever wear it unless I'm going to write because it's kind of Pavlovian.

There are little things I do for performance that are almost like ritualized ticks or triggers that I do to get myself into that space, but I don't and won't say specifically what they are because those are very secret and powerful to me in that way, and part of their power is in their secrecy.

Janaka Stucky Recommends:

Ezra Rose, a multi-disciplinary creator whose work explores esoterica, queer/trans identity, and Jewish culture. They're doing exciting work at the fringes to decolonize historically Jewish traditions of magic.

After a close friend's recent recommendation, I have spent countless hours listening to Nala Sinephro's "Space 1.8" on repeat.

A Breath of Life by Clarice Lispector is dense, ecstatic, and essential reading for writers.

Learn how to expertly prepare three of your favorite dishes and you will always have a method for rewarding yourself for hard work, celebrating your successes when no one else does, and bringing others a little bit of joy.

Unplug for a solid 24 hours every week. No social media, set an away message on your inbox.

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Vocation

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