

*Life As It Is*  
“Into the Long Dark”  
Episode #50 with Francis Weller  
January 21, 2026



*Note: Transcripts are generated using a combination of speech recognition software and human transcribers. Please check the corresponding audio before quoting in print.*

**Francis Weller:** I think when we get quiet, we can be informed by something larger than us. Larger than our stories. Larger than our wounds, larger than our conditioned fictions. Something fresh might actually come into our imaginal ground, and that's what I find faith in right now, is that we are susceptible, we are vulnerable, we are receptor sites for the larger dreaming of the planet. That's what I've seen over my forty years of practice and my work with many, many groups is that the earth is a dreaming being. And if we get quiet enough, we might be dreamt into some forms, some actions, some ritual practices that might actually help us repair the relationship between the human and the more-than-human world.

**James Shaheen:** Hello, I'm James Shaheen, and this is *Life As It Is*. I'm here with my cohost Sharon Salzberg, and you just heard Francis Weller. Francis is a writer and soul activist who has worked as a psychotherapist for forty years, and he is currently on staff at Commonwealth Cancer Help Program. In his most recent book, *In the Absence of the Ordinary: Soul Work for Times of Uncertainty*, he lays out practices for embodying new ways of being so that we can meet the anxieties and unknowns of our time with presence and faith. In our conversation with Francis, we talk about why he views listening as an art of reverence, the subversive power of restraint, how not knowing situates us at the edge of discovery, the importance of learning how to grieve, and the role of ritual in navigating what he calls the Long Dark. Plus, Francis leads us in a guided practice. So here's our conversation with Francis Weller.

---

**James Shaheen:** So I'm here with Francis Weller and my cohost Sharon Salzberg. Hi Francis. Hi Sharon. It's great to be with you both.

**Francis Weller:** Thank you for having me.

*Life As It Is*

“Into the Long Dark”

Episode #50 with Francis Weller

January 21, 2026



**Sharon Salzberg:** Hi.

**James Shaheen:** So, Francis, we're here to talk about your new book, *In the Absence of the Ordinary: Soul Work for Times of Uncertainty*, which builds on your decades of work as a psychotherapist and soul activist specializing in grief. So first I'd like to ask you a bit about your background. How did you first start doing grief work?

**Francis Weller:** I get asked that a lot, and my typical answer is that I didn't volunteer for the job.

**James Shaheen:** Neither did Sharon volunteer for her job.

**Francis Weller:** I kind of got drafted early on. There was a lot of loss in my life early, in my early experience in family, and finding my way into the territory of psychotherapy in my 20s. Then as a therapist in my late 20s, the whole territory is saturated with sorrow. And if you can understand that, you can actually help give a deeper context to what people are experiencing—their childhood losses, their loss of relationship, struggling with addictions, or whatever it is, there's always going to be sorrow there. And sorrow seems to be one of those great ways that the heart can continue to stay softened. If we stay open to sorrow, we have a way of being able to bring compassion not only to ourselves but also to those who are around us, because no one you meet on the street does not know sorrow quite intimately.

**James Shaheen:** Yeah, I could have used this book in my 20s. In this book, you turn particularly to our collective grief, and you say that we've entered a season of descent, into an underworld even. So can you tell us about this underworld? How do you understand that?

**Francis Weller:** Well, I call the time we're in the Long Dark. And what I mean by that is both words are important. Long meaning probably two generations at least, where we are going to be in a prolonged season of witnessing erosions in the vitality of our communities, the planet ecosystems. We are not in a time of rising. We're not in a time of confidence and ease. We are in a very rapid descent into that underworld territory. I say that not with a lot of despair or even

*Life As It Is*

“Into the Long Dark”

Episode #50 with Francis Weller

January 21, 2026



with a lot of anguish. I see the necessity of this descent. We've been on a 3,000-year, roughly, process of ascension, rising, domination, control, supremacy. These have been the factors that have shaped a lot of our cultural context at this time. It seems to me that what the soul of the world, the *anima mundi*, is doing now is dropping us downward into the underworld where we have to deal with loss and grief, with vulnerability, with uncertainty. At the same time, we're invited into the terrain of imagination, gestation, incubation, silence.

Now, those have typically been qualities of spiritual life. And so there's a sense that we're being invited into a period of deepening and hopefully also of ripening as human beings and also as a human species—ripening into our full accord with the wider cosmology of being here on this planet.

**James Shaheen:** So you use the alchemical language of the blackening. So what is the blackening in relation to all of this?

**Francis Weller:** Yeah. In the alchemical language, the season we're in is called the *negredo*, which is the blackening. And the blackening in the alchemical tradition is actually a form of beginning. James Hillman, one of my primary teachers, would say that the blackening is actually an achievement, that something has happened at a deep soul level, at a psychological level, where you have gathered what has been decaying, dying, decomposing, all these wonderful strong “d” words that remind us that this is actually an essential part of our psychic life. Nature is not always increasing. It's not always growing. It has its own periods of decay and decomposition, of breakdown, of endings, the same as with the psyche personally, but also collectively as well.

So the *negredo*, they call it the subtle dissolver. And I don't think things are so subtle right now. Things are dissolving. What I find valuable about this imagery, this idea, is that it gives us, again, a way of appreciating what's happening. Not that it's pleasant or easy, but it gives us a way of imagining where we are, that things are breaking down. Certain things must break down.

*Life As It Is*

“Into the Long Dark”

Episode #50 with Francis Weller

January 21, 2026



Systemic racism must break down. Gender discrimination must break down. Economic disparities must break down. Capitalism must break down. So if these energies that are gathering help us to dissolve some of these structures, we then have a chance to recede the imagination of what does living culture actually look like?

**James Shaheen:** I just want to say that historically there have been periods like this, for instance, in Kamakura Japan, the idea of *mappo*, or the same descent into chaos was one thing, but it actually brought forth these remarkable traditions. So I think in terms of it has historical resonance, what you're saying. There have been other times like this.

**Francis Weller:** Yes. We think about the Renaissance. It was preceded by what they called the Dark Ages, right? I mean, there was a time of a breakdown of collapse, of organized systems and that gave birth to something new. Now, the circumstances now are actually quite a bit more serious given that we are now facing a possible extinction process. And maybe that's simply the intensity we need psychically to generate a response that is capable of meeting this moment.

There's a wonderful term in the Inuit tradition north of the Arctic Circle called *qarrtsiluni*, and *qarrtsiluni* literally translates as sitting quietly together in the darkness, waiting expectantly for something creative to burst forth. Now, I think that's a beautiful metaphor for where we are right now. We're not comfortable with the darkness. We're always striving for the light, but we have to sit quietly together in the darkness. This comes out of the whaling tradition. They couldn't go out to hunt a whale until the whale people gave them a song. So that talked about restraint, it talked about reciprocity, talked about mutuality, talked about reverence in that one gesture. To sit quietly is an act of humility. These are the values that we are being asked to begin to embody.

**Sharon Salzberg:** Right. So you say that as a culture and society, we tend to devalue descent and darkness, but in order to navigate these times, it's essential to remember what you call the sacredness of the dark. So how can we connect to this sense of sacredness?

*Life As It Is*

“Into the Long Dark”

Episode #50 with Francis Weller

January 21, 2026



**Francis Weller:** Well, imagination is very important here. I mean, if we stop for a second, we realize right now our conversation is happening because our hearts are beating, our lungs are working. Everything's happening in utter darkness inside of us. Everything I see out my window, the redwoods, the Douglas firs, the bays, the madrones, all of that is there because of what's happening underground. What's happening in the darkness is making what's possible in the light. We tend to, as we said, make this binary system of up and light good, down and dark bad. And so part of our job is to begin to remember the holiness that dwells in the darkness. There's a wonderful line of Rilke who said, “And yet, no matter how deeply I go down into myself, my God is dark, and like a webbing made of a hundred roots that drink in silence.” So Rilke was somebody who really understood the holiness that dwells in the darkness. And so I read a lot of Rilke’s poetry, and I love the dark time of the year. It seems to be an encompassing space of quiet, you know, and maybe this is the space, again, going back to that idea of qarrtsiluni, that might actually foster our quietness and our deep listening.

I think when we get quiet, as you all know from your deep meditation practices, we can be informed by something larger than us. Larger than our stories. Larger than our wounds, larger than our conditioned fictions. Something fresh might actually come into our imaginal ground, and that's what I find faith in right now, is that we are susceptible, we are vulnerable, we are receptor sites for the larger dreaming of the planet. That's what I've seen over my forty years of practice and my work with many, many groups is that the earth is a dreaming being. And if we get quiet enough, we might be dreamt into some forms, some actions, some ritual practices that might actually help us repair the relationship between the human and the more-than-human world.

**James Shaheen:** Francis, you say that the Long Dark is the realm of the soul, of whispers and dreams, mystery and imagination, death and ancestors. So what do you mean when you talk about a soul?

*Life As It Is*

“Into the Long Dark”

Episode #50 with Francis Weller

January 21, 2026



**Francis Weller:** I know that's not a typical Buddhist term.

**James Shaheen:** Well, it comes up.

**Francis Weller:** What I mean by it is more a sense of how we experience something. So there is this corresponding relationship between ascension, which in my teachings and what I've learned is more associated with spirit, and the descent down into the vulnerabilities, down into our tenderness. You know, we talk about having a soulful conversation, and those are usually intimate conversations, right? There's a vulnerability that comes out. We risk revelation in those conversations. So what I mean by soul is more of a quality of how we see, encounter, and experience the world, that there is something else besides ascension and rising. There's actually something that takes us down. We call it depth psychology. We had a deep experience. So the directionality of soul is downward, and it takes us into what is most human, most intimate, and, in a sense, most common. It's the archetypal realm of what I call the commons of the soul. We all know loss. We all know tenderness. Hopefully we all know love. We all know those moments of susceptibility to our own humanness. So soul is more a directional reality. It's associated with beauty, with imagination, with ritual, with elders, with culture. It's the place where we meet the world in an engaged form. Hopefully that came across. That's a big question.

**Sharon Salzberg:** So you link the soul to the practice of deep listening, which does involve listening to others and to the earth itself. I'm also wondering if the soul is the place we find each other most profoundly. So how can we learn to listen deeply? And what space does that begin to open up?

**Francis Weller:** I think there's a tremendous anxiety around whether or not we are welcomed, whether or not we belong. So we tend to be preoccupied with self-presentation: How am I looking? How am I acting? Am I being appreciated? Am I being recognized? Am I approved of?

*Life As It Is*

“Into the Long Dark”

Episode #50 with Francis Weller

January 21, 2026



So, getting out of ourselves, there's a wonderful line by Robinson Jeffers that we must uncenter our minds a little, right? We must get out of ourselves just a little bit.

I remember in 2020 I was heading into bed. I was literally crawling into bed just before the election full of despair, despondent, and something literally turned my body around and took me to one of my bookshelves and reached for a book, and it was a collection of essays by Linda Hogan, who is a Chickasaw elder and writer and poet, a marvelous writer. And I opened the book to the chapter “All My Relations,” and I recognized that in that moment, I had forgotten all my relations. I had become so insulated and so isolated that my despair was actually a reflection of my disconnection. And so I began to remember my affiliations, my tentacles, my tendrils of intimacy with star clusters and moonlight and redwood and sorrel and salmon and everything around me. And my despair lifted almost instantly. So part of the work, I think, is also to come back into that wider communion, that wider engagement with the living world, because we do tend to get so insulated and anxious about how welcome I'm going to be. So to listen is actually an act of faith. And I believe you wrote about faith, did you not?

**Sharon Salzberg:** I did.

**Francis Weller:** Yes. Beautiful book on faith.

**Sharon Salzberg:** Thank you. And James and I actually watched those very same election results together until I went to bed very early.

**James Shaheen:** Right, Joseph and I hung in there for a while longer, but you know, I guess for me the opposite of listening is wondering about what I'm going to say next. But anyway, you describe listening as the art of reverence. So how do you think about reverence in this context?

**Francis Weller:** Well, reverence is that process that recognizes that everything has a subjective and interior nature to it, and our loneliness is in great part a forgetting about that kind of recognition of that truth. So we tend to objectify nature, or the world even. Relationships get

*Life As It Is*

“Into the Long Dark”

Episode #50 with Francis Weller

January 21, 2026



kind of caught in our own static interpretations. So reverence is very close to respect, and respect in the old Latin means to see again. So when I'm going to try to see something freshly every time, whether it's my wife or my friends or where I live, it keeps me in a reverential place of recognizing that every moment has an epiphanic quality to it. It can show me something, it can reveal itself to me, and I can reveal myself also to the world. So reverence, I think, is one of those essential values that in a commodified circumstance, we tend to forget. Everything becomes objectified and commercialized, and that's causing us a great deal of suffering right now.

**Sharon Salzberg:** You know, I find it so interesting that another discipline you described for navigating the Long Dark is restraint, which is so great and and so unusual since it runs so counter to much of our conditioning and cultural messaging. So I wonder if you can talk a little bit about restraint as a discipline and how it can be subversive and ultimately liberating.

**Francis Weller:** Well, to honor restraint means you're living in a relational field. I mean, if you look at the old fairy tales, the old myths for many cultures, particularly in the Native American cultures, their stories have a lot to do with practicing restraint, not taking too much. If we abuse the balance between us and the world, the animals will retreat, the game will disappear, the ground will go bare. So restraint is a value. I think it's the least developed spiritual value on the continent, basically. It has a lot to do with being able to trust that there is enough. It's also a pause between actions. So there's a spaciousness that comes with restraint, both from constantly being driven by a feeling of emptiness where I have to keep filling myself up, but it's also a way in which we allow other voices, other qualities to come forward.

What more can I say about restraint in these few seconds? It's just that moment of pausing, you know, of hesitation, of allowing another voice to come forward, of allowing another way of being to be recognized. I love the practice of restraint. It's not about withholding; it's learning how to hold. Restraint also has a lot to do with allowing something to ripen. We're so quick to reveal, to share, to speak, particularly in this 24/7 society we live in, which is always about

*Life As It Is*

“Into the Long Dark”

Episode #50 with Francis Weller

January 21, 2026



talking. I think I jokingly wrote that we suffer from premature revelation. You know, that we don't know how to allow something to warm and stay quiet and allow it to ripen over time. That takes the discipline of restraint. Don't share too much too soon. Allow it to gestate, allow it to cook and see what it wants to become.

**Sharon Salzberg:** I think it's so beautiful, because of course we tend to think of restraint as being oppressed and limited, whereas it is actually a very beautiful quality that liberates us.

**Francis Weller:** Yes. I mean, when you think about our society, which is always about acquisition, about gathering more, getting more, getting more, that insatiability has a lot to do with that feeling of emptiness in us, not in the Buddhist sense of emptiness, but in that sense of there's a gap, there's a hole, there's an ache in me that I have to fill up with specialness, with wealth, with power, with prestige. And all of those are kind of antithetical to the practice of restraint. So restraint, again, is not something that we're encouraged to even look at. In a consumer culture, it's like, what can I get? We do that in psychology as well. It's like, what can I get from this dream? It's always about colonization and acquisition rather than about trusting and allowing and coming again with reverence to what does this dream want from me, rather than what can I get from the dream? You know, what's being asked?

**James Shaheen:** Francis, you link restraint to humility, and you say that it brings us closer to the ground, and by that, I imagine you have in mind the etymological roots of the word humility. So what does the practice of humility look like?

**Francis Weller:** Hmm. Well, for me, it always has to do with following soul. I've spent my entire adult life becoming a good tracker. Where does soul take us in this moment, in this conversation, in our community, in our watershed? What is soul leading us towards? So rather than being self-driven, it's more of a soul response. There's a call and response that is based on not knowing. What is that wonderful Zen phrase? Not knowing is most intimate, right? That's a beautiful koan. So not knowing allows me and encourages me to become a good listener. Back to

*Life As It Is*

“Into the Long Dark”

Episode #50 with Francis Weller

January 21, 2026



what's being asked of us in this time, what are we being dreamt into? And if I'm leading the way, which is a very heroic approach, if I'm in charge and if I'm muscling my way through something, I'm probably not practicing humility. Humility is a beautiful value of recognizing our mutuality, that we're in this together, and we will only get through that in a collaborative sense of how do we support one another? How do we dream together?

**James Shaheen:** Yeah you say that not knowing situates us at the edge of discovery. Can you say something about that?

**Francis Weller:** Well, it goes back to that refrain of respect. You know, if I wake up in the morning and see my wife and I've already got a story about her, that this is who she is, it's a fixed fiction. And so to practice not knowing, like, *Who are you today? What did you dream last night? What mood did you wake up with? What creative, inspiring thought is coming into your being today?* So to have that is more of a sense of discovery, living on the edge of revelation, again, back to the humility and allowing,

**James Shaheen:** Right. The final discipline you mention is letting go, which you tie to the truth of impermanence, a favorite topic of ours. So how can letting go help us navigate the Long Dark?

**Francis Weller:** So much is—

**James Shaheen:** These aren't trick questions.

**Francis Weller:** No, no, I know. I mean, to let go really is an art form, isn't it? I mean, it takes tremendous practice about allowing things to be as they are. You know, I think that's the process of becoming an elder is that we slowly begin to lose our fight with life itself—you know, that I want life on my terms. Well, that doesn't go too far down the road. We end up having to live on life's terms. And so letting go of my fictions, my stories, my expectations and living with the absolute truth of impermanence, that nothing we have, nothing we love, nothing we want will

*Life As It Is*

“Into the Long Dark”

Episode #50 with Francis Weller

January 21, 2026



last forever. So we're living in that practice of letting go, whether that's a language that's been silenced, how do we let go of that? How do we let go of a child that's dying of cancer? I mean, fierce practices, aren't they? These are fierce practices of our own ripening. I know you all know much more about letting go than I do.

**James Shaheen:** No, I thought the book put it quite beautifully, and it is so central, you know, impermanence and letting things go. Sharon?

**Sharon Salzberg:** I was also so interested to find out that you say that one of the primary skills we need during this time is learning how to grieve. It was just last night that I was talking to a group of people, and somebody brought up a family situation with somebody seeming on the verge of death and the complexity of the relationships and holding on, and I described a similar situation I'd once witnessed, where I was so confused in a way by people's reactions when a friend turned to me and she said, “Don't you know? None of us know how to grieve.” And so it's really surprising in a way to have that notion because grief is not often presented as a skill or something to cultivate, and you very much did that. So how do you think about grief as a skill we can develop?

**Francis Weller:** It's, I think, something that has been cultivated through 300,000 years of our story. Not a single person in that history probably didn't know something about loss and grief, and culturally they responded to these losses intelligently, developing rituals and practices usually lasting over the course of a year or more. And so that's a skill to recognize how to approach this material, how to approach this territory. I describe grief, particularly acute grief, as if you have left the daylight world. You have left the ordinary world, and now you're in the shadow land. and it has its own customs and its own practices, again, practices of stillness, of listening, of quiet. We used to have armbands, and we used to dress in black. We used to have ways of showing the world that we're someone not quite in this world anymore, that we're in an alternate world where not much should be expected of me. I'm not going to speak the same way. I'm not going to move the same way. I'm going to be moving slowly. I'm going to be quiet. At times I'll

*Life As It Is*

“Into the Long Dark”

Episode #50 with Francis Weller

January 21, 2026



be screaming and hollering. But what I mean by this idea of learning it as a skill is approaching it more as an apprenticeship, as a long-term process, that you're not going to go to a weekend workshop on grief and master it. It's going to take years, just like a true apprenticeship. It takes years to learn how to be with this difficult guest, how to sit with it, how to engage it. See, grief doesn't want to just be endured, which is how we approach grief. How do I get to the other side of this? Grief wants to deepen us and take us into territories of soulfulness. And in that space of engagement, writing, dancing, drawing, dreaming, ritual, community, those are the practices that allow us to stay in touch with grief. And back to alchemy, the primary practice of alchemy was to learn how to keep the material and the vessel warm. If our grief is tended, it stays soft and fluid and continues to move. If we treat it with disrespect, if we treat it with suspicion, if we push it to the edges of our attention, it hardens and gets cold and congealed, and then we're left with a kind of weighted sediment of untouched sorrow, which is what comes in my office. You know, people come in saying, “I'm depressed,” but as you sit with them for any length of time, it isn't really depression; it's oppression. They're sitting with decades, sometimes generations, of untouched sorrow. And that weightiness oppresses us into a feeling of barely being able to touch the joy of life again. And that's what I see frequently in my work.

**Sharon Salzberg:** I am also curious, in your work, somehow people need some sense of inner resource, I think, to face the grief, to face the sorrow and so I'm curious about ways that you encourage people to finally stop avoiding that which is so difficult to be with. Is it through a sense of community, of not feeling so alone? What components exist there?

**Francis Weller:** I think grief has always been a communal process. It's never been a private issue, a private affair. I mean, if you think about it, we even go to private practice to talk about grief. We don't tend to talk about it communally, but the psyche recognizes the cadence and the rhythm that's necessary for grief work to be done. And that cadence was set up again through our long evolutionary story that we expect there to be many others, or at least a few others, witnessing our grief.

*Life As It Is*

“Into the Long Dark”

Episode #50 with Francis Weller

January 21, 2026



I write in my first book, *The Wild Edge of Sorrow*, that grief requires two things. It requires containment and release. And if I'm asked to do it by myself, I can't do both jobs. I can't both contain and release at the same time, so I'm stuck. We end up becoming permanent recycling centers for our grief, never really allowing it to move out of us, so we're waiting for that rhythm. I've seen this literally thousands of times in grief ritual gatherings. When the cadence is struck, the archaic psyche recognizes, “This is the rhythm I've been waiting for. I've been waiting to be side by side with others, all of us acknowledging the truth of what we all carry. And when that rhythm is struck, I only have one job to do, which is to release. I can stop being the containment field. I can actually move into release.” And in a healthy culture, that release is happening regularly, not just once a year, which is oftentimes what we get at best here, but to actually have it happening weekly or monthly. That's what keeps a culture sane, and it keeps the people present.

Part of what I love about grief work, and I know this is a big issue in Buddhism, is how do we get present? Much of the time we're facing our past and our generation's past, and we never really get to be in this moment. Grief work seems to me to be one of the ways I actually get to be current in many senses of that word—in the electricity of life, in the flow of life, and in this present moment. You know, that's what I've seen so much coming out of grief work.

**Sharon Salzberg:** So, as you say, ritual feels like a fundamental aspect in this work, and I wonder if you can say more about ritual.

**Francis Weller:** Well, ritual is that invitational space that we create intentionally. It's designed to help extend a pitch into the other world, into the sacred. In other words, the idea was that much of this work is dependent upon something larger being part of our experience. So we enter into ritual space to become, as Joseph Campbell said, transparent to the transcendent so that our relationship isn't just based on what I know or my skills or my strategies, but I enter into a space that's potent enough that allows me to become deranged. And I use that word very specifically: You don't want to come out of the ritual the same as you went into it. You want to be altered in

*Life As It Is*

“Into the Long Dark”

Episode #50 with Francis Weller

January 21, 2026



both senses of that word too. We want it to reshape us, to dislodge. I mean, meditation is a ritual practice in a sense that helps and is designed to dislodge stories and fictions and ideologies to create a sense of spaciousness and presence.

So what I love about ritual is that it has that capacity to generate enough intensity and enough heat to shake things loose, to make it possible for some new iteration of soul, of self, to come forward. And that's always exciting to me. And I've seen that again and again, and I know you have also, just how it is when you get through that ritual process. The look on the face is radically altered. They're different by coming into that space of the unencumbered heart, the body that feels lighter and more open to connection.

**Sharon Salzberg:** Well, another word that can be seen from different angles or with different meanings is center or uncenter, which you used before. And I found that really fascinating too, because usually in a different context, we talk about centering as a good thing. You know, like getting more collected, getting more grounded, having a sense of purpose, understanding, what we really want in different situations. But you were using it in a way of self-preoccupation or feeling like we are the center of the universe in some way, and I really appreciated that because I tell the story a billion times about being stuck in traffic once driving with a friend and we were complaining bitterly about the traffic when my friend turned to me and said, “Well, we are the traffic too, you know.” And I thought, oh, they're probably complaining about us. And I realized that before she said that I had a sense of being in the center of the universe, like, it's my road, and you people are in the way, you're interlopers, and hurry up. You're slowing me down. Whereas when she said that, that sense of center and margin dropped away and it's like we were all the traffic, which was true. So I really took note of your saying it in that way. And you say that ritual can help uncenter the human and reconnect with the earth, so can you describe that?

**Francis Weller:** Well, in that same principle of entering into a space of derangement, it also loosens the tightness of our identity so we can actually begin to feel our affiliations to the green world, to the imaginal world, to the cosmological world, to the stone world. We can begin to feel

*Life As It Is*

“Into the Long Dark”

Episode #50 with Francis Weller

January 21, 2026



that what we actually live in is a multicentric cosmos, that everything is a point of dreaming. When I am so self-centered, I lose that relational field, or I can lose that relational field. And so what ritual does, what these practices do is remind us that we live in a multicentric cosmos. You know, everything's a point of dreaming. I think it was Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme who talked about the three principles of differentiation, subjectivity, and communion, that the cosmos is built on those three principles, that everything is different, everything is unique. Not everything in the cosmos is particular. Everything has an interior, and everything is drawn to everything else. Communion. So those three principles remind us that what we're actually living in is a multicentric, cosmological wonder. And when we can open that truth, when we can uncenter ourselves a little bit and come into that communion, our loneliness is dissipated radically.

**Sharon Salzberg:** I wonder if you can give us some examples of some of the rituals you've led and facilitated around the Long Dark.

**Francis Weller:** Well, we just did a really big ritual up in Minnesota in October. It was called Renewing the World.

**Sharon Salzberg:** Thank you for that. I mean, that's good.

**Francis Weller:** We're still here. So this first came to me, again, what I feel is rituals aren't made up. They're dreamt. They're received. So this image came to me in 2000 when I was teaching alongside Malidoma Somé. And this ritual came because I was also looking at how, particularly in northern climates, Northern Hemisphere cultures, frequently, there are rituals of renewal, that the earth is beginning to slow down, the game is getting sparse, days are getting shorter. We might need to do something to reanimate and regenerate the world. So I thought about that a lot, and what came to me was that we have to begin with a funeral. And so we dug a five-foot-deep pit and built a funeral pyre in there. And meanwhile, while one group was building that funeral pyre, another group was building an ark, and onto the ark, which was going to be carried

*Life As It Is*

“Into the Long Dark”

Episode #50 with Francis Weller

January 21, 2026



processionally at the night of the ritual, were being put all these clay figurines and carvings of things that are leaving the world: languages, cultures, species, glaciers, possibly democracy. My brother had just died. My brother-in-law had just died. So all of those were going into the ark. So on the night of the ritual, the ark was processed, the fire was lit, the ark was placed on there, and this conflagration was so powerful, so beautiful, and then around the berm of the earth, around that were all the men, there were eighty of us weeping about what's happening at this time in our planet. Then as that comes to a close, as the last person has stepped away from the grief root, the shrine, I say to them, “It's over. We've lost the earth. This is the last night we will see each other. You will not kiss your children again. You'll not see the sunrise; you'll not inhale the fragrance of rose. You'll never see your partner. This is it. We've lost the world.” And there's this look of stunned silence in the faces of the men. And then I realized when I first did this in 2000, that was just an imaginal exercise that came into my mind spontaneously. Now, in 2025, the reality of this possibility is much, much closer, that we may not have a living world at some point soon. I don't know. That's the not knowing part I'm counting on. So we end the night in silence, and I said, “The only thing left to do is to say goodbye to your brothers.” And then we went to bed in total silence with the instruction that if it's possible, we'll gather here at the bell at six o'clock in the morning in the dark.

So we all showed up in the morning. We were delighted by the mercy of the creator that we had another day. And then we walked down to the lake and scooped out the waters of the new life, the placental waters, the waters of our tears, the waters of the lakes and marshes and streams, the glaciers, the rainfall. And we processed back up to where the ashes were remaining from the night before, and we crawled through a little grotto that we built, and men also made offerings to gift to the earth in that morning ritual. So we fed her our affection and our apologies, and these offerings that we made, flowers, and then we closed her up, and then we took that water and we watered the seeds of the new life.

*Life As It Is*

“Into the Long Dark”

Episode #50 with Francis Weller

January 21, 2026



So that was one of the rituals that we've done lately. And that's an intense, beautiful ritual. Most of the time we just do our grief ritual gatherings and our gratitude gatherings, our renewing the world gatherings, our reclaiming gatherings. They're all designed to basically keep us in relationship to one another and basically to the watersheds that we're living in.

The grief ritual is usually a three-day gathering, and the first two days are loosening up the hard pack, because we are very tight. I know it took me three grief rituals before I shed my first tear. I was a well-packed white man—I knew how to hold on and be in control. And to lose control is something that's frowned upon terribly, but that's what we need to be able to do. So we spend two days writing and working in small groups leading up to the ritual itself. By that time, the cup is ready to be emptied by people in the room, and we build a beautiful grief shrine and people are encouraged and they go down to the shrine and they're always accompanied by somebody sitting behind them just witnessing what's happening for them, not interacting with them unless they want to be touched. But there's an invitation there to have eight to ten people by your side all grieving at the same time. I can't tell you how powerfully reparative that is. To come out of our insulation around our grief to actually grieve together is so healing, so reparative to the fiction of isolation and disconnection. So those are some of the rituals that we really do.

**Sharon Salzberg:** It's beautiful. This ritual reminds me of how you talk about initiation and how the soul responds to crisis by waking up to alternative modes of being, and not feeling so alone seems so important there.

**Francis Weller:** Oh, absolutely. I mean, if we use the imagery of initiation, the imagery has a lot to do with breaking open to the widest aperture of identity. So I am part moon, part cloud bank, part turtle, part salamander. I begin to remember through initiations my wider identity. So I become not a matter of altruism, that I care for the world, but a matter of identity. I am this world. This world is me. And we see this a lot in cultures where initiation is still alive, that they'll put their lives on the line to protect their watersheds, their rivers, whether it's from oil incursion or mineral rights or whatever. And again, it's not because they should. It's not out of

*Life As It Is*

“Into the Long Dark”

Episode #50 with Francis Weller

January 21, 2026



some moralistic ideal that they go out to protect the land. It's because that is their flesh, that is their blood, that is their being. They're one and the same. And that's so hard for our minds to get around. That's an abstraction for most of us. But initiation's deepest purpose is to prepare your affiliation and to ripen your affiliation with the surrounding land that you're part of. I remember writing once that initiation generates human beings who are more aware of responsibilities than rights, more aware of entanglements than entitlements. And if you look at the rhetoric in our culture right now in this continent, so much of the rhetoric is around rights and entitlements. And they're not bad things. Rights and entitlements are fine, but we have forgotten the other part of that equation. What am I responsible for? And what am I entangled with? Well, I'm certainly entangled with the Russian River. It's my watershed, and I can't treat that like an inanimate object. It's part of my lifeblood.

**James Shaheen:** Francis, you describe initiation as a contained encounter with death, in contrast to trauma, which you describe as an uncontained encounter with death. So what do you mean by that, and how can initiation help us process and heal from different forms of trauma?

**Francis Weller:** Every true initiation, particularly formal initiations, always brings the initiate to the edge of death. In other words, the psyche requires that kind of deep intensive encounter to realign itself with a deeper identity. And that's why the contained encounter was established by the elders, by the rituals, by the community, by the land, by the tradition, by the language, by the myth. All of those provided a containment field through which the initiates could enter into that ground and be held adequately to go under the fierce process of alteration of change. We don't have that so much anymore, and particularly in white Western society. But one of the things I wrote about, I think I said this in the book, is that initiation is not optional. You will be taken to the edge of your ripening somehow and in some way, and psyche will use whatever material has been given to it as the material to help ripen you. And trauma is frequently the thing that we encounter. It's some overwhelming emotional encounter, whether it's slow trauma, neglect, abandonment or whether it's intense trauma, abuse, violence, rape. These have a way of

*Life As It Is*

“Into the Long Dark”

Episode #50 with Francis Weller

January 21, 2026



activating something in the psyche, some radical change, but it's uncontained. So whereas initiation is breaking us open to the widest identity, trauma tends to collapse us into the singularity of the smallest identities. Survival. How do I not get killed? How do I keep breathing through this day?

What happens then in these uncontained initiations is that we remain suspended. We have suspended initiations, we never return. So I'm sure you're familiar with that term, the liminal phases that we all have encountered, right? That's that space between leaving something and not quite arriving at the new identity. In between, there is that process of dissolution where the caterpillar changes into gel. You know, it just dissolves completely. Well, in trauma, we enter into the liminal, but we frequently don't find our way out. So we become what I call liminoid. We're neither here nor there. We're not in our old world, and we haven't entered the new world. We're just kind of caught.

So one of the things we've been working with a lot is how do we finish the return? So initiations out there, initiations are happening through wounds, through illness, through divorce, through all the things that happen in our lives, through love. They could all radically change us, but how do we finish the initiation? Well, you're seeing a lot of work, particularly with veterans, where their stories are being asked to be told. They're being asked to share what happened for them. That's part of what happens when you come back from initiation. You're asked to share what happened to you. What did you encounter? And for those who went through trauma, they went through devastating times, whether it's a soldier or a child, the story has to be told. And then they need to hear from the community. We see you, welcome home. You have returned. You know, some signifier to the psyche. And again, I've seen this many, many times, when those signal frequencies are offered, some part of the psyche can say, done, I can move on. So that's a very important part of the work that we need to tend to collectively.

**James Shaheen:** You know, I was thinking of it differently, and so it's helpful to hear this. I think in the face of profound loss, as an example, we're tipped into that liminal space or into the

*Life As It Is*

“Into the Long Dark”

Episode #50 with Francis Weller

January 21, 2026



dark, and it's a very nourishing place and it's a very special place. I found that I returned too soon. I remember going back to work and thinking I've returned too soon. So in the absence of ritual, there's no marker. You know, it's just sort of like the container was a group of friends, but ultimately there was not a framework for holding this or a container, as you say. But you describe all of these rituals and practices as forms of medicine for the Long Dark. So how do you think about medicine in this context, and what are the medicines we need and find in the Long Dark?

**Francis Weller:** Yeah, that was, I think, the last essay I wrote for that collection. And partly from hearing from so many people in conversations like this or community gatherings, people are feeling overwhelmed, helpless, powerless. There's that sense that in the Long Dark, I'll just be consumed by it and have no real response to it.

Well, the fact of the matter is we have all kinds of medicines. The first one that I talk about is friendship. It's not going to be possible for us to stay open to this time in isolation. It's just too much. First of all, we're not designed for 24-hour trauma in feeds, right? I mean, you turn on your computer and it's the next shooting, the next news from the climate report, the next refugee situation. We're constantly being inundated. So when we're dealing with that alone, the psyche wisely shuts down and goes numb. So the very first thing we need is some sense of community around us. It can just be two or three friends, but some place to talk honestly about what it is you're encountering.

The second medicine that we absolutely need is imagination. Imagination doesn't get much attention in our collective, and in fact it gets kind of dismissed—oh, it's just your imagination. Carl Jung said that image-making is the primary activity of psyche. If you want to track psyche, track the image. We're most aware of it when we go to bed at night, when we sleep. The reality is that I don't dream. I am dreamt. I am part of a dreaming field. I'm just one of the characters in the dream, oftentimes, not even the most interesting one. But I'm in the dream, right? So we have the image, which is the phenomenon, the psyche-generating image. We have imagination, which is the skillset of how do I engage those images? And the third level of that is the imaginal. And

*Life As It Is*

“Into the Long Dark”

Episode #50 with Francis Weller

January 21, 2026



then when you look at traditional cultures, Indigenous cultures, they often talk about the dream time or the imaginal ground as the real world. And so that world, like in the Aboriginal cultures in Australia, for 75,000 to 100,000 years, they've been attending to the dream world through their rituals, their songs, their dances, their paintings. Those rituals are what keep the world alive. And so in the Long Dark, we're going to have to become more susceptible to the imaginal, to actually have practices of listening to hear what images are coming from that fertile ground.

The third medicine that we need takes us back to what I call the trail on the ground, our deep time ancestral inheritance, that even though we have very little recall of what our ancestral ground was about, we don't remember the rituals, we barely remember the language, sometimes we don't know the landscapes, we don't know where the ancestors are buried. But Jung also said, he called it the unforgotten wisdom at the core of the psyche, that there's something in us that still remembers maybe not the specific shape and form of the ritual, but that ritual is necessary. We may not remember the songs, but there's a felt sense that we need songs or we need potent and fertile stories to be told right now. So the deep time ancestral inheritance reminds us that that unforgotten wisdom is in us. And again, many times at the end of a ritual gathering, somebody will say something like, “You know, I've never done anything like that before in my life, but it felt oddly familiar.” So what is that thing that's oddly familiar? That we're designed for this work. There's many more medicines. I could go on.

**James Shaheen:** No, at the time I was experiencing loss, I said, “I don't know how to do this,” and somebody said to me, and it really did help, “This has been going on for millennia. Somewhere in you, you know how to do this.” And that gave me a confidence to sit there and just go through it. But anyway, there was no particular ritual. The priest showed up and we said no. You know, maybe we should have said yes. I don't know. But he said no. He said absolutely not. But anyway, Francis, anything else before we close?

**Francis Weller:** I just think the most valuable things right now are a sense of friendship and community, a trust in the dream process, that we can open up and be informed by what we need

*Life As It Is*

“Into the Long Dark”

Episode #50 with Francis Weller

January 21, 2026



right now, of how to respond to the Long Dark and to become more trusting and faithful to the experience of loss, because that's going to be, as I wrote in this essay for Duane Elgin's book, *Choosing Earth*, grief will be the keynote for the foreseeable future. And so we either become skillful at being able to stay present to that, or we will not be able to stay in love with this world, as our beloved Joanna Macy said. You know, that's the broken heart that can contain the whole universe, and it may be that grief is what saves our ass right now. It may be that our tenderness, our felt sense of loss for this beloved, beleaguered earth is what gets us to participate in her dreaming. So that's what I would hope.

**James Shaheen:** Well, thank you Francis Weller. It's been a pleasure. For our listeners, please pick up a copy of *In the Absence of the Ordinary*, available now. We like to close these podcasts with a short guided practice, so I'll turn it over to you, Francis.

**Francis Weller:** Thank you. First of all, thank you both for sharing this time with me and asking beautiful questions and hopefully responding with something that will feed the community. The exercise or the little practice that I'm going to share comes out of that moment I spoke about, about getting into bed and being turned around and coming to that remembrance of all my relations.

So I just invite you to close your eyes for a moment, all of you who are listening, and just drop into a possibility that in this moment, there's nothing you have to do, there's nothing you have to accomplish, that these next few breaths are simply an invitation to presence. And as you're dropping into that space, allow yourself to begin to recall all that you love.

Imagine sending a tendril, a filament of your love to everything that's coming to your mind. It may be a partner or a child. It might be a particular place or a beloved animal, a friend, or your community. Just extend it out to the trees, to whatever it is that you love. Let those filaments extend out and touch all that you love and feel the reality of this affection.

*Life As It Is*

“Into the Long Dark”

Episode #50 with Francis Weller

January 21, 2026



Now, for a moment, just allow all those that love you, all the things that love you, feel and receive the filaments of affection coming from them, family and friends, the land around your home, the color, the daylight. Just feel yourself receiving those filaments of love. And just for a moment, allow your in-breath to be receiving love and your out-breath to be acknowledging all that you love. Breathing in, I am loved; breathing out all that I love. And just see if you can allow this cadence of in and out to become a place of support and encouragement, a place of fortification, so that day by day we may be the ones who say yes to receiving the dream and offering our medicine to our beautiful, tender world. And so when you're ready, you can just softly let this breathing continue and your eyes open and welcome back.

**James Shaheen:** Thank you so much, Francis, and thank you, Sharon.

**Sharon Salzberg:** Yes. Thank you.

**Francis Weller:** Thank you, James. Thank you, Sharon.

**James Shaheen:** Great to have you.

**Francis Weller:** Pleasure to be here with you.

**James Shaheen:** You've been listening to *Life As It Is* with Francis Weller. To read an excerpt from Francis's book, visit [tricycle.org](https://tricycle.org). Tricycle is a nonprofit educational organization dedicated to making Buddhist teachings and practices broadly available. We are pleased to offer our podcasts freely. If you would like to support the podcast, please consider subscribing to Tricycle or making a donation at [tricycle.org/donate](https://tricycle.org/donate). We'd love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at [feedback@tricycle.org](mailto:feedback@tricycle.org) to let us know what you think. If you enjoyed this episode, please consider leaving a review on Apple Podcasts. To keep up with the show, you can follow *Tricycle Talks* wherever you listen to podcasts. *Tricycle Talks* and *Life As It Is* is produced by Sarah Fleming and the Podglomerate. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!