



# ILLUMINATING THE THRESHOLD

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*A Retreat for Women's Christmas*

JAN L. RICHARDSON

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*This Women's Christmas Retreat  
is dedicated to Brenda Lewis,  
who has provided such good company  
on so many thresholds  
and counted every one.*

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## PRELUDE

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### *Blessing the Threshold*

This blessing  
has been waiting for you  
for a long time.

While you have been  
making your way here  
this blessing has been  
gathering itself  
making ready  
biding its time  
praying.

This blessing has been  
polishing the door  
oiling the hinges  
sweeping the steps  
lighting candles  
in the windows.

This blessing has been  
setting the table  
as it hums a tune  
from an old song  
it knows,  
something about  
a spiraling road  
and bread  
and grace.

All this time  
it has kept an eye  
on the horizon,  
watching,  
keeping vigil,  
hardly aware of how  
it was leaning itself  
in your direction.

And now that  
you are here  
this blessing  
can hardly believe  
its good fortune  
that you have finally arrived,  
that it can drop everything  
at last  
to fling its arms wide  
to you, crying  
*welcome*  
*welcome*  
*welcome.*

# ILLUMINATING THE THRESHOLD

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## *An Introduction*

There is a custom, rooted in Ireland, of celebrating Epiphany (January 6, which brings the Christmas season to a close) as Women's Christmas. Called *Nollaig na mBan* in Irish, Women's Christmas originated as a day when the women, who often carried the domestic responsibilities all year, took Epiphany as an occasion to celebrate together at the end of the holidays, leaving hearth and home to the men for a few hours. Celebrated particularly in County Cork and County Kerry, the tradition is enjoying a revival.

Whether your domestic commitments are many or few, Women's Christmas offers a timely opportunity to pause and step back from whatever has kept you busy and hurried in the past weeks or months. As the Christmas season ends, this is an occasion both to celebrate with friends and also to spend time in reflection before diving into the responsibilities of this new year.

The Women's Christmas Retreat is offered in that spirit. Within these pages is an invitation to rest, to reflect, and to contemplate where you are in your unfolding path. Mindful of those who traveled to welcome the Christ child, we will turn our attention toward questions about our own journey.

## WISE WOMEN ON THE THRESHOLD

Years ago, when I was first starting to discover the artist layer of my soul, I sat down to create a collage to use as a greeting card for Epiphany. I found myself imagining who else might have made the journey to welcome Jesus. A trio of women began to take shape, carrying their treasures to offer the child. I named the piece *Wise Women Also Came*.

Years have passed since those wise women showed up in my life. My style as an artist has changed greatly, and the journey has taken me across much terrain—some that I had dreamed of, some that I never could have anticipated even in dreams. This image of the wise women continues to travel with me, posing questions that linger with me still.

This year, many of the wise women's questions have had to do with thresholds, those between-places we experience when we have left something that was familiar—a place, a person, a job, a way of being—but the way ahead has not become clear. The threshold has been a recurring image for me, a resonant metaphor as I navigate my life as an artist, writer, and minister.

This past year has brought the most consuming threshold I have ever encountered. At the beginning of Advent 2013, my husband and partner in ministry, Garrison Doles, died unexpectedly, several weeks after experiencing complications during what we had anticipated would be routine surgery. Gary's death propelled me onto a heartrending threshold that has also been marked by grace and blessed by wise women and men who have accompanied me in this dark time.

As I continue to find my way, I am grateful for your company. Within the pages of this Women's Christmas Retreat you will find an invitation to contemplate the threshold—to notice where you are and to discern how you will enter the coming year. In this space between what has been and what lies ahead, may you have room to pray, to imagine, to rest, and to dream.

## NAVIGATING THE PATH

There are many ways to engage these reflections. You can set aside a day—on or near Women’s Christmas, or another time that suits you. You can spread out the reflections over several days or weeks. You might share the retreat with others—a friend near or far, a family member, a small group. You could get together with friends for a cup of tea or a meal on Women’s Christmas—or, again, whenever fits for you—and select just one or two reflections as a starting place for conversation together.

As you move through these readings, you will likely find that different readings invite different kinds of responses. For one reading, you might feel drawn simply to sit in silence or go for a walk as you engage the questions. With another reading, you might want to respond with words of your own: a journal entry, a poem, a prose piece, a letter, a prayer. A reading could inspire a collage. Or a drawing or painting or sculpture.

With each reflection, as you contemplate the words and the questions—including your own questions that these pages might prompt—I invite you to consider what helps you put the pieces of your life together: the experiences you carry, the scraps of your story, the fragments that seem jagged and painful as well as those that you think of as beautiful. What response—in words, in images, in prayer, in movement, in stillness, in conversation, in solitude—helps you recognize and honor the pieces and put them together in a new way, making your path as you go?

## BLESSING OF COMFORT, BLESSING OF CHALLENGE

Whenever I lead a retreat, I talk about how I hope to offer a space of comfort as well as a space of challenge. I hope you will find this kind of space within these pages. If you have arrived at this point in your path feeling weary and depleted, I pray that you will find something here that provides comfort and sabbath rest. At the same time, I pray that you will find something that stretches you into new terrain, that invites you to think or move or pray in a direction that will draw you into some uncharted territory in your soul, and there find the God who ever waits to meet us in those spaces that lie beyond what is familiar, comfortable, and habitual for us.

In the Gospel of Luke, we read that on the night of Jesus’ birth, shepherds arrive at the manger with a story of angels who brought them astounding tidings of a Savior’s birth. Luke tells us that all who hear the tale of the shepherds are amazed. “But Mary,” Luke writes—Mary, who has journeyed so very far beyond her familiar terrain—“treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart” (Luke 2:19, NRSV).

As you engage this retreat, may you enter into a space where you can gather up the words, the stories, the fragments and pieces, the gifts and challenges of the past year. May you ponder them in your heart, and there find treasure to sustain you and illuminate your path. May you have comfort and challenge in good measure, and travel with wisdom through the year ahead. Know that I hold you in prayer and wish you blessings on your way. Merry Women’s Christmas!





*Crossing the Threshold*

## ON THE THRESHOLD

When my Advent book *Night Visions* was being prepared for publication, one of my astute readers, my longtime friend and seminary roommate Brenda, wrote on one of the manuscript pages, “Do you know you use the word ‘threshold’ 36 times in this book?”

I had not known this, but it was an early occasion of learning that the words that recur in my work are a good indicator of where I am in my life. I created *Night Visions* while I was preparing to move from congregational ministry into a new ministry as the artist in residence at San Pedro Center, a Roman Catholic retreat center owned by the Diocese of Orlando. In that time of passage and change, the book articulated and illuminated that threshold in my life in a way I had not anticipated.

Years later, I would write these words:

I am still fascinated by thresholds—those places we come to that lie between the life we have known and the life ahead of us. I am continually intrigued—and eager, and fearful, and amazed, and mystified—to enter into those spaces where we have left the landscape of the familiar, the habitual, and stand poised at the edge of a terrain whose contours we can hardly see or even imagine.

Whether we arrive at these between-places by design, by accident, or by the choices that others have made for us, the threshold can be a place of wonders. It can also be chaotic, discombobulating, and even terrifying. Yet a threshold, chosen or otherwise, is a place of wild possibility. A threshold invites and calls us to stop. To take a look around. To imagine. To dream. To question. To pray.

Writing those words, just a year before Gary’s death, I could hardly have imagined the threshold I am living on now. Nothing prepared me for it, or for how very unfamiliar this terrain would be. Every day I wake up in a world that feels foreign to me. Yet I hold onto what rings true in those words that I wrote. Even in heartrending grief, the threshold is a place of wild possibility. It is a place where I am learning, all over again, how to imagine, to dream, to question, to pray.

*Here on the edge of Epiphany and the new year, I am here to ask, what threshold are you on? What is the place where you are right now? If you were to look at the words that keep recurring in your life, or the images that keep returning to you, what would they say about this space in your journey? How might this be a place to imagine, dream, question, and pray anew?*

## BLESSING

Here  
at this beginning,  
be there delight  
or be there grief,  
may grace come  
to greet you  
and keep you company  
in the way  
you go.



*Changing Woman*



## CHANGING WOMAN

On the day before I moved out of the parsonage where I had lived during my first appointment as a pastor, I received a phone call from a pastor in Pennsylvania inviting me to speak at a retreat the following spring. “We’re thinking of doing something on the theme of women and change,” she said. “Would you be interested?” I laughed, telling her that she had found me in the midst of packing up my house and that I figured I could find something to say about women and change.

This image emerged as I thought about the upcoming retreat and about the changes that had taken place in my own life. As I worked at my drafting table, I thought, too, of the Navajo legend of Changing Woman. Daughter of Earth and Sky, raised by First Man and First Woman, Changing Woman is the creator of the Navajo people. Renewing her youth as the seasons unfold, she does not fear change but draws on its power as it cycles within her.

Many seasons have passed since then, and I finally feel that my soul has mostly caught up with the deep changes these seasons have brought. I have navigated the risks involved in moving into a ministry beyond the local church and have settled well into the rhythms of this new life at San Pedro Center. After a year of living in the cabin at San Pedro, I moved into a nearby studio apartment. In the autumn I entered a new relationship, and I continue to marvel at the wonder and challenge of sharing the path together.

In her book *The Mother’s Songs*, Meinrad Craighead writes, “Revolving at her own center, Changing Woman unwinds the incalculable curvatures of time, calling the minutes and months, naming the seasons and years to measure her turnings. Her unity is perceptible in the two moving points of our own spiral dance in time: the journey evolving outward, the search involving inward.” I think of an image from a postcard that Elizabeth Johnson includes in her book *She Who Is*. The picture depicts a Mexican woman spinning cotton into thread. On the back of the postcard, the sender wrote, “This is a wonderful image of God, no? I think we are neither in the raw cotton or the thread, but in the twirling.”

And so we twirl in the spiraling seasons, held by the God who is nexus and source and who roots us in the midst of all our changes.

*How is change making itself known in your life? Is there something new you are seeing in yourself as you respond to these changes? Is there something new you are seeing in God? What do you need as you navigate these changes? Who could help?*

## BLESSING

In my turning  
and returning,  
take me in  
and let me go.

At the still point  
of the spiral,  
draw me close  
and send me forth.

At the center  
of the spinning,  
root me deep  
and set me loose.

In the passage  
of the seasons,  
hold me fast  
and set me free.



*The Cave of the Heart*

## IN THE CAVE OF THE HEART

Journeying into and back out of the cave of the heart is a journey of initiation. What gestates within us during seasons of introspection eventually comes to birth and leads us out of the cave, drawing us across a threshold. In my seasons of reflection and introspection, I have learned that I cannot create without being recreated myself. The process changes me, calls forth things from me that I didn't always know were there, leads me to passages and to places I had not anticipated. We who give birth—to children, to dreams, to ideas, to relationships and new ways of living—are ourselves born and reborn as we join in the ongoing cycle of creation.

Many of us live in communities that give little attention to rites of passage, and so we sometimes find ourselves ill equipped to cross the thresholds that appear in our lives: coming of age, leaving home, claiming or changing vocations, entering or leaving relationships, weathering the deaths of loved ones, preparing for our own death, and the myriad other changes that hold the possibility of rebirth.

In her book *A Circle of Stones*, Judith Duerk asks, "How might your life have been different if there had been a place for you...?" A place to be among women, a place to hear their stories, to receive the generations of wisdom, to honor your body and its cycles, a place where, in time, you would take your place in the circle? Whatever passages we have failed to honor in the past, we can still become intentional about those that lie ahead. Drawing on the wisdom gathered from our introspection, we can emerge from the cave prepared for a new season, a new turn in the spiral.

*The "cave of the heart" is a way of describing that place where, even for some small space of time, we can turn inward and pay attention to what is stirring within us. How do you find or create this kind of space? Are there practices, people, or places that help you listen to your life in a way that enables you to return to the world with renewed vision?*

### BLESSING

What we choose changes us.  
Who we love transforms us.

How we create remakes us.  
Where we live reshapes us.

So in all our choosing,  
O God, make us wise;

in all our loving,  
O Christ, make us bold;

in all our creating,  
O Spirit, give us courage;

in all our living  
may we become whole.





*Ceremony*

## CEREMONY

Sometimes the changes in our lives beg for recognition. Our initiations are occasions that give us the opportunity to take the pieces we accumulated in a season of living—pieces that may be beautiful or broken or some of both—and to gather them up in a fashion that seeks to make some sense of their presence, to incorporate them into the pattern of our lives.

I think of the years I spent as the artist in residence at San Pedro Center. The first year, I lived on the property in a small cabin by the lake. There wasn't much ritual involved when I moved there (except for a pair of sandhill cranes standing welcome in the driveway when we pulled the moving truck into the entrance, which felt like some kind of blessing). Years later, though, when I left my position there and took up my new role with The Wellspring Studio, it felt like an occasion that needed some ceremonial action. The transition had been a lengthy and convoluted process, in part because it took a while to do the institutional sorting-through of the form that my new ministry would take. With all that past, it was time to celebrate—and to remember.

One afternoon I gathered at the retreat center with three friends who had been sustaining companions throughout the sometimes complicated and sometimes wondrous (and sometimes both) turnings of my path within and beyond that place. I shared some reflections with them about what I had found there and who I had become because of it. I talked about how I had imagined having a Big Ritual to mark what a huge transition had taken place for me in leaving and what a deep transformation had occurred within me over the course of my years there. But as the day of celebration approached, I realized that I didn't need a Big Ritual. Having already put copious amounts of energy into getting to this point in my life, I found that I needed a ritual that would be simple. Gathering together, telling some stories, and being in that landscape: this would be ceremony enough.

And, of course, we had cake.

It was an occasion of learning that rites of passage don't have to be lavish affairs. Each passage asks something different of us. They do, however, ask. Our passages invite us to consider how we move from one part of our life to another, how we can do so with mindfulness, how we will gather up the pieces and fashion from them a doorway, a path.

*How do you mark the beginnings and endings of the lifetimes that unfold within your life? How would you describe the different selves you've been across the years? Did you know when you were passing from one phase of your life into another? Have you gone or are going through or are anticipating a change that could benefit from some ritual attention? How might you set aside a time, alone or with friends, in order to remember and to mark the passage—to name who you have been and who you are becoming?*

## BLESSING

In the beginning,  
in the ending,  
in the beginning again:  
may the God of the threshold  
encompass you in every turning.





*Having Taken the Fruit*

## THE FIRST QUEST

*So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food,  
and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was  
to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate.*

– Genesis 3:6

In my mind's eye I keep seeing Eve's gesture of reaching for the tree, fingers not yet grasping the fruit but poised. I find myself wondering, *What hunger gave rise to this?* What told her that Eden wasn't enough, that the landscape and the life she knew would not suffice? What hunger lay beneath her hunger?

In her commentary on this story, Susan Niditch writes that “to be the curious one, the seeker of knowledge, the tester of limits is to be quintessentially human—to evidence traits of many of the culture-bringing heroes and heroines of Genesis.”<sup>1</sup> We are built to stretch beyond what we know, to search for what lies beyond our known borders. Eve's reaching for the fruit is the first quest. Within her gesture lies the impulse that would animate the restless searching of all the following generations.

In her desire, Eve commits herself also to the requirement of every quest: the experience of exile. We cannot stretch beyond ourselves and yet cling to what we have known. Reaching means abandoning the familiar landscape in which we live our days; if not physically departing, then shifting the patterns and habits that have defined our terrain. Once undertaken, it is a leaving that we cannot undo or unlearn. The road by which we set out is never quite the same one by which we will return.

This is, perhaps, the curse of each quest but also its gift: with every departure, a new world. And each time we cross a threshold or make a choice for something new, every time we reach for some piece of knowing to make it our own—there is the presence of Eve, in shadow. Reaching. Tasting. Beyond.

*So what are you hungry for? What do you desire, and what desire lies beneath that desire—or within it? What does your wanting teach you about yourself; about what you love, what you fear, what is possible? Where are you feeling inspired to reach, to stretch beyond what you have known? How might your hunger be a starting place for prayer?*

## BLESSING

May your longings lead you far  
and farther still  
toward the place where what you desire  
can be met only by God.  
May your hungering bring you home  
by another way.

## INTERLUDE

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### *Wise Women Also Came*

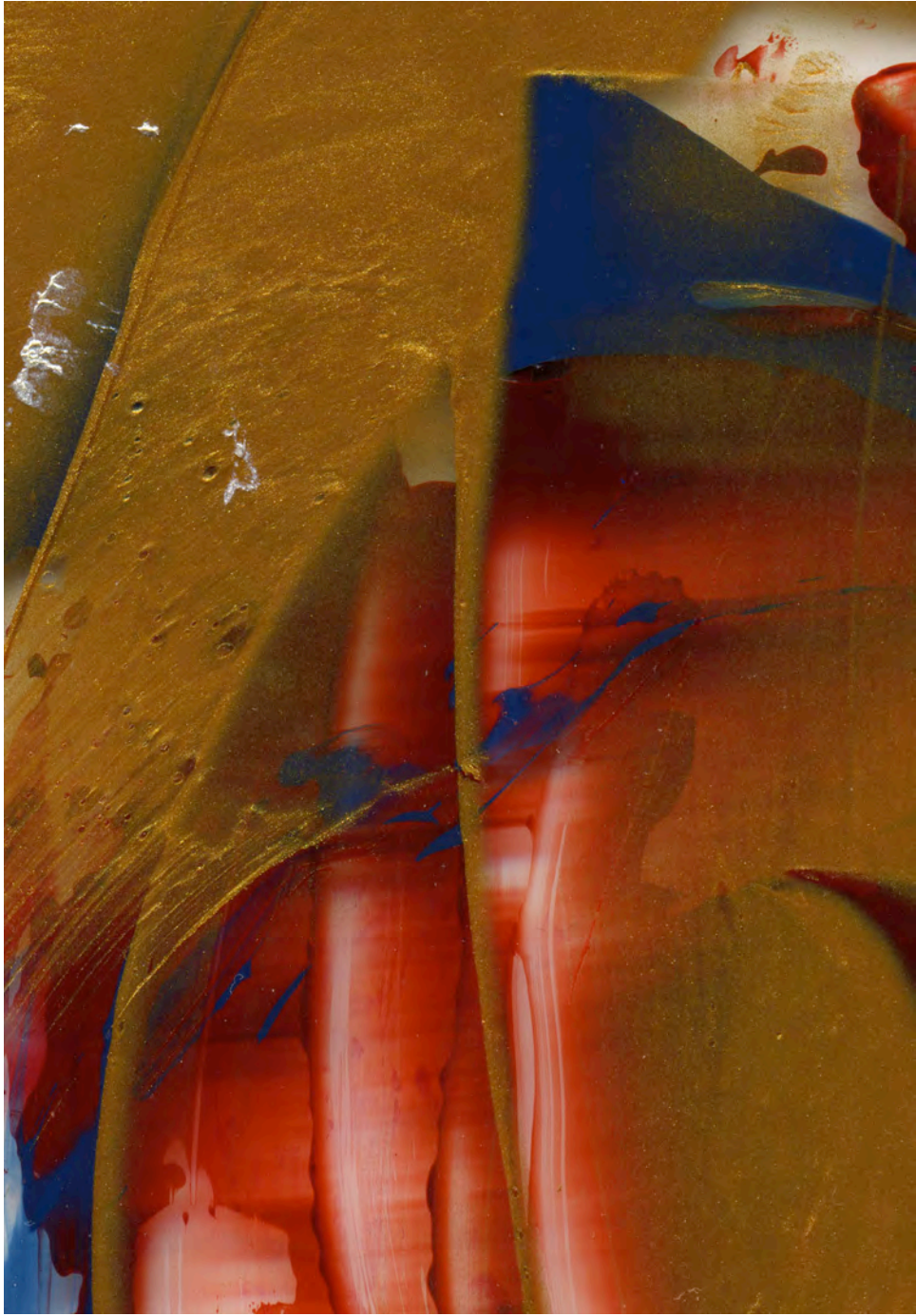
Wise women also came.  
The fire burned  
in their wombs  
long before they saw  
the flaming star  
in the sky.  
They walked in shadows,  
trusting the path  
would open  
under the light of the moon.

Wise women also came,  
seeking no directions,  
no permission  
from any king.  
They came  
by their own authority,  
their own desire,  
their own longing.  
They came in quiet,  
spreading no rumors,  
sparking no fears  
to lead  
to innocents' slaughter,  
to their sister Rachel's  
inconsolable lamentations.

Wise women also came,  
and they brought  
useful gifts:  
water for labor's washing,  
fire for warm illumination,  
a blanket for swaddling.

Wise women also came,  
at least three of them,  
holding Mary in the labor,  
crying out with her  
in the birth pangs,  
breathing ancient blessings  
into her ear.

Wise women also came,  
and they went,  
as wise women always do,  
home a different way.



*Threshold Gathering*



## FROM A LETTER TO A FRIEND WRITING A THESIS, WHO ASKED ME ABOUT ART AND FAITH IN MY WORK

The poet Jane Hirshfield has a wonderful essay in her book *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry*. The essay is titled “Writing and the Threshold Life,” but what she says about writers is often true of other creative folks as well. She offers the image of the monk—himself a threshold figure living on the margins of the community—who daily goes out with his begging bowl, receiving scraps of sustenance from the community in exchange for what he has to offer, including wisdom and prayers. Hirshfield writes,

Monks are recyclers, composters—out of waste and communal labor they create subsistence, beauty, and wealth. This is the work of the threshold: to step into places of seeming barrenness, emptiness, or neglect and bring back an abundance new-coined. For writers, as for monks, to take on this work often means leaving the mainstream in outward ways, abandoning the world of ordinary jobs and housing; the garret life is found up literal stairs as well as within the steep reaches of the psyche. In its deepest sense, though, threshold life for a writer has to do with a changed relationship to language and culture itself. In writing lit by a liminal consciousness, the most common words take on the sheen of treasure—transformed in meaning for the entire community because they have been dipped in the mind of openness and connection.<sup>2</sup>

I connect with what she writes about in a variety of ways, both in my vocation as a writer and also as an artist who works in a couple different media (and who, in my garage apartment, lives the “garret life” she describes!). The medium of collage provides a tactile way for me to experience what Hirshfield writes about—taking the scraps and, with the help of the Spirit, transforming them into “an abundance new-coined.” This is much the same thing that I experience the Spirit doing with my life—taking the bits and pieces and sometimes ragged-edged scraps, the light and the dark, the rough and the smooth, and piecing them together, transforming them, to create something new.

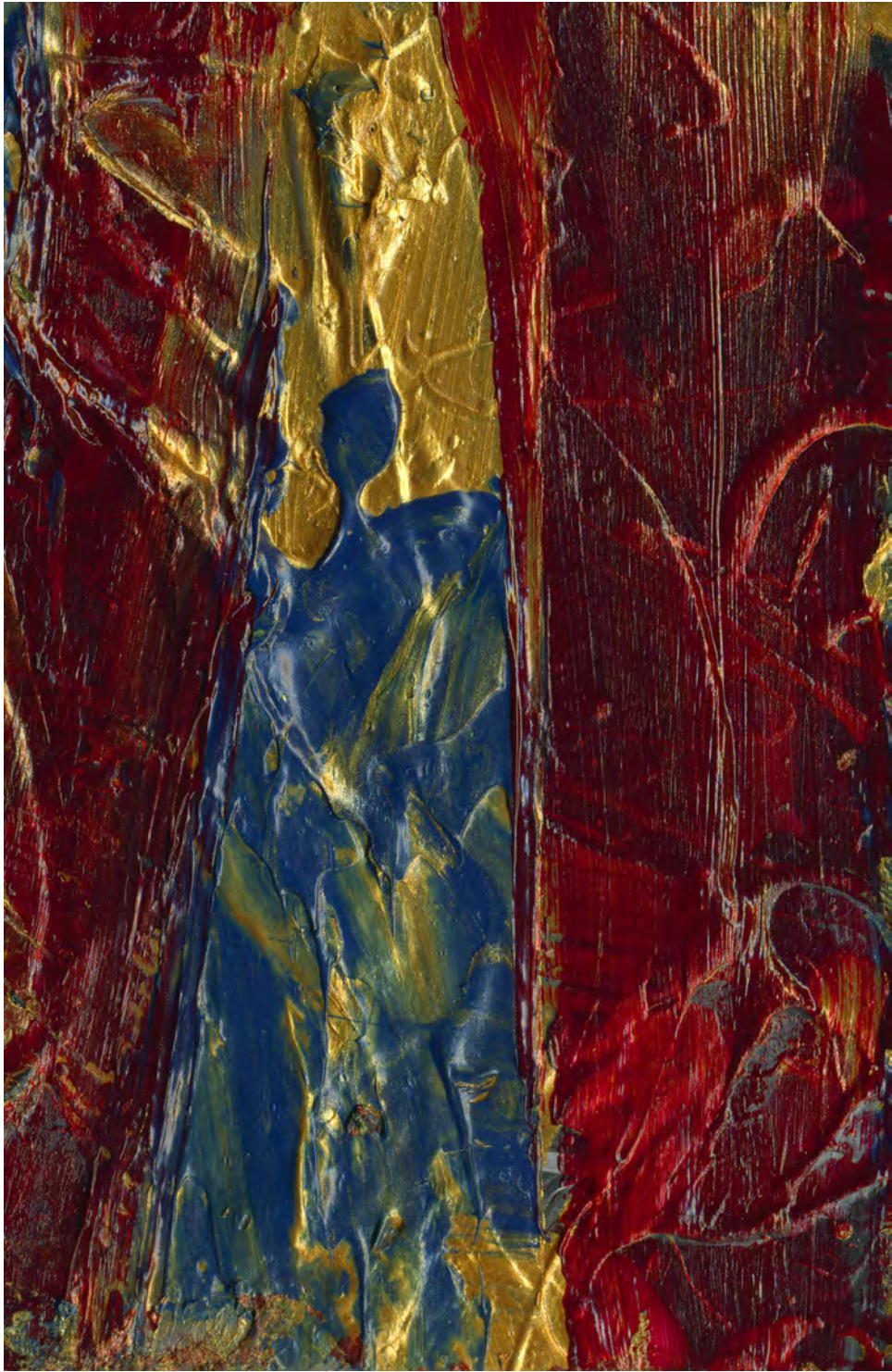
To cross through the doorway into that threshold space is its own act of faith. As you know in your own life, the creative crucible is not always an easy place to be. Our own layers get exposed in the creative process in ways that are wondrous and sometimes unsettling or scary. And certainly chaotic. I don’t think I could do it if I weren’t aware of the presence and sustenance of God in the midst of it all, if I didn’t feel called and companioned by the One who, in the beginning, hovered over the chaos and began to create from it. So even as art is for me a doorway into faith, the converse is also true. As I open to God’s presence, trust God’s call, and engage (and struggle) with the Spirit who hovers over my chaos and brings forth creation, then faith is a doorway into art.

*Do you have a practice in which you experience what Jane Hirshfield writes about—where the pieces of your life are transformed into “an abundance new-coined”? What do you notice as you engage this threshold work? How do you experience God in this crucible?*

### BLESSING

That we may live on the threshold  
where barrenness becomes beauty  
and poverty becomes plenitude.





*Are You Coming or Going?*

## A BLESSING IN THE DUST

*“But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you,  
go out into its streets and say, ‘Even the dust of your town  
that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you.  
Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.’”*

– Luke 10:10-11

Knowing when to stay, knowing when to leave: this is one of the most difficult invitations to discernment we will ever encounter.

There are times, after all, for leaning into the resistance that meets us; times when God calls us to engage the difficulty and struggle that will shape and form us in a way that ease and comfort never can. There are muscles—in our body, in our soul—that can be developed only by pressing through the resistance; not with pride, not with the utter conviction that we are in the right, but with the humility that enables us to summon our intention and will and open ourselves to the grace that carries us through situations we cannot navigate on our own. There is ground that becomes holy only when we remain long enough to see the blessing that can emerge from struggle, that shimmers through only after the dust the struggle kicks up finally begins to settle.

And then there are times for leaving; times when—as Jesus counsels his disciples—the holy thing to do is to shake the dust from our feet and leave behind a place that is not meant for us.

This blessing is for those times.

## A BLESSING IN THE DUST

You thought the blessing  
would come  
in the staying.  
In casting your lot  
with this place,  
these people.  
In learning the art  
of remaining,  
of abiding.

And now you stand  
on the threshold  
again.  
The home you had  
hoped for,  
had ached for,  
is behind you—  
not yours, after all.

The clarity comes  
as small comfort,  
perhaps,  
but it comes:  
illumination enough  
for the next step.

As you go,  
may you feel  
the full weight  
of your gifts  
gathered up  
in your two hands,  
the complete measure  
of their grace  
in your heart that knows  
there is a place  
for them,  
for the treasure  
that you bear.

I promise you  
there is a blessing  
in the leaving,  
in the dust shed  
from your shoes  
as you walk toward home—  
not the one you left  
but the one that waits ahead,  
the one that already  
reaches out for you  
in welcome, in gladness  
for the gifts  
that none but you  
could bring.





*A Spiral-Shaped God*

## THRESHOLDS NOT CROSSED

In Isak Dinesen's novel *Babette's Feast*, later made into a stunning movie, a powerful scene unfolds near the end. To the feast that Babette has prepared for the elderly sisters who helped rescue her years before, a general comes. As a young man he had fallen in love with one of the sisters, whom the father, leader of a strict religious sect, kept closely guarded. Moved by the remarkable feast and by this meeting that has taken place nearly a lifetime later, the general stands to raise a toast. He speaks of the choices we make in life and of coming to realize that everything returns to us, even what we, in our choosing, had to leave behind.

I'm not sure about that; the mystic in me believes in the final unity of all things, but the pragmatist in me believes that the choices we make mean that certain lives are forever lost to us. Yet I carry the words he speaks: "We tremble before making our choice in life, and after having made it, again tremble in fear of having chosen wrong. But the moment comes when our eyes are opened, and we see and realize that grace is infinite."

Sitting in this room, windows open to a cool day, I think of the choices I have made. Most of them, the big ones, I would make again. I don't know how or whether what I left behind will return to me, save in the guise of questions about whether I chose rightly. But in the unfolding of these days I gather to myself the grace, the infinite grace, that has come in the choices made along this spiraling path.

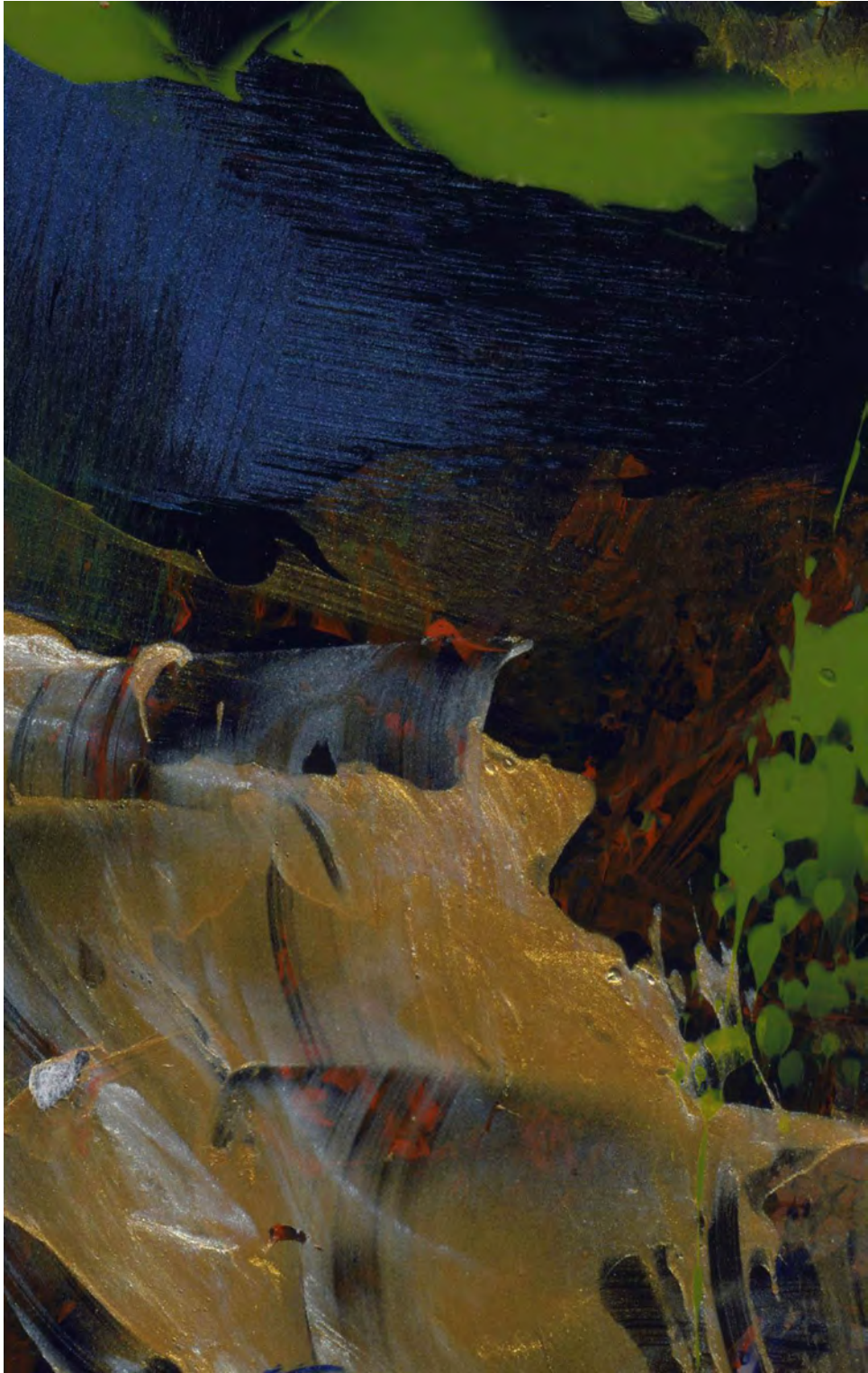
*Sometimes the thresholds we chose not to cross are as much in need of a blessing as the thresholds we did cross. Is there a threshold you decided against, or was somehow closed to you, that might be in need of acknowledgment and blessing? Is there something about that threshold that needs to be released so that you can enter the path ahead with a whole heart?*

## BLESSING

Thou who dwells at the crossroads,  
bless the choices gone before,  
the roads not taken,  
the thresholds not crossed,  
the lives not lived.

On the terrain that we have chosen  
may we travel lightly,  
shed of regrets  
and shorn of illusions  
of other landscapes  
that we reckoned  
and did not choose to cross.





*River of Life*

## IT IS HARD BEING WEDDED TO THE DEAD

For many years, I have loved the days of Halloween, All Saints, and All Souls. This trinity of days from October 31-November 2 is a sacred space in the turning of the year—what Celtic folk have long called a *thin place*, where past, present, and future intertwine, and the veil between worlds becomes permeable. I learned long ago that it's important to pay attention to what happens in these days. Mostly what happens is that the days offer a window onto my life—a perspective that, however subtly, shifts how I see my path. But sometimes these days offer a doorway, a new threshold that changes everything.

Gary and I began dating on Halloween, the eve of All Saints. As our life together unfolded, the sense of crossing a sacred threshold with him, of walking together through a door of mystery, wonder, and love, never disappeared.

It seems beyond belief that this year, when our church celebrates All Saints Day, Gary's name will be among those read in the litany of remembrance; that, as for each of the beloved ones who have died in the past year, a bell will sound for my husband, who has crossed a threshold that is beyond my reach. Yet the Feast of All Saints assures us that even here, in the depth of our grief and loss, there is a doorway, a place where the worlds touch.

As I approach this first All Saints Day since Gary's death, I am pressing my ear to that door. In the depth of my sorrow, I am learning that Gary and I still have thresholds to cross; that mystery and wonder abide, drawing us more and more deeply into the love that has little regard for matters such as death and time.

This is a poem that came in the early days of grieving, as I was first beginning to reckon with Gary's dying and with the love that has kept making itself known. I offer it to you as an All Saints gift, a talisman to hold onto as you remember your own beloved ones. May our love be more fierce than our grief, more enduring than our tears.

*With whom do you share the threshold? Who are you beloved dead, the ones who continue to inhabit and influence your life, your story, your choices? How do you tend the love, the grief, and the hope that live on the threshold between worlds?*

## IT IS HARD BEING WEDDED TO THE DEAD

It is hard  
being wedded  
to the dead;  
they make different claims,  
offer comforts  
that do not feel comfortable  
at the first.

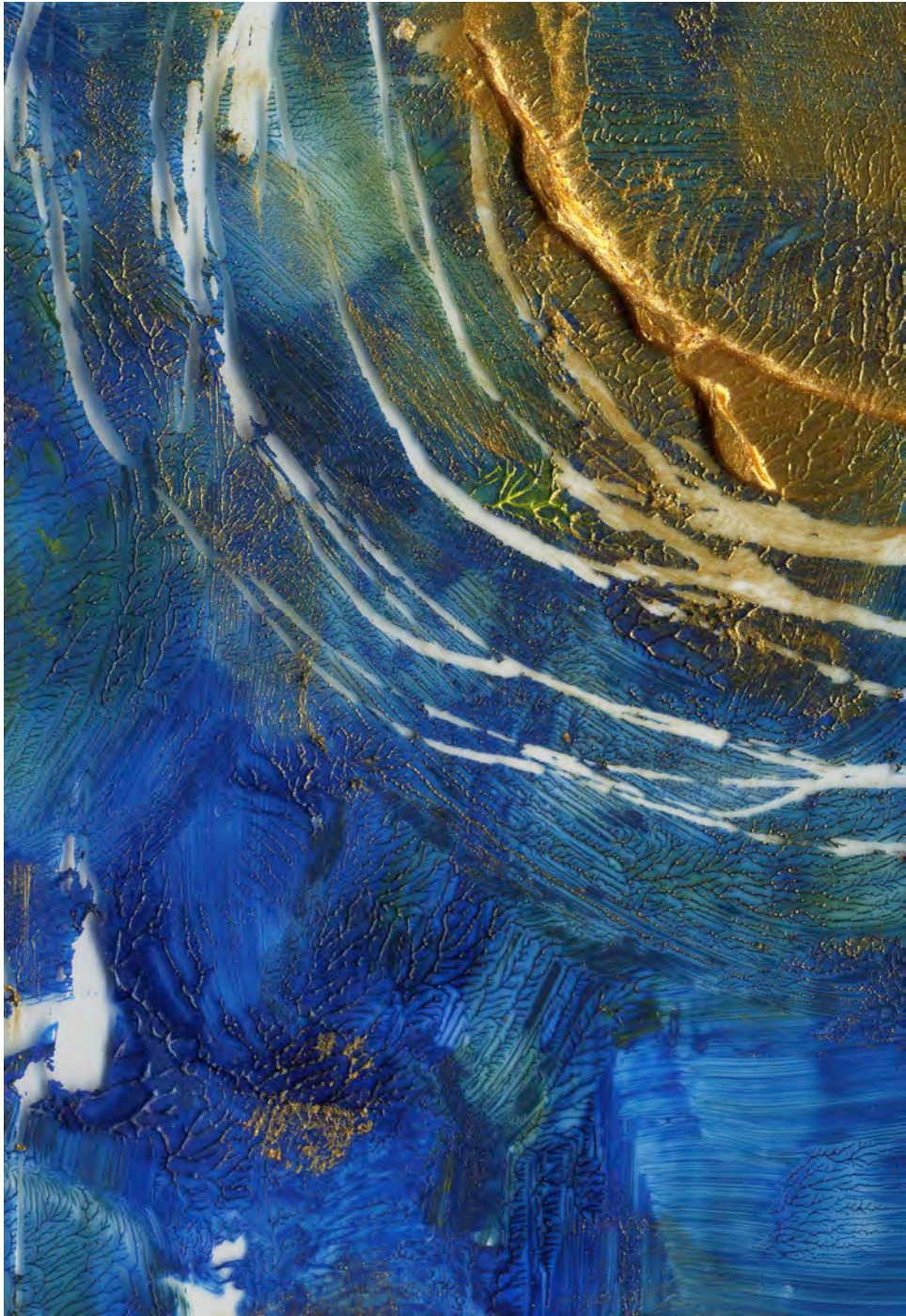
They do not let you  
remain numb.  
Neither do they allow you  
to languish forever  
in your grief.

They will safeguard  
your sorrow  
but will not permit  
that it should become  
your new country,  
your home.

They knew you first  
in joy,  
in delight,  
and though they will be patient  
when you travel  
by other roads,  
it is here  
that they will wait  
for you,  
here they can best  
be found

where the river runs deep  
with gladness,  
the water over each stone  
singing your  
unforgotten name.





*Christ in My Dreaming*



## SLEEPY ON THE THRESHOLD

*Keep awake!* is the cry we hear during Advent. Yet in any season, staying awake and aware does not mean being perpetually alert and on edge. Keeping vigil does not mean exhausting ourselves with our efforts to pay attention. Even as Advent calls us to be watchful, it invites us to consider just what it means to stay awake.

Some years ago I came across words by Thomas Moore that I often think of in Advent, as we watch and wait for the light that comes to us in the darkness. In this article from *Parabola*, titled “Neither Here nor There,” Moore writes about thresholds, those betwixt and between places to which our lives often lead us. He challenges us to rethink how we look for the insight that comes in those spaces, suggesting that perpetual consciousness is not the primary goal of the threshold.

Moore writes, “Religion is in the business of finding and constructing methods of getting sleepy, feeling lost, arriving and departing: pilgrimage, procession, fasting, incense, chanting, illuminated books. ... Often we attain thresholds best through inadvertence. If we want their benefits, we might not always aim for consciousness and awareness, but rather a gap in our attention.”

Thomas Moore is not arguing against awareness, of course; he is making the case that wisdom does not come solely in trying to bring our full consciousness to every single moment. There is a different kind of waking that happens in giving ourselves to practices that cultivate a mindfulness of mystery.

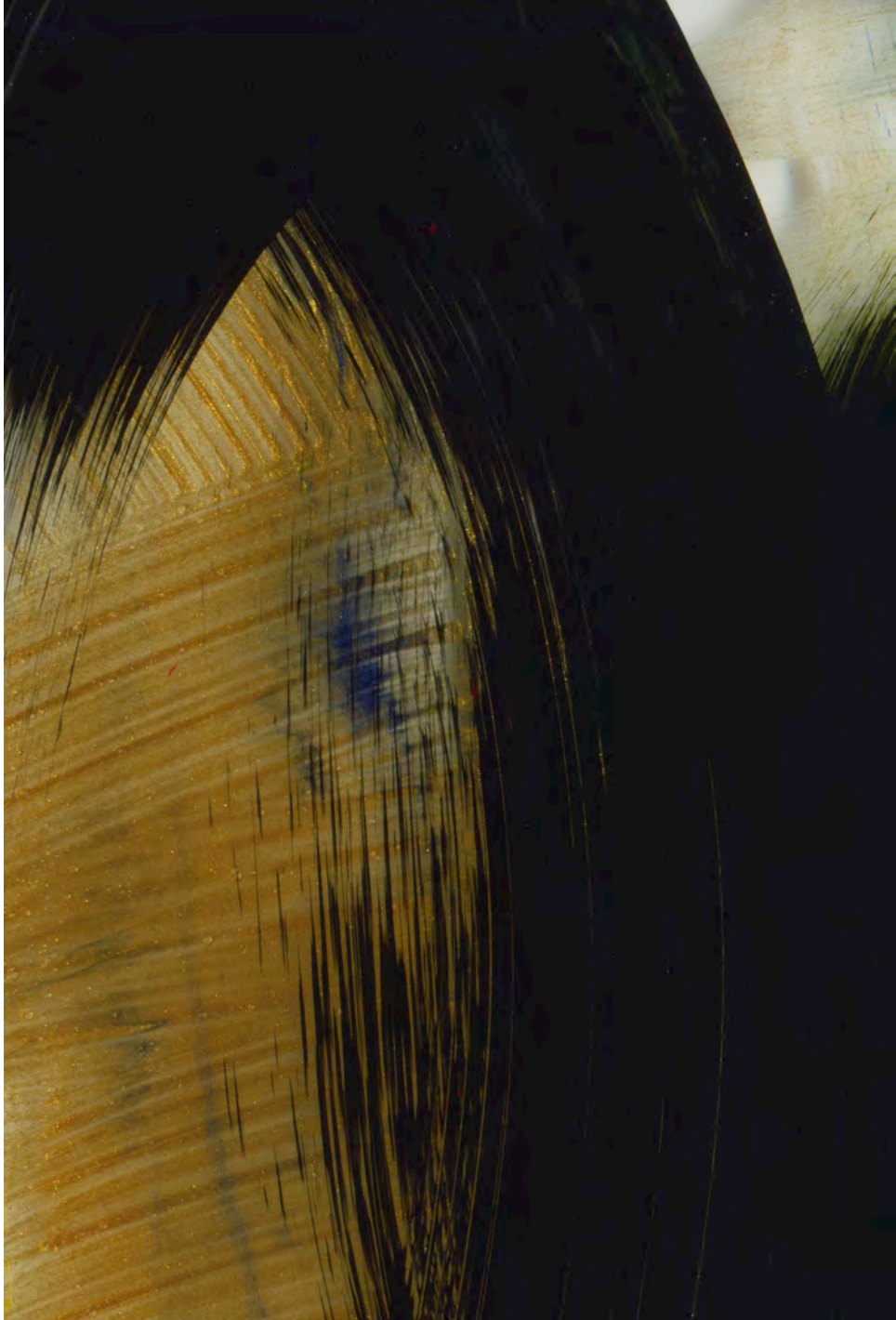
The scriptures in Advent are rich with tales that tell of insight received from unexpected, unlooked-for sources. Angelic visits, prophetic visions, life-altering dreams, mysterious travelers from the East: the story of Christmas hinges on people whom God approaches in all manner of ways, and who have the capacity to recognize and receive Christ when he shows up.

The people we find in the scriptures of Advent help us see that keeping vigil is not about constant alertness, nor is Advent about exhausting ourselves in looking for Christ or “doing” the season correctly. Instead, Advent asks us to be open to how Christ comes to us, not only in our ardent seeking but also in our resting, our sleeping, our dreaming, our creating, our playing—in whatever practices and habits enable a sacred gap in our attention: a space that leaves room for Christ to enter in.

*Thomas Moore’s list of practices for “getting sleepy” includes some of my favorites—for any season. I would add others: walking, lingering over a meal with friends, art, poetry. What would be on your list? What helps bring the gap in attention that Moore writes about—a gap that, paradoxically, can help us wake up? What gifts do you find in the gap?*

### BLESSING

Christ in your waiting.  
Christ in your resting.  
Christ in your sleeping.  
Christ in your dreaming.



*And Love Will Rise Up and Call Us By Name*

## THE MAGDALENE'S BLESSING

*Jesus said to her, "Mary!"*

– John 20:16

You think that you would give anything just to hear his voice again: the way his words resonated in your heart, your chest; the timbre of his laughter; how he would, in the midst of the most ordinary moment, suddenly break into song.

So when, in your weeping, you hear the sound of him speaking your name, you are stunned, then elated. You want to reach out, to gather into your arms the one you had thought forever gone.

What you do not know is that resurrection is not quite the same as return. You will learn, and soon, that it comes with a cost, that new life really means this: means new, means that it will not be the same as before, means that you cannot hold onto him, means that you will have to let go of everything in order to know him and love him as he is now. As *you* are now, yourself altered beyond imagining.

You will learn that the cost of resurrection is also the gift: that having to let go—*again*, but differently—will propel you into a life you could hardly have dreamed on your own. Into the aching and empty space of your outstretched arms, a whole new world will enter. And this awful hollowing inside your chest: this is your heart becoming larger. This is the space you will need in order to hold him now.

---

Several years ago, Gary and I flew from Orlando to Seattle to lead a workshop on “Illuminating the Edge: Threshold as Sacred Space.” I had Mary Magdalene on my mind as we arced from one corner of the country to the other. Watching the landscape shift and change below, I thought about the threshold on which the Magdalene found herself on Easter morning: how she had to choose whether to try to cling to what she had known, or to leave the garden and enter into Jesus’ call to proclaim what she had seen.

We are here because she chose to leave the garden and to tell the story.

In the coming year, what threshold will we dare to cross? How might Mary Magdalene inspire us? What grace do we need to ask for?

Here on this threshold, I offer you this blessing that came as I crossed the country with Gary. I give it to you with a prayer that this day, you will know the voice of the Living One who calls your name:

*Beloved.*

## THE MAGDALENE'S BLESSING

You hardly imagined  
standing here,  
everything you ever loved  
suddenly returned to you  
looking you in the eye  
and calling your name.

And now  
you do not know  
how to abide this ache  
in the center  
of your chest  
where a door  
slams shut  
and swings open  
at the same time,  
turning on the hinge  
of your aching  
and hopeful heart.

I tell you  
this is not a banishment  
from the garden.

This is an invitation,  
a choice,  
a threshold,  
a gate.

This is your life  
calling to you  
from a place  
you could never  
have dreamed

but now that you  
have glimpsed its edge  
you cannot imagine  
choosing any other way.

So let the tears come  
as anointing,  
as consecration,  
and then  
let them go.

Let this blessing  
gather itself around you.

Let it give you  
what you will need  
for this journey.

You will not remember  
the words—  
they do not matter.

All you need to remember  
is how it sounded  
when you stood  
in the place of death  
and heard the living  
call your name.



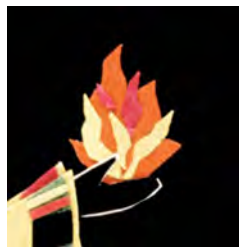
*Postscript*

A BLESSING BETWIXT

May you abide  
the places in between:  
the thresholds, the passages,  
the spaces of waiting  
and patience and preparing.

May you give yourself  
to the mysteries  
that move us from what was  
toward what is yet to be.

May you know  
the company of the angels  
who come only  
to those betwixt  
and who love  
the liminal places  
and the treasures  
that they hold.



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## Notes

1. Susan Niditch, “Genesis,” in Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, eds., *The Women's Bible Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 13.
2. Jane Hirshfield, *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry* (New York: Harper/Perennial, 1998), 209.



## ABOUT JAN

Jan L. Richardson is an artist, writer, and ordained minister in the United Methodist Church. With a distinctive intertwining of word and image, Jan's work has attracted an international audience drawn to the welcoming and imaginative spaces she creates in her books, online blogs, and public events. She frequently collaborated with her husband, the singer/songwriter Garrison Doles, until his sudden death in December 2013. Jan makes her home in Florida.

You can find Jan's books, artwork, and more at her blogs and websites:

*The Painted Prayerbook*  
[paintedprayerbook.com](http://paintedprayerbook.com)

*The Advent Door*  
[adventdoor.com](http://adventdoor.com)

*Jan Richardson Images*  
[janrichardsonimages.com](http://janrichardsonimages.com)

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