



THE PATH WE MAKE  
*by* DREAMING

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*A Retreat for Women's Christmas*

JAN RICHARDSON

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*Prelude*

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THE MAP OUR DREAMING MADE  
*A Blessing for Women's Christmas*

I cannot tell you  
how far I have come  
to give this blessing  
to you.

No map  
for the distance crossed,  
no measure  
for the terrain behind,  
no calendar  
for marking  
the passage of time  
while I traveled a road  
I knew not.

For now, let us say  
I had to come by  
a different star  
than the one  
I first followed,  
had to navigate by  
another dream  
than the one  
I loved the most.

But I tell you  
that even here,  
the hope

that each star belongs  
to a light  
more ancient still,

and each dream  
part of the way  
that lies beneath  
this way,

and each day  
drawing us closer  
to the day  
when every path  
will converge

and we will see the map  
our dreaming made,  
luminous in every line  
that finally led us  
home.

# THE PATH WE MAKE *by* DREAMING

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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, and who returned home by another way, we will turn our attention toward questions about our own journey.

## WISE WOMEN ALSO CAME

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 *dreaming*, in its broadest sense: the dreams that come by night, the dreams that come by day, the imagining and envisioning we engage in as we work to find and create our path.

My dreaming changed drastically when my husband died unexpectedly several years ago, just three and a half years after we were married. In our marriage and in our shared ministry, Gary and I had loved dreaming together. In the wake of his death, I had to learn to ask, *What do I dream now?* I am finding new dreams that have roots in the life I shared with Gary, making a way I had not anticipated, but one that holds its own graces.

This year's Women's Christmas Retreat invites you to ponder how we make our path by dreaming. With readings and images inspired by my dreaming both before and after Gary's death, the retreat offers a constellation of entry points into contemplating how dreaming happens in your life—in your sleeping, in your waking, and in the spaces where those realms intersect. Within these pages, may you find a welcoming space to pray, to imagine, to rest, and to dream anew.

## NAVIGATING THE PATH

There are many ways to work with these readings. 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 of the readings as a starting place for conversation together.

As you move through these pages, 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

I pray that in these pages, you will find a space of comfort as well as a space of challenge. If you have arrived at this point in your path feeling weary and depleted, I hope that you will find something here that provides comfort and 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 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, whose path has led her so far from home—*treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart* (Luke 2:19).

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 may you dream well this year. Know that I hold you in prayer and wish you blessings on your way. Merry Women’s Christmas!



*House of Dreams*

## THE HOUSE OF DREAMS

Once upon a time I lived down the street from a house with a name. Spelled out on tiles embedded in the white painted garden wall that fronted the street, its name always struck me as a poem when I would pass by on my walks. *La Casa de Sueños*. The House of Dreams.

I was remembering this house as we moved through Advent and Christmas, a season whose story hinges on dreams and visitations that occur by night and by day. Zechariah, Mary, Joseph, the Magi: sleeping or waking, these characters entertain strange and wondrous invitations and annunciations that draw them down a road they do not expect but one they are willing to travel. Each of them has left room enough in their lives and their hearts to recognize, receive, and respond to the life-altering messages when they arrive.

How do we do this in our own lives?

So many of us live in an overstimulated culture in which we allow the noise and press of our environment to drive us from the spaces where we can pause and listen to the dreams and messages that can come in both our sleeping and our waking. The schedules and distractions that disrupt our waking life often disturb and diminish our sleeping life as well, depriving us not only of rest but of dreams. The dangers of dream deprivation go far beyond simply losing the stories and images that might otherwise come to us in the dark; chronic dream disruption alters us, hollowing out the places in our brains and our souls that need what dreams bring.

In his book *Healing Night: The Science and Spirit of Sleeping, Dreaming, and Awakening*, Rubin Naiman challenges our tendency to dismiss the importance of dreams and the sleep necessary to receive them. “With the loss of our night dreams,” he writes, “we lose touch with our waking dreams, with the larger world of the creative, sacred, and imaginal process.” He writes also, “Dreaming is to waking as the atmosphere is to the earth.”

*What are your habits and rhythms of sleeping and waking? Do you leave space in your life for the dreaming, listening, and imagining that happen in both places? Is there healing or a shifting of your patterns that would foster your dreaming? What would it take for this to happen?*

## A BLESSING FOR DREAMING

This blessing begins  
behind your eyelids  
when at last  
you close them  
for sleep  
and all that you have seen  
in this day  
begins to play itself  
again.

You watch the scenes  
as they repeat themselves:

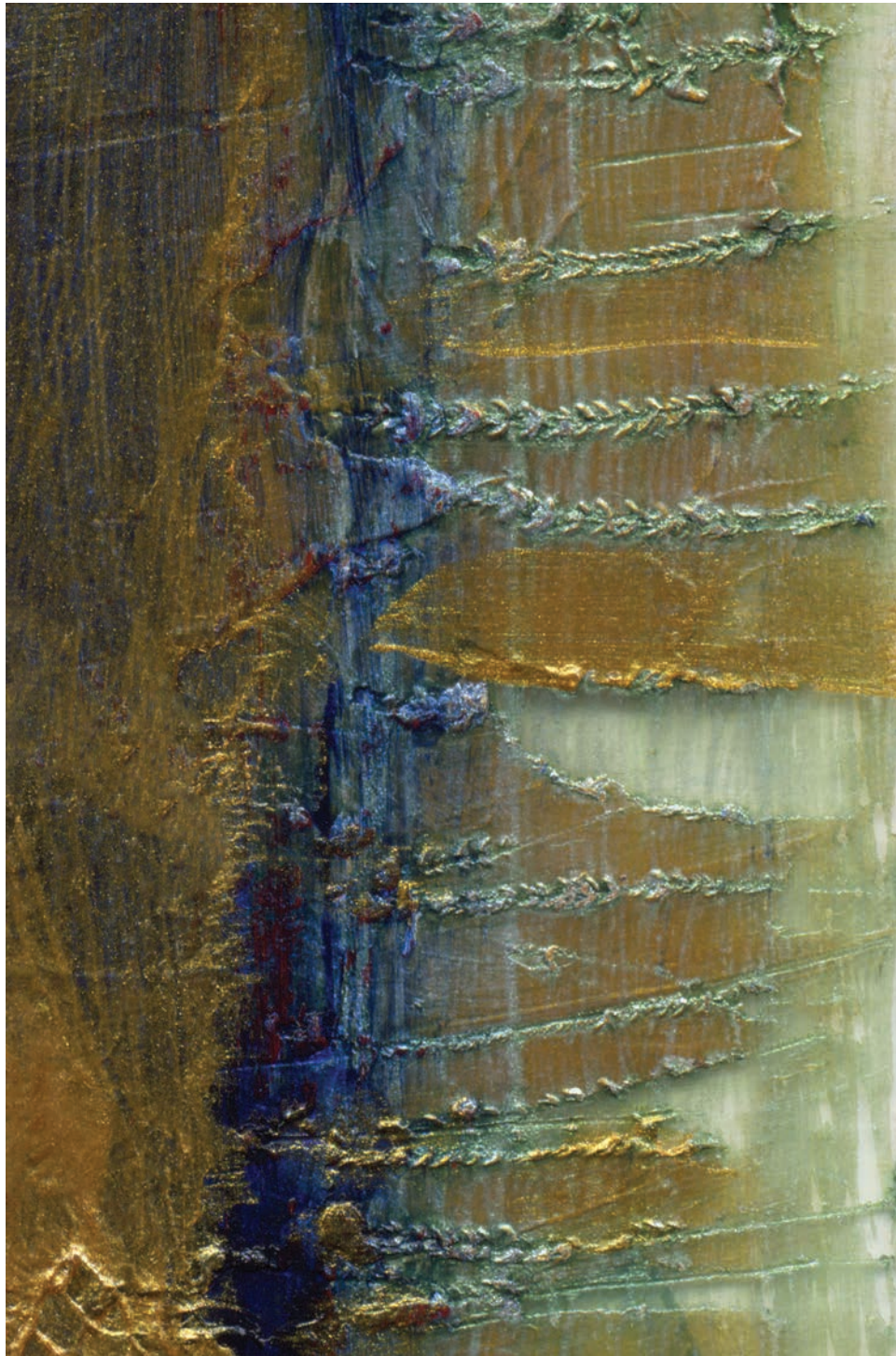
everything done  
or undone,  
all the moments that brought  
worry or delight,  
the meetings and crossings  
that gave gladness  
or pain.

Let these scenes unwind,  
and then  
let them go.

Beneath them,  
behind them,  
other pictures are waiting,  
other stories wanting  
to draw your gaze

like paintings  
on the walls of a chapel  
no one has seen  
for centuries,  
or shimmering from the pages  
of an ancient prayer book  
that falls open  
in your hands.

Open the eyes  
behind your eyes  
and see what reveals itself  
only in the dark,  
only in this house  
made of dreaming  
where you can  
lay yourself down  
and you can rest  
now.



*Between Heaven and Earth*

## DREAMING BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH

*And [Jacob] dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth,  
the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were  
ascending and descending on it.*

—Genesis 28:12

Sometimes there is no time to plot and plan our path, no time to contemplate the possibilities before us, no time to seek wise counsel or ponder or pray. Sometimes we are propelled from the life we have known, driven far from our familiar terrain by a call, by circumstances, or by the consequences of our mistakes.

What path becomes possible then?

A man named Jacob learned what road can open to us when our less wise choices have launched us beyond our known world. When we find him in Genesis 28, he is on the run from his brother, Esau, who is in a murderous mood after Jacob, by trickery, takes the blessing due his barely-older twin.

Hustled out of town by their mother, Jacob flees Beersheba, his home. Hours pass. His run slows to a walk, and as evening falls, he stops. He is in the wilderness, he is alone, he has left everything behind, and though he is bound for a place of safety, he little knows what his life will be like there.

Jacob is a man seriously betwixt. He has arrived at a threshold beyond any he has ever known. And here he finally makes perhaps his first wise decision: he rests. Picking up a stone, he places it beneath his head for a pillow. Somehow he manages to sleep. In his sleep, Jacob dreams, and in his dreaming, he has a vision. Jacob sees a ladder stretched between earth and heaven, with angels ascending and descending on the ladder. He hears the voice of God speaking to him. *Know that I am with you*, God tells the dreaming man, *and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.*

Jacob wakes from his sleeping. Looks around. Remembers. Exclaims, *Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it! How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.*

Far past the edge of his known world, Jacob has found himself in what Celtic folk have long called a *thin place*. In the dark, in the wilderness, heaven and earth meet in the dreaming of a man who finally stopped long enough to let God catch up to him, and who was willing to have his eyes and his heart opened.

What Jacob receives in that thin place is not a map but something much better: a vision, a promise, and the assurance of God's presence with him. From this point, Jacob will travel a road that has begun anew with a ladder and a dream. His path has become more vast than he had ever imagined: it is encompassed by heaven, and he is held by the God who goes with him.

*Has there been a time when you suddenly landed in a place you never imagined yourself? Did you come to perceive the presence of God there, either at the time or as you look back now? When you are making decisions about your path, what attention do you give to insights that come from beneath or beyond your analytical thinking: dreams, the creative process, intuition, etc.?*

## BLESSING FOR THE PLACE BETWEEN

When you come  
to the place between.

When you have left  
what you held  
most dear.

When you are traveling  
toward the life  
you know not.

When you arrive  
at the hardest ground.

May it become  
for you  
a place to rest.

May it become  
for you  
a place to dream.

May the pain  
that has pressed itself  
into you  
give way  
to vision,  
to knowing.

May the morning  
make of it  
an altar,  
a path,  
a place to begin  
again.



*Honest about the Darkness, Perceptive of the Light*

## CHOOSING

In the dream I stand at the opening. Of what, I'm not sure—a cave, perhaps, or maybe a tunnel. I tell the people with me that I don't want to go in. The space is narrow; I won't be able to breathe. This is a recurring fear, breathlessness, perhaps owing in part to the lung that collapsed repeatedly during adolescence. The collapses didn't scare me half so much as the final treatment did: tetracycline poured through a tube into my chest. They can't give you enough anesthesia to deaden the pain of acid forming scar tissue on your lung. All I remember is searing pain, the flowing acid turning into a crushing weight on my chest, leaving me barely enough breath to cry out as I mangled the hands that I gripped: the nurse's on one side, my mother's on the other.

In the dream I take a breath, pass through the opening, and am surprised to find it more spacious inside than I anticipated. I can move and breathe easily in the gaping darkness. I walk steadily through the passageway, then through another, and another. Each tunnel spills out into a clearing of light. I have to choose whether to stop in the light or to find the next dark tunnel that lies beyond.

There is never just one choice in the clearing. There are always several passageways farther along. I have to choose without seeing what's ahead. But as I take each entry step, my breath rises and falls with the realization: in the darkness, there are many ways to go.

*Where have you found a doorway in your dreaming—a threshold that opened onto a place you had not foreseen? What choices offered themselves in that place, and where did your choosing lead you?*

## BLESSING

There are other senses,  
you tell us,  
and when the darkness  
obscures our choices,  
we must turn  
to the other ways of knowing  
you have given us.

In the daylight  
we can get by on sight,  
but for the nighttime  
is our hearing,  
is our tasting,  
is our smelling,  
is our questioning,  
longing touching.

A thousand messages waiting  
for our sensing  
you have given us,  
O God.



*Dreaming the Map*

## DREAMING THE MAP

Once upon a time, on a sojourn to Alaska, I found myself in a room of maps. The room was in the Anchorage Museum, and the maps were part of an exhibition in which artists from across the United States had turned the idea of mapmaking inside out. In their hands, the traditional boundaries of cartography stretched, dissolved, shattered; there was little here that resembled a foldable piece of paper that would help a person get from Point A to Point B.

Wandering the room, I saw maps that took the form of sculpture, of pottery, of books. There was a map that opened like a scroll, a map that was a diptych, a map that had been made by weaving. Few of the maps depicted actual geographical locations. These were maps for charting worlds of imagination, fantastical realms, personal history, the strange and wondrous inner terrain of the soul and spirit. The maps told stories of things seen and unseen.

The exhibit tugged at my imagination and quickened my fascination with maps. I suspect this fascination owes to the fact that I have so few maps for my life. As an artist, writer, and ordained minister, I have walked a vocational path for which I have had no model, no blueprint. The absence of a map is part of the struggle—and the joy.

Because I had so few maps for my life, I used to think of myself as someone who had a high tolerance for mystery—that I was adept at living with the unknown, carrying the questions, and taking the time to dream and discern my way toward the next place in my path. Then my husband died, and darkness fell with stunning suddenness. In the wake of Gary's death, my capacity for mystery has been severely tested.

After Gary died, I found myself remembering the enchanted map room in Alaska. I began to wonder what it might look like to make a map in the dark, a luminous guide that would help me navigate this strange and unseeable terrain. I wanted a map *of* the dark, a map stitched together of mystery and shadows, questions and wonderings. I began to dream of a map with wounds, with holes; a map that bears witness to what has been torn away, even as it allows space for light and illumination to enter, and for new paths to emerge from the dark.

Whatever the texture of the darkness we journey through—the painful darkness of loss, grief, and suffering, or the hopeful darkness of anticipation, mystery, and dreaming—God desires to meet us there. In the presence of God, even the darkness can become a place of discernment, of creating, of imagining: a place where a way is made and a map begins.

*How is it for you to live with questions, with mystery, with uncertainty? Is there a question that is especially present to you these days? How might you carry that question into the coming year? How might you let the question carry you, inviting you into places of wondering, of discerning, of dreaming?*

## BLESSING

When in darkness,  
when in shadow,  
when in mystery,  
when in waiting,

let there come stillness,  
let there come silence,  
let there come dreaming  
where the map begins.



*Treasured in Her Heart*

## DAYDREAMING

I have a handful of articles that I have saved over the past few years, pieces that spoke to me and challenged me when I first encountered them and to which I return periodically as my life spirals back around the questions they raised. One of these articles is by former United States poet laureate Rita Dove, an adaptation of an address she gave entitled “To Make a Prairie.” She speaks of the absolute necessity of imagination and specifically of the need for daydreaming, a pastime she acknowledges as being increasingly discouraged as we grow up. “There’s a loftier expression for it, of course—reverie,” Dove writes. “But daydreaming is the word that truly sets us adrift. It melts on the tongue.” She quotes French writer Gaston Bachelard, who wrote of a “dreaming consciousness” and called poetic reverie a “phenomenology of the soul” in which “the mind is able to relax, but . . . the soul keeps watch, with no tension, calmed and active.”

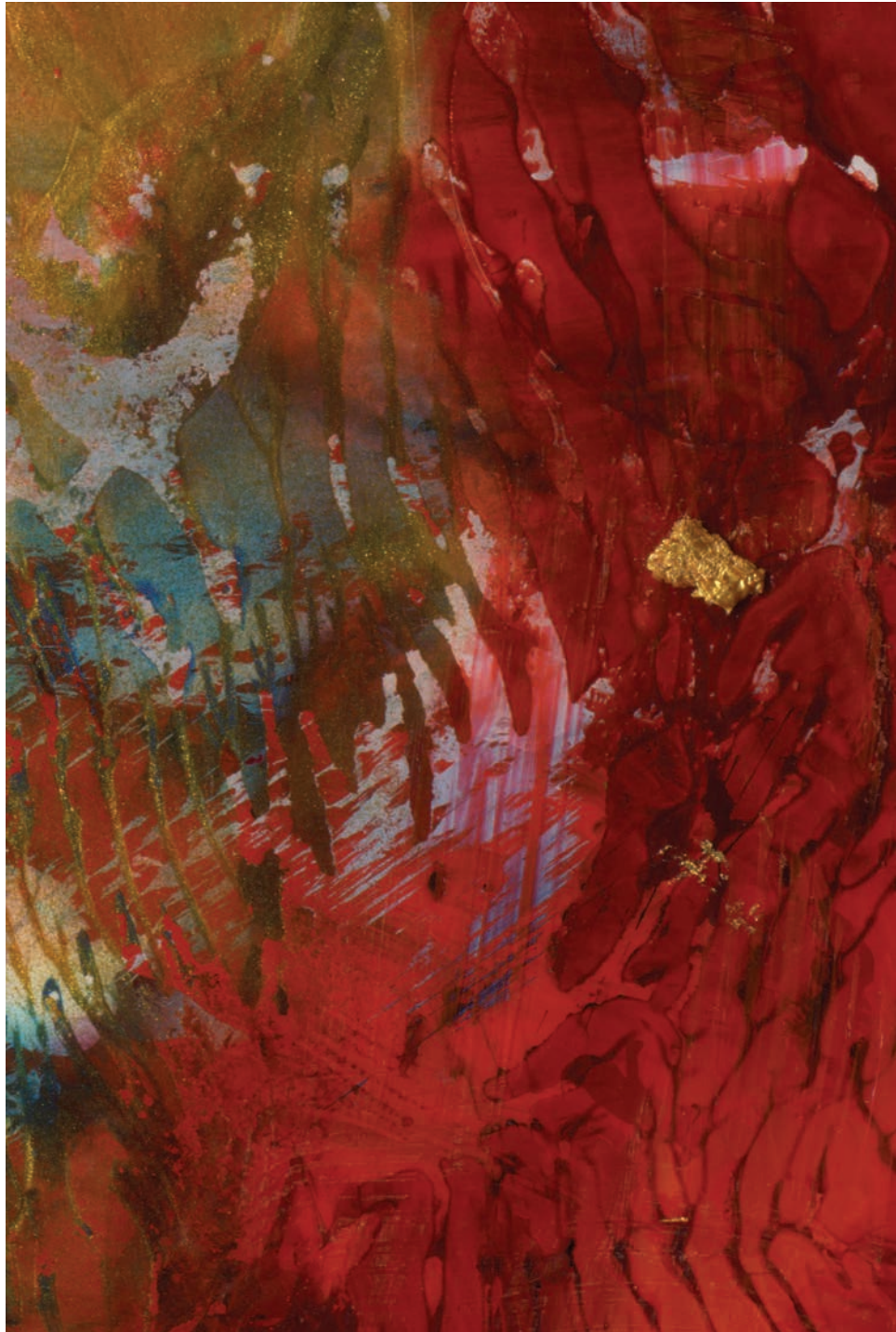
Rereading the article, I think of how daydreaming affords the opportunity to try on different lives, to make connections that might elude us in more rational moments. It helps account for how a nice Methodist girl like me ended up as the artist in residence at a Catholic retreat center. It doesn’t make logical sense. But from the time I was a young child, I was given the opportunity to pursue my interests and passions and to see where they led me. I had the time and space for daydreaming and also the support to pursue those dreams. There is still a part of me that never gave this up. I have spent a lifetime searching my longings, learning and learning again how, if I pay attention to them, they will tell me what I need to know, will give me a map of my heart.

*What does dreaming look like in your waking life? Do you daydream? When your mind has a moment to wander, where does it go? In your quiet contemplation or your wild imagining, what do you dream about for your path?*

## BLESSING

Here,  
in the center of my chest,  
their constant dwelling:

the persistent yearning  
the insistent craving  
the unbidden imagining  
the desire awakening  
the daydream, the nightdream  
the reverie unfolding:  
the language of longing  
drawing me home.



*When Friends Rejoice Both Far and Near*

## THE WEDDING HOUSE

The family intended it as a mother-in-law house, but the mother-in-law ended up living somewhere else, and so the house in the woods became known as the wedding house when her grandson made plans to marry. The entire assembly processed there after the wedding, following the path of luminarias that had been laid out through the trees. It was a skeleton of a house, still in progress; tiny lights snaked along its frame, lending a glow to the thin covering stretched across it. Here they had laid the feast, prepared the celebration. Walking in, I found myself stunned by the grace of its incompleteness.

It was Advent eve when I drove home from the celebration, and the Seven Sisters danced in the night sky over my left shoulder all the way home. That night I dreamed that my bones were strung with lights, that my skin glowed in welcome, that within my skeleton a feast had been laid. Here was the wedding house, unfinished but waiting to celebrate the meeting of souls. Here were the guests, waiting to dance under the night sky.

*In your dreaming, do you find spaces of hospitality and welcome? What do these spaces look like? What—or who—meets you there, and what do you carry with you when you leave?*

### BLESSING

O my soul,  
this is your work:  
to light the candles  
set the tables  
prepare the room  
lay the feast  
pour the wine  
welcome the guests

and bless  
in your innermost being  
and celebrate  
with your deepest delight  
the lovers and friends  
families and kin  
and all who dare  
to cast their lot together;  
O my soul,  
bless.

## 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,  
sparkling 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.



*Secret of the Seed*

## SECRET OF THE SEED

*[Jesus] also said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how."*

—Mark 4:26–27

As I worked with this passage, what showed up in my painting was not the seed but the space that waits for the seed, that holds itself in a shimmering emptiness, already loving what it cannot see but aches to enfold. How the green of growing already reaches toward the seed, and the gold of harvest even now anticipates the way it will paint itself across the fruit that will be months in coming. How they love this mystery, this space where the seed will grow in secret while the rest of us sleep and rise night and day, our lives encompassing what we cannot see but lean toward in love.

*Our dreaming is often marked by "someday"—a vision for what our life will look like one day down the road, when circumstances align. How might it be for you to think about your life as already holding space for the dream that is unfolding in you—to envision your life as already taking the shape of what you dream? What image might evoke this for you? How might you carry that image with you into this new year?*

## BLESSING THAT HOLDS A NEST IN ITS BRANCHES

The emptiness  
that you have been holding  
for such a long season now;

that ache in your chest  
that goes with you  
night and day  
in your sleeping,  
your rising—

think of this  
not as a mere hollow,  
the void left from  
the life that has leached out  
of you.

Think of it like this:  
as the space being prepared  
for the seed.

Think of it  
as your earth that dreams  
of the branches  
the seed contains.

Think of it  
as your heart making ready  
to welcome the nest  
its branches will hold.



*Doing Some Dreaming*

## DOING SOME DREAMING

*Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose [Mary]  
to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.*

—Matthew 1:19

Among the leaves of a tenth-century illuminated manuscript in the Medici Library in Rome, Joseph lies dreaming. Hands resting on his stomach, brow creased, Joseph sleeps on a multicolored coverlet. Having just discovered that Mary is pregnant, Joseph has gone to bed with a plan for how he will respond. He will wake up with a different plan altogether.

Coming from the upper corner of this manuscript page, an angel with boots and blue wings hurtles toward the slumbering Joseph. “Shooting towards Joseph like a projectile from heaven,” Sister Wendy Beckett says of the angel in her book *Sister Wendy’s Nativity and Life of Christ*, “a spiritual rocket is about to land on his anxious slumbers, and his rational world will deconstruct.”

This vivid and homely depiction of Joseph’s dream, and Sister Wendy’s commentary on it, has me thinking about the intersections between what we tend to call the “real” world and the world of the imagination, the realm of dreams and visions and stories. Sister Wendy writes that although Jesus’ birth is marked by signs and wonders, it is rooted in the very real experience of a woman who finds herself pregnant, and a man who has to discern how to respond to this.

“The birth of Christ,” Sister Wendy observes in her reflection on this illumination, “can seem utterly removed from the everyday reality of our own life, elevated into a sacred sphere where all is peace and joy. Not so: Mary is living in a real world, though in her innocence she may not have appreciated the full dimensions of it.”

This depiction of the dreaming Joseph and his dive-bombing angel vividly illuminates a place where the real world and the dreaming world cross paths. Here on this side of Advent and Christmas, it is a timely image to ponder.

As we enter into the new year, we may find ourselves wrestling with the hopes and expectations we carried into the past season. Ideas we had about how we would spend the season might not have come to pass. Plans we made for a meaningful holiday might not have happened quite the way we had hoped. The real world—the realm in which people get sick, wars continue, death comes to call, relationships crumble, and women find themselves unexpectedly pregnant—can leave us feeling a deep dissonance between the culturally expected cheer of the holidays and the reality life hands us.

How do we move beyond this dissonance to open ourselves to that deeper place where the real world and the dream world meet?

The real world was weighing heavily on Joseph when Mary told him she was pregnant. In response, he drew on reason and rationality to form a plan. But then, Matthew tells us, Joseph dreamed. And his dream came as an interruption, a disruption to the reasoned realm he had been inhabiting and acting from. In that powerful collision between the real world and the dreaming world, so literally depicted in the manuscript in the Medici Library, a new way opened up for Joseph. And for Mary. And for Jesus.

The story of Joseph offers an invitation to pay attention to our dreaming world. And not only to our night dreams; I am thinking also of other realms where the unconscious bubbles up into our awareness. In our creative work, in our lives of prayer and contemplation, in the landscape of our imaginations: what wisdom might God be offering in those places?

*Here at this place in your path, what realms are you listening into? How do you cultivate an openness to the place where the real world and the dreaming world intersect and offer a message you need? How do you carry your dreaming into the world in which you wake and live?*

## BLESSING FOR WAKING

This blessing could  
pound on your door  
in the middle of  
the night.

This blessing could  
bang on your window,  
could tap dance  
in your hall,  
could set a dog loose  
in your room.

It could hire a  
brass band  
to play outside  
your house.

But what this blessing  
really wants  
is not merely  
your waking  
but your company.

This blessing  
wants to sit  
alongside you  
and keep vigil  
with you.

This blessing  
wishes to wait  
with you.

And so,  
though it is capable  
of causing a cacophony  
that could raise  
the dead,

this blessing  
will simply  
lean toward you  
and sing quietly  
in your ear  
a song to lull you  
not into sleep  
but into waking.

It will tell you stories  
that hold you breathless  
till the end.

It will ask you questions  
you never considered  
and have you tell it  
what you saw  
in your dreaming.

This blessing  
will do all within  
its power  
to entice you  
into awareness

because it wants  
to be there,  
to bear witness,  
to see the look  
in your eyes  
on the day when  
your vigil is complete  
and all your waiting  
has come to  
its joyous end.



*Gathering Courage*

## A LIFE WE DID NOT CHOOSE

*An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said,  
“Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid.”*

—Matthew 1:20

*How do we say yes to a life we did not choose?* It's a question that has pressed on me since Gary's death. Every morning I wake into a world I did not count on. Every day I have to figure out how to enter this life that has presented itself to me, so altered from what Gary and I had imagined and dreamed.

*How do we say yes to a life we did not choose?* It's a question that the dreaming Joseph, too, had to answer for himself.

This *yes* is not something we can always summon on our own. It is not a response we can manufacture by the strength of our will. This *yes* depends on a constellation of graces. Some of those graces are ones we need to learn to ask for. Some of those graces will find us without our even knowing we needed them.

I love how in Joseph's dreaming, the angel comes not only with a compelling invitation, an annunciation designed especially for him, but also with a needed gift. *Do not be afraid*, the angel tells him. These are the same words the angel Gabriel told Mary in her own annunciation. *Do not be afraid*. In asking Joseph to agree to what might have seemed an impossible life, the angel does not leave him to his own devices. *Do not be afraid*, the angel tells the dreaming man.

The angel comes bearing the gift of courage to Joseph. Courage to say *yes* to a life he had not envisioned. Courage to keep saying *yes* to this woman, this child, this path that will take him far beyond anything he has ever imagined for himself. Courage that will keep coming as grace, as dream, as blessing for his way.

*How are you being invited to say yes to a life you did not choose? Is there a fear you need to let go of in order to offer this yes? What “no” might you need to say in order to make way for what God is inviting? How would it be to ask for the courage you need, and to open yourself to how this courage wants to meet you in your waking, your dreaming?*

## BLESSING OF COURAGE

I cannot say  
where it lives,  
only that it comes  
to the heart  
that is open,  
to the heart  
that asks,  
to the heart  
that does not turn away.

It can take practice,  
days of tugging at  
what keeps us bound,  
seasons of pushing against  
what keeps our dreaming  
small.

When it arrives,  
it might surprise you  
by how quiet it is,  
how it moves  
with such grace  
for possessing  
such power.

But you will know it  
by the strength  
that rises from within you  
to meet it,  
by the release  
of the knot  
in the center of  
your chest  
that suddenly lets go.

You will recognize it  
by how still  
your fear becomes  
as it loosens its grip,  
perhaps never quite  
leaving you,  
but calmly turning  
into joy  
as you enter the life  
that is finally  
your own.



*A Ladder Between*

## BETWEEN YOU AND ME

*for Gary*

I had a dream in which you and I were at the Evinston house, as it looked when I was growing up. We were in the front bedroom that was, at different times, my bedroom or Sally's. You and I were on a ladder—a straight ladder—with you on one side, me on the other. We were working to stay balanced on the ladder and were doing a sort of dancing, gymnastics-y kind of thing, moving up and sort of sliding down the ladder. In the dream I had a very physical sensation of learning how to do this—of coming into balance and being able to move with greater ease, and loving the sensation of learning this, of being able to do it. You were already good at it—you already knew this choreography, this art, and were helping me learn how to balance and move with you.

I think this is my favorite dream I've had of you since you died. I love the image of being on the ladder with you and learning to balance and move with you with grace. The ladder image holds such resonance for me, especially with the story of Jacob that we have so loved, with his vision of the liminal ladder stretched between heaven and earth, with angels ascending and descending. Perhaps you have been learning from the angels.

The dream prompted me to remember a charcoal drawing I had done years earlier, when I was first starting to experiment with charcoal (for the art for Peter Storey's book). I did a small, spare drawing of a ladder. It was a one-off drawing, unlike most anything else I had done. After having the dream, I went searching for the drawing. I looked through years' worth of artwork and finally found it stuck in a pad of drawing paper in a stack I had already gone through.

I was so glad to find the drawing that I hadn't seen at least since we moved me out of the Maitland apartment. Particularly since it was a one-off kind of drawing, it felt a little like a message to myself from years ago—or perhaps not so much a message as a bit of solace. A point of connection across time, between my younger and present self, between my waking and dreaming self, and between you and me.

*How does your dreaming make connections between different times in your life, and between the selves you have been in those times? What gift does that connection provide for you in this time and place?*

## ALL HALLOWS BLESSING

Who live	in the chambers	made from the
in the spaces between	of our heart:	tissue of memory
our breathing		like the veil
	nowhere can they	between the worlds
in the corner	be touched,	
of our vision	yet still	that stirs at
		the merest breath
in the hollows	how they move us,	this night
of our bones	how they move	and then is
	in us,	at rest.



*May We Find You*

## DREAMING THE LABYRINTH

*for Gary*

*In the dream, I am in a place that I'm familiar with, though I don't recognize it from my waking life. It feels a bit like a lovely hotel or a country home. I'm up on the second floor, looking out from a spot where there's a bank of windows. For the first time, I see the remains of a labyrinth. I hadn't been able to see it previously from the ground level, but from the second floor, it's visible.*

*I go downstairs to explore the labyrinth. It is an old labyrinth, made of stone. Much of it is worn away, but this intrigues me rather than bothers me. I have to work at finding the path. I am relieved to have found this labyrinth. In the dream, I'm aware that, as in waking life, I have been wanting to walk a labyrinth, and that it's been a long time.*

*As I begin walking, trying to find the path, I am aware of people nearby. They're talking about rebuilding the labyrinth. I think that's fine, but I am happy with the labyrinth as it is.*

I loved this dream. It was a wondrous sensation to find a labyrinth in a place that, in the dream, I was familiar with but in which I hadn't seen the labyrinth until now.

I found myself wishing there were a way to create a labyrinth in our home, but that didn't seem quite feasible, as there's no single room that could hold a decent-sized labyrinth. I'm not drawn to the canvas labyrinths that are designed for smaller spaces; a neat idea, but I haven't seen one I like.

I thought about alternate materials—was there something else I could use to create a labyrinth in our home?

Yesterday afternoon I brought in a box of stones from the garage—the ones left over from when I had the stones engraved with *beloved* for the day we buried your ashes. I rolled the big table in our studio to one side and laid out a spiral with those stones. I needed a few more and used the ones you had saved in a small glass—stones we used in our retreats. I spent some time walking the stone spiral, with your Advent guitar meditations playing.

Today, in the late afternoon, I finished the labyrinth. Stones now stretch from our studio down the hallway and spiral through the front studio and the family room. I walked the full labyrinth tonight—three times, slowly, took me close to an hour—and listened to some of your guitar meditations for the Lenten retreat as I walked.

The labyrinth is, loosely, a Celtic triple spiral. It feels resonant with the imaginings I've had about our labyrinth (that struck me as I wrote it—*our labyrinth*)—that it's both ancient and new—and resonant also with my dream, though in a very different setting—that I've found it in a place I was familiar with. I can't think of anything that's more familiar than our home. Though I created the labyrinth rather than “finding” it in the way I did in the dream, there still felt like an element of finding—figuring out how to create a labyrinth within the space of our home, and using materials that I/we already had.

*Has there been a time when you made a tangible connection between your sleeping and waking worlds—an occasion when you made real something you encountered in your dreaming? How does your dreaming life inspire you to take concrete action—to bring into this world an idea, an image, a word that visited you in your dreaming?*

## BLESSING THE WAY

With every step  
you take,  
this blessing rises up  
to meet you.

It has been waiting  
long ages for you.

Look close  
and you can see  
the layers of it,

how it has been fashioned  
by those who walked  
this road before you,

how it has been created  
of nothing but  
their determination  
and their dreaming,

how it has taken  
its form  
from an ancient hope  
that drew them forward  
and made a way for them  
when no way could be  
seen.

Look closer  
and you will see  
this blessing  
is not finished,

that you are part  
of the path  
it is preparing,

that you are how  
this blessing means  
to be a voice  
within the wilderness

and a welcome  
for the way.



*See What This Blessing Sees*

## A BLESSING FOR AFTER

*Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord;  
let it be with me according to your word."*

—Luke 1:38

Sometimes, after a little or a long while, clarity arrives. We respond to a dream, we say *yes*, we set out into a terrain that we had previously only imagined. Now what happens?

## A BLESSING FOR AFTER

This blessing  
is for the moment  
after clarity has come,  
after inspiration,  
after you have agreed  
to what seemed  
impossible.

This blessing  
is what follows  
after illumination departs  
and you realize  
there is no map  
for the path  
you have chosen,  
no one to serve  
as guide,  
nothing to do  
but gather up  
your gumption  
and set out.

This blessing  
will go with you.  
It carries no answers,  
no charts,  
no plans.  
It carries no source  
of light  
within itself.

But in its pocket  
is tucked a mirror  
that, from time to time,  
it will hold up to you

to remind you  
of the radiance  
that came  
when you gave  
your awful and wondrous  
*yes*.

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## ABOUT JAN

Jan 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 that she creates in her books, online blogs, and public events. She frequently collaborated in retreats and conferences with her husband, the singer/songwriter Garrison Doles, until his sudden death in December 2013. Jan's most recent book is *The Cure for Sorrow: A Book of Blessings for Times of Grief*. She makes her home in Florida.

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

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