



BY WAY *of the* HEART

A Retreat for Women's Christmas

JAN RICHARDSON

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CONSTELLATION
A Blessing for Women's Christmas

Consider that the heart
holds its own constellation.

Consider that it has
a secret chamber
radiant with unspent light.

Consider this when you cannot find
that one star, that dream
that compels you to the road.

When every last thing seems
to have disappeared into dark,
consider that you cannot always know
how you bear this brightness
but that it holds you
and is not wasted
or lost.

See how we share this sky,
how it stretches above us
beyond every border,
how every day
turns each of us
in steady revolution
through morning, night,
morning again.

Or think of it like this:
that every heart is its own voyage,
sending its vessels out,
drawing them back again,
never by the same way they went
but still somehow making for
home, that place
that shimmers now in welcome
with all the gathered light
you had thought
you could not see.

BY WAY *of the* HEART

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.

Over this past year, many of the wise women's questions have had to do with the heart. In the wake of the unexpected death of my husband five years ago, I have been astonished to experience how much our hearts can still hold after they have been broken by loss in any form. It's as if there is something about heartbreak that opens new chambers to us, deepening our capacity not only to feel the intensities of sorrow but also of love and joy, knowing how deeply all these are bound together. This capacity does not explain away the presence of loss, and it doesn't make it much more palatable. I continue to learn, though, that as we move into these new chambers that appear, we become able to engage our lives and the world more wholeheartedly.

This year's Women's Christmas Retreat invites you to ponder how we travel by way of the heart. With reflections and images from the path I have been navigating, the pages of this retreat offer a welcoming space for you to pray, to imagine, to rest, and to dream as you contemplate your own heart and the mysteries it holds.

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 travel in the company of love. Know that I hold you in prayer and wish you blessings on your way. Merry Women’s Christmas!



Welcoming Heart

WELCOMING HEART

In her book *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*, Kathleen Norris tells a story that's said to come from a Russian Orthodox monastery. A seasoned monk, long accustomed to the ancient tradition of monastic hospitality that welcomes all guests as Christ, says to a young monk, "I have finally learned to accept people as they are. Whatever they are in the world, a prostitute, a prime minister, it is all the same to me. But sometimes," the monk continues, "I see a stranger coming up the road and I say, "Oh, Jesus Christ, is it you again?"

Opening our heart is an act of hospitality. When we choose to open ourselves in this way, to turn toward the world in a spirit of welcome, we cannot control or predict who is going to show up, bearing the presence of Christ in a form we may not always recognize at first. This kind of hospitality of the heart requires practice. And as with any practice, it can feel like work sometimes. We may grow weary or frustrated. We may become impatient. (*You again?*) But as we give ourselves to the practice over time, we have glimpses of the agility and grace that come from practice, and moments of connection that remind us why we chose to open our heart in the first place.

The practice of opening our heart asks us not only to turn toward the world and seek the presence of Christ there, that we may welcome him in the ways that he shows up. Opening our heart asks us also to extend hospitality to our own selves, that we give our care even—and sometimes especially—to the parts of ourselves where we may have difficulty recognizing the presence of Christ.

The new year invites us to turn our attention toward some of the more challenging guests that inhabit our hearts and our lives: our patterns and attachments that may hinder or harm us; our fears, worries, and wounds; the inner ghosts that go with us: all the stuff we carry around with us without always realizing it until something rears its head. A difficult memory comes to the surface, an old wound starts to throb, something we think we've resolved and laid to rest suddenly decides to return, and we think, *Oh, Jesus Christ, is it you again?*

We may want to close the door on them, these aspects of ourselves that we find less lovely, more frustrating, and overly persistent in how they repeat and recur in our lives. How might it be instead to choose one or two of these and turn ourselves toward them, welcoming them as visitors, as teachers, as messengers that have something to tell us—something we need to know? How might it be for us to give our attention—carefully, and perhaps with the help of a wise companion—to something that is causing us pain or weariness or frustration and ask it, *What have you come here for? What is the word you have for me? Where is the presence of Christ in this, waiting for me to open my heart to him?*

BLESSING TO OPEN THE HEART

It may astonish you
how quietly this blessing
arrives.

No hammering
at the door.
No chiming
of the bell.

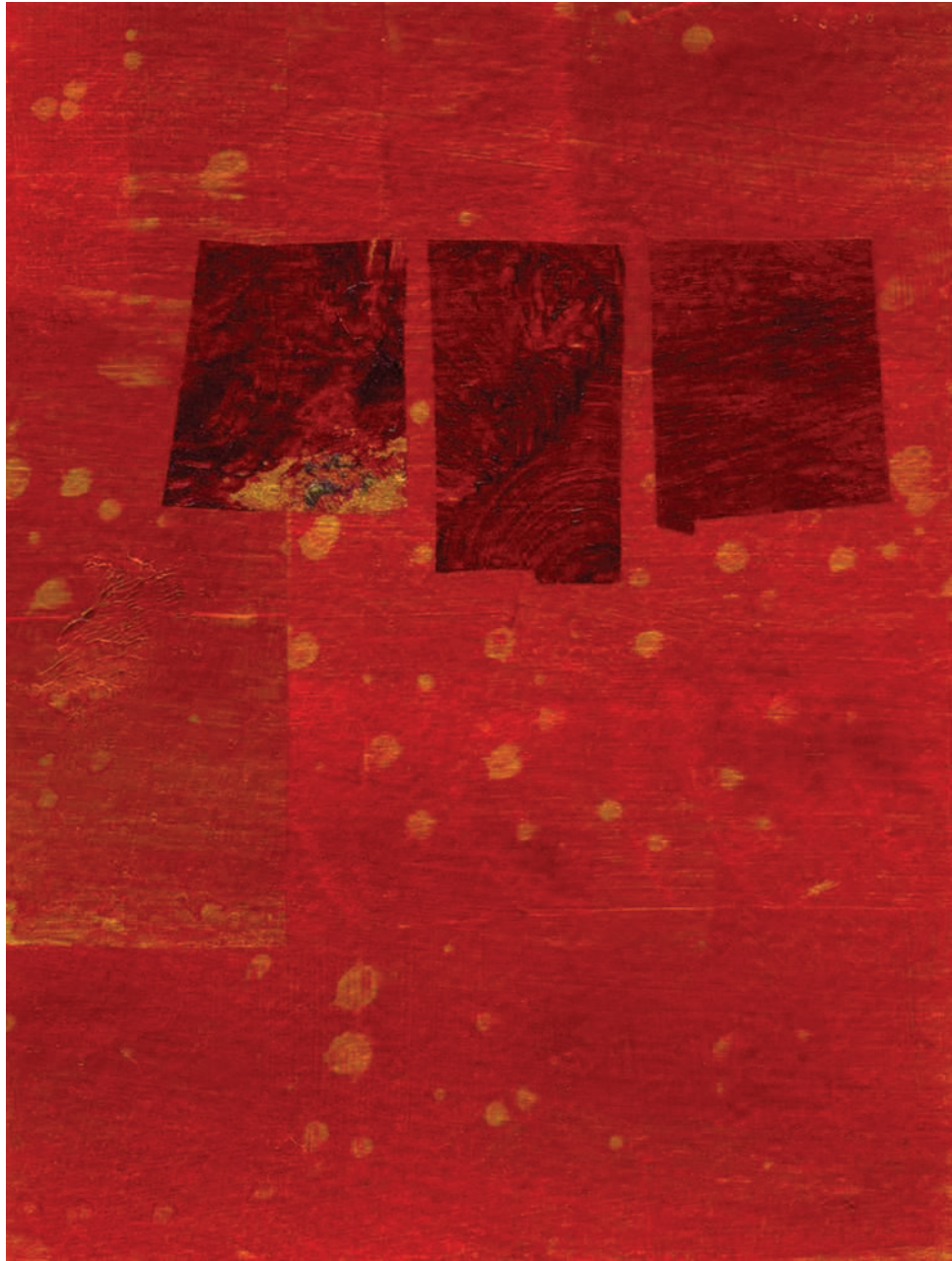
It has given
no warning,
sent no message
in advance,

yet with a suddenness
that somehow comes
as no surprise,
it is there
on the doorstep
of your heart.

Peer out,
and you will see
this blessing is no stranger.
You already know
every word
it has come to say.

I am merely here
to tell you
how this blessing
is a remembering,
a returning;
how it asks of you
what you already long
to do:

open
open
open.



Love and Revelation

LOVE AND REVELATION

On a day more than six hundred years ago, in the English town of Norwich, a woman walked into a cell attached to the parish church. She intended to remain there for the rest of her life. Her original name is unknown, and the cell where she would live as an anchoress—a woman devoted to a life of contemplation and solitude—no longer remains. It is likely that she took her name from the church in whose cell she lived: the Church of St. Julian.

Nearly everything we know about Julian of Norwich comes from a manuscript she composed in her cell. In it she tells of how, at the age of thirty and a half, she became desperately ill. Just when she seemed at the point of death, her pain suddenly departed. As Julian continued to pray, she received a series of sixteen visions, which she called “showings.” These visions primarily are of Christ on the cross, who reveals the face of joy and love to her.

Julian recorded her visions in a short text. Nearly two decades later, she wrote a longer text that incorporates the insights she gained through years of reflecting on and praying with the visions. Together Julian’s texts became the book known as *Showings*, or *Revelations of Divine Love*.

In the final chapter of *Showings*, as she comes to the end of the remarkable work in which she reveals to us a God of endless mystery who knows and loves us in all our human particularity, Julian writes,

And from the time that it was revealed, I desired to know in what was our Lord’s meaning. And fifteen years after and more, I was answered in spiritual understanding, and it was said: What, do you wish to know your Lord’s meaning in this thing? Know it well, love was his meaning. Who reveals it to you? Love. What did he reveal to you? Love. Why does he reveal it to you? For love. Remain in this, and you will know more of the same. But you will never know different, without end.

As you stretch yourself into loving others, what becomes revealed to you—of them, of yourself, of God? How has love challenged or changed what you know? How are you opening yourself to its presence in your life?

BELOVED IS WHERE WE BEGIN

If you would enter
into the wilderness,
do not begin
without a blessing.

Do not leave
without hearing
who you are:
Beloved,
named by the one
who has traveled this path
before you.

Do not go
without letting it echo
in your ears,
and if you find
it is hard
to let it into your heart,
do not despair.
That is what
this journey is for.

I cannot promise
this blessing will free you
from danger, from fear,
from hunger or thirst,
from the scorching of sun
or the fall of the night.

But I can tell you
that on this path
there will be help.

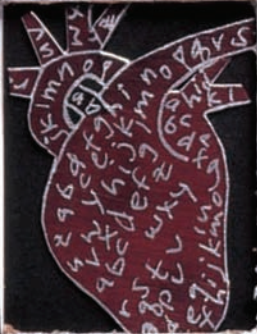
I can tell you
that on this way
there will be rest.

I can tell you
that you will know
the strange graces
that come to our aid
only on a road
such as this,
that fly to meet us
bearing comfort
and strength,
that come alongside us
for no other cause
than to lean themselves
toward our ear
and with their
curious insistence
whisper our name:

Beloved.
Beloved.
Beloved.



NANCY MAIRS. TERRY
TEMPAST WILLIAMS.
KATHLEEN NORRIS JOY
HARJO. JANET MORLEY.
bell hooks. CARTER
HEYWARD. JULIA CAM-
ERON. JULIAN OF NOR-
WICH. ANNIE DILLARD.
TONI MORRISON. MEIN-
RAD CRAIGHEAD. ISABEL
ALLENDE. MARGO PIERCY.
MADELINE L'ENGLE. GUY
HILLESUM. JULIA ESQUIVEL



The Language of the Heart

LANGUAGE OF THE HEART

Soon after I moved to Orlando, an advertisement for an exhibit of artists' books at the art museum in Ormond Beach captured my attention. On a day off I drove to the beach and found myself enchanted as I browsed through the exhibit, titled "The Book Unbound." As an artist and writer, I was astounded that I had never before encountered this medium, in which books become art forms through the use of nontraditional bindings, papers, and formats. A world had opened before me. I sent off for information from several places in the United States that deal in the book arts. Browsing through one catalog I received, I came across an announcement for a book that used a font whose letters were based on the shape of the bones of birds.

Some years later, mulling over questions of words and language one afternoon as I walked the grounds of the retreat center where I lived, I remembered the bird-boned letters that the font designer had created. I began to ponder what it would look like to design letters based on the shape of the veins of women. I wondered how words would look if we could see the ways that women had fashioned them from broken and mended hearts, from blood vessels that coursed with the stories of their lives, from arteries that fed throats straining to tell the truth of their souls. I thought of women writers whose words had rescued me in the desert of language, whose letters and syllables coursed through my blood, who kept my heart pumping with their insistent drumming, *You can speak, you can speak, you can speak.*

Who has sustained you with their words? Who has helped you to learn and speak the language of your heart?

BLESSING

In the vein
and in the vessel,
in the marrow
of the bone,
in the chambers
of the heart,
in the waters
of the womb;

in the teeth
and in the tongue,
in the pounding
of the blood,
you speak
a new creation
in the flesh
becoming word.



Keeping Vigil in the House of the Heart

IN THE HOUSE OF THE HEART

If you know the Harry Potter stories, you might have been enchanted, as I was, by the tent that first appears in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. Borrowed by the Weasley family as they head to the Quidditch World Cup, this tent, which appears small and humble from the outside, proves to be spacious and well-appointed on the inside. (I want this tent.)

The house of the heart is like that. We think we know the size of it and what it is capable of holding. Then we step inside and start looking around. Even when we think we have learned its layout, have located every room and each nook and cranny, a new chamber will suddenly open to us, and then another one, and we find ourselves drawn into rooms we never anticipated were there.

On the eve of Epiphany one year, just weeks after Gary died, I drove to see Peg and Chuck, who have been our closest friends. It felt like only a moment had passed since the vigil with Gary had come to an end, and, at the same time, an aching forever since the nurse had said to me, *His heart beats in you now*. As I drove, I became increasingly aware of the strangest sensation. It felt like something was carving out my chest, that I was being hollowed out. A little farther down the road, the words came: *This is the space you will need to hold him now*.

Even as the physical sensation of being actively hollowed has subsided, the spaciousness has remained, and grown. I am still learning what it means to hold Gary as I move into the new rooms that God is making from the shattering.

The house of the heart is more spacious than we can imagine. It is capable of holding more than we can dream. Sometimes it grows larger because our hearts break. God, who does not will the breaking, nonetheless knows what to do when the shattering happens, knows how to work with the fragments to create new passageways, new doors, new chambers in our heart—provided we are willing, that is; provided we choose not to close our hearts in response to the pain.

Sometimes, thankfully, it is not brokenness but beauty that causes the house of the heart to grow more spacious. We experience a moment of connection and mystery so stunning that we cannot contain it, and our heart has to open still wider in welcome.

The astounding ability of our heart to grow more spacious depends on something stranger and more wondrous than magic. It depends on the endless grace that flows through each chamber and every room, already preparing us for what we cannot see or know from here. It depends on the love that continually keeps vigil for us in our gladness as well as in our pain. It depends on the mystery that encompasses us even as it dwells within us.

In the house of your heart, have you had the experience of finding yourself in an unexpected room? What did you discover there?

BLESSING THE HOUSE OF THE HEART

If you could see
how this blessing
shimmers inside you,
you would never wonder
whether there will be
light enough,

time enough,
room enough for you.

If you could see
the way this blessing
has inscribed itself
on every wall
of your heart,
writing its shining line
across every doorway,
tracing the edge
of every window
and table
and hall—

if you could see this,
you would never question
where home is,
or whether it has
a welcome for you.

This blessing wishes
to give you
a glimpse.

It will not tell you
it has been waiting.
It will not tell you
it has been keeping watch.
It would not
want you to know
just how long
it has been holding
this quiet vigil
for you.

It simply wants you
to see what it sees,
wants you to know
what it knows—
how this blessing
already blazes in you,
shining in every corner
of your broken
and beautiful heart.



The Generous Dark

INTO THE MYSTERY

He came to Jesus by night.

—John 3:2

So often the place where love meets us is in the dark. You know this kind of place: the place where our familiar sources of illumination have gone out; the place where our trusted landmarks have disappeared; the place where the most crucial questions begin to stir.

In the third chapter of John's Gospel, we enter such a place in the company of a man named Nicodemus. John tells us that Nicodemus, a Pharisee, comes to Jesus by night, posing questions that are perhaps too difficult and too dangerous to ask in the daylight. So much easier, sometimes, to talk in the shadowed hours, when the questions that the day has kept at bay can now steal forth, and in the cloistering dark we can speak of what is intimate and eternal.

The fact that Jesus and Nicodemus have their conversation at night seems fitting not just because the darkness offers a measure of protection and secrecy for Nicodemus, but also because Jesus speaks here of a mystery. In response to the question that Nicodemus asks about being born anew, Jesus does not provide a clear explanation. Yet in his words about water and Spirit, about birth and love, Jesus offers something better than an explanation: he extends an invitation to a relationship and a journey of transformation.

On this night, Jesus chooses the image of birth to describe how this happens. He does not offer the image lightly; he well knows that the process of birth can be messy, painful, and dangerous. He knows also what can hinder us from receiving the transforming power of love: how we resist love even as we crave it; how we struggle toward it, thinking it is something to work for. He knows how we accept it in doses, modulating it so as not to feel its full effect, or so that we do not have to give up any false notions that might have us believing we are too insignificant, too damaged, too unworthy to receive this love.

Knowing all these things, Jesus says this to Nicodemus: *For God so loved the world.*

In many quarters of the Christian tradition, we have so focused on the ending of this sentence, parsing Jesus' words about belief and eternal life and using them as a litmus test to determine who is saved and who is not, that we have often lost sight of how Jesus begins the sentence.

For God so loved.

It is this Love that speaks to Nicodemus in the night; this Love that has entered the world, encompassing our darkness, our ache, our fear, our loneliness; this Love that invites our wonder and takes delight in us; this Love that meets us in the midst of it all, taking flesh in order to tell us specifically and without reservation, with each heartbeat and every breath: *So loved.*

How is it for you to lean into the mystery involved in being transformed in love? How do you seek the presence of Christ in the shadowed spaces of your life—in your uncertainty and fear, in your wondering and dreaming? How might it be simply to sit with the words so loved and know they are meant for you?

BLESSING

When the night
has come,
and the dark;

when the questions
wrap us round,
and the wondering;

when you speak to us
what we can hardly fathom
or absorb;

then let it come
like a heartbeat,
like a breath:

this love
this love
this love.

INTERLUDE

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.



That Heartbeat

THAT HEARTBEAT

Last year I had occasion to visit with my college poetry professor when he came to town to give a reading. We hadn't seen each other in many years—a few lifetimes, it felt like—but David's influence has been lasting. Whenever I work on a poem, I am drawing on practices I first learned in his classes.

After the reading, we walked down the street to a place where we could visit. David knew something of what these years had held, and as we walked, he asked, *What's the rhythm of your days like now?* I stumbled around for a response, my awkwardness a sign that I didn't have a comfortable answer.

David's question lingered with me, resonating with my own questions about how to enter into the life that was unfolding for me still. I found myself thinking about the moment in the hospital, soon after Gary died, when I placed my hand on his chest and told the nurse that it was so strange to feel a pulse and know it was only my own heart. The nurse said to me, *His heart beats in you now.*

That's what I'm looking for, I thought as I carried David's question; *that heartbeat.* Not just the sense of Gary's heart continuing to inhabit mine, but the rhythm of the heart that holds us both, that holds us all, that encompasses each of us in love and calls us toward a cadence by which to live.

It can seem a marvel that amid its scars and shatterings, the heart continues to beat. When damage or disruption enter our lives, they have a way of making it hard to perceive the underlying rhythm that carries us. How might it be for us to listen again? What helps us stay present to the life still at work in us, and to the God who makes this possible?

What brings you back to your heartbeat? How do you listen for the life that is unfolding for you? What's the rhythm of your days like now? How does this help or hinder your listening?

BLESSING FOR THE BROKENHEARTED

There is no remedy for love but to love more.

—Henry David Thoreau

Let us agree
for now
that we will not say
the breaking
makes us stronger
or that it is better
to have this pain
than to have done
without this love.

Let us promise
we will not
tell ourselves
time will heal
the wound,

when every day
our waking
opens it anew.

Perhaps for now
it can be enough
to simply marvel
at the mystery
of how a heart
so broken
can go on beating,

as if it were made
for precisely this—

as if it knows
the only cure for love
is more of it,

as if it sees
the heart's sole remedy
for breaking
is to love still,

as if it trusts
that its own
persistent pulse
is the rhythm
of a blessing
we cannot
begin to fathom
but will save us
nonetheless.



Love Is the Most Ancient Law

THE MOST ANCIENT LAW

Jesus said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment.

—Matthew 22:37–38

I came home from a recent trip to the library with an armload of books from the art department. From *Arts & Crafts of Morocco* to *The Art of Japanese Calligraphy* to *Medieval and Renaissance Art* and beyond, the books are providing savory fare for my hungry eyes in this season of needing some new sustenance in my practice as an artist. Today at teatime, my book of choice was *Shaker Design*, a catalog from an exhibit cosponsored by the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Corcoran Gallery of Art.

June Sprigg, the author of *Shaker Design*, writes, “The Shakers were not conscious of themselves as ‘designers’ or ‘artists,’ as those terms are understood in modern times. But they clearly worked to create a visible world in harmony with their inner life: simple, excellent, stripped of vanity and excess. Work and worship were not separate in the Shaker world. The line between heaven and earth flickered and danced.”

I am fascinated by the elegant simplicity that the Shakers brought to the work of their hands. The lines of Shaker design seem to emerge directly from their sense of what is most essential: follow the simple curve of a bowl, the uncluttered planes of a cupboard or dresser or table, the weave of a basket, and you can see how it has been created by someone who managed to let go of all that was not necessary.

As an artist whose work has become increasingly spare over time, I am drawn to such designs, curious about how others have found their way to the lines of their handiwork. Looking at a Shaker chair, a Japanese tea bowl, an Amish quilt, I wonder, What did their makers have to pare away in order to discover what was essential? How did they find their way to the heart of the matter?

In Matthew’s Gospel, we see Jesus engaging in this kind of work. “Teacher,” a lawyer from the religious establishment has just asked him, “which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Designed to test him, the question nonetheless prompts Jesus to lay out the lines that lie at the core of his life and teaching. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind,” Jesus responds. “And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Firmly rooted in his Jewish heritage, Jesus gathers up the wisdom of his forebears and distills it into these two commandments that stand at the center of his history and of our own. He has found the heart of the matter, bringing to light what is most crucial in our life together.

With these two commandments, Jesus extends a call that is compelling in its utter directness and seeming simplicity. Yet the work of love—loving God and one another and ourselves, with all the artfulness and creativity this asks of us—can be wildly complicated. Jesus’ words here get at something I continually experience at the drafting table: arriving at something that appears simple and basic is one of the hardest things to do.

How do you do this in your own life? How do you sort through all that competes for your attention, so that you can find what is most crucial? What are the challenges along the way, and where do you find the presence of love in the lines of your emerging life?

LOVE IS THE MOST ANCIENT LAW

Open to it
and you will know
how love is
its own blessing
and most ancient
of laws.

Pursue it
entirely
with everything
in you—
your heart
(all)
your soul
(all)
your mind
(all).

Spend it
all—
this love
so generous,
this love
that goes out
to each
it finds,
this love
that gives itself
in lavish and
unimagined measure
everywhere and
to all—

yourself
not least.



In Every Chamber of the Heart

LOVE AND PERIL

In all the Bible, the Song of Songs stands as one of the most beautiful—and most curious—meditations on love. This reflection comes from In the Sanctuary of Women, from a chapter on the Song.

Just past its midpoint, the Song takes a dramatic turn. What has been a celebration of each other's presence becomes a lament of absence: "I opened to my beloved," sings the bride, "but my beloved had turned and was gone. . . . I sought him, but did not find him; I called him, but he gave no answer" (5:6). Absence then gives way to violence: "Making their rounds in the city," the bride continues, "the sentinels found me; they beat me, they wounded me, they took away my mantle, those sentinels of the walls" (5:7).

It is tempting to gloss over this seeming aberration within a generally rapturous poem. Yet the presence of loss and violence within this sacred text demands our attention and contemplation. Sometimes the most difficult passages benefit most from prayerful reflection: the practice of *lectio divina* [a way of praying with a sacred text] invites us not to shrink from problematic or painful texts but to seek the presence of God who dwells even there.

I find myself thinking about a line from a John Gorka song in which he sings, "Love is our cross to bear." I used to cringe at this line. I have seen the torments and crucifixions of loving in abusive relationships where the recipients of abuse remain because they believe they are called to this form of sacrifice. There is something fatalistic—and sometimes fatal—about this kind of loving that compels someone to remain in a place so destructive and contrary to God's desire for wholeness.

At the same time, I have learned how the presence of love opens us to certain perils. We cannot control love; we cannot contain it; we cannot predict its effect upon us. When we give ourselves to love, we undertake a risk we can hardly fathom. It will take us down roads we cannot see at the outset. It will change us. It will demand the death of our false selves. It will open us to the possibility of the eventual absence of the other. All the loss and all the piercing joy that come in the blessed binding of ourselves to our beloved: this cross is our fearsome and wondrous privilege to bear.

And so perhaps, reading the Song within the space of *lectio*, this is what the sentinels remind us of: that love will take us by surprise and shed us of the sureties we have clung to. Yet their presence reminds us too that God ever desires our wholeness. Within the vulnerability of love, we need to cultivate some part of ourselves that remains conscious, aware, and vigilant against the threat of real violence that diminishes, destroys, and is contrary to God's purpose for human loving.

How has your loving changed you? How do we discern between the authentic and transforming risks of love and the perils that can damage and destroy? Is there a relationship in your life that is causing harm? What do you need in order to be whole? Who could help?

BLESSING FOR A WHOLE HEART

You think
if you could just
imagine it,
that would be a beginning;
that if you could envision
what it would look like,
that would be a step
toward a heart
made whole.

This blessing
is for when
you cannot imagine.
This is for when
it is difficult to dream
of what could lie beyond
the fracture, the rupture,
the cleaving through which
has come a life
you do not recognize
as your own.

When all that inhabits you
feels foreign,
your heart made strange
and beating a broken
and unfamiliar cadence,

let there come
a word of solace,
a voice that speaks
into the shattering,

reminding you
that who you are
is here,
every shard
somehow holding
the whole of you
that you cannot see
but is taking shape
even now,
piece joining to piece
in an ancient,
remembered rhythm

that bears you
not toward restoration,
not toward return—
as if you could somehow
become unchanged—
but steadily deeper
into the heart of the one
who has already dreamed you
complete.



A Gathering of Spirits

YOUR MOST DARING OPENNESS TO ETERNITY

for Gary

As I talked one day with my spiritual director, Maru, she said this:

Invite your most daring openness to eternity—your willingness to stand in the portals of infinity where everything converges, knowing that each realm has its own dimensionality—its own sphere—but love is the universal portal for all of them. Let yourself come home to who you are called to be in this sphere, in this time, knowing you don't ever leave that space of coalescence and converging. Whatever is real in eternity, in infinity, is real in your sphere. Although you're not able to manifest in the same sphere as Gary, you coexist and abide in that space of mystery. Who you are called to be in one sphere is not in contradiction with any sphere.

One of the things I've become so aware of over the past few years is that death and intense grief tear open our hearts toward eternity. The rending creates a portal, a passage. Because my heart has been held by you, and—I pray—is held by you still, I no longer live only in this realm. It's not a matter of choice, of deciding where my heart lives now. It's the default position that follows the death of the beloved.

So I love how Maru talks about eternity, about infinity, about the realms that seem distinct but have congruence, and between which there is a space of mystery in which you and I abide. And that love is the portal—the *universal portal*—between each realm.

Invite your most daring openness to eternity. It's these kinds of words that help me release or at least loose my hold on my worries that I'm too absorbed in my grieving, too close to your work, too attentive to your ongoing presence in my life and reckoning with its impact. Where else could I be right now? And Maru's words provide solace and reassurance.

But we talk, too, about how the invitation is to remain present. To be *here*, in this world and in this life, because this is where we are. This is where we are called to be. And so we can live with an awareness of those other realms—the awareness that comes through the terrible rending that death and grief bring—but we have to *live*.

Grief has an immense pull, a compelling field all its own, partly because of the awareness it gives us of the weak points between worlds—the rendings between realms. We have to discern how to live with this—by which I mostly mean stumble and feel our way through those decisions, which aren't always conscious, about whether we'll let ourselves be tugged into those other realms and potentially stuck there, unable to live here, or whether we will open our hearts to the knowledge that both those realms—the realm where we are, the realm where our beloved is—abide in us, and learn how live with this threshold that is painful and also wondrous. To abide this abiding. But to *live*.

When loss happens, what helps you continue to engage your life? Even as your heart becomes larger, what helps it stay open to being here, and to the path still unfolding for you in this place?

GOD OF THE LIVING

When the wall
between the worlds
is too firm,
too close.

When it seems
all solidity
and sharp edges.

When every morning
you wake as if
flattened against it,
its forbidding presence
fairly pressing the breath
from you
all over again.

Then may you be given
a glimpse
of how weak the wall

and how strong what stirs
on the other side,

breathing with you
and blessing you
still,
forever bound to you
but freeing you
into this living,
into this world
so much wider
than you ever knew.



For Love

THE GREATEST OF THESE

And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

—1 Corinthians 13:13

Loving is always risky, because we cannot enter into it without being changed. Altered. Transformed. In the face of this, we might well ask, *Do I really want this?* Do we really desire to be so undone?

Loving is never just about opening our heart. It is about being willing to have our heart become larger as we make room for people and stories and experiences we never imagined holding. It is about being willing to have our heart become deeper as we move beyond the surface layers of our assumptions, prejudices, and habits in order to truly see and receive what—and who—is before us. It is about being willing to have our heart continually shattered and remade as we take in not only the brokenness of the world but also the beauty of it, the astounding wonder that will not allow us to remain the same.

BLESSING THAT MEETS YOU IN LOVE

It is true that
every blessing begins
with love,
that whatever else
it might say,
love is always
precisely its point.

But it should be noted
that this blessing
has come today
especially to tell you
it is crazy about you.
That it has been
in love with you
forever.
That it has never
not wanted
to see your face,
to go through this world
in your company.

This blessing thought
it was high time
it told you so,
just to make sure
you know.

If it has been shy
in saying this,
it has not been
for any lack of
wanting to.
It's just that
this blessing
knows the risk
of offering itself
in a way that
will so alter you—

not because it thinks
you could stand
some improving
but because this is
simply where
loving leads.

This blessing knows
how love undoes us,
unhinges us,
unhides us.

It knows
how loving
can sometimes feel
like dying.

But today
this blessing
has come to tell you
the secret
that sends it
to your door:
that it gives itself
only to those
willing to come alive;
that it vows itself
only to those
ready to be
born anew.

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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 she creates in her books, online, and in public events. She frequently collaborated in ministry 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:

The Painted Prayerbook
paintedprayerbook.com

The Advent Door
adventdoor.com

Jan Richardson Images
janrichardsonimages.com

and her main website
janrichardson.com